

A MATTER OF TRUST

By: Alice Aldridge



To my husband, Jarvis, scientist and mathematician, IT specialist, computer expert, and overall perfectionist, who smoothes my rough drafts into readable prose... and doesn't drive me crazy more than three times a day.

< > indicates that the enclosed dialogue is in French or German, depending on the speakers.

The speeding jeep lurched to an abrupt halt in front of the CP, throwing up clouds of dust that caused the lanky lieutenant crowded into the front seat to give a deep hacking cough. Unfolding long legs as he extracted himself from the vehicle, he flashed an ironic grin as he gathered his duffle bag.

"Thanks for the lift, Banks. I don't think you missed a single pothole between here and Division HQ."

"We aim to please, Lieutenant Hanley." The driver threw a casual salute. "If you happen to see him, tell Kirby he still owes me twenty bucks from Saturday's poker game."

With a jaunty wave, Banks tore down the road, generating still another cloud of dust which Hanley ducked away from before entering the King Company CP to report to his company CO.

Captain Mark Jampel, commander of King Company, was digging his way slowly out from under the mountain of papers covering his makeshift desk as Hanley entered. Requisition forms, replacement orders, status reports, and most depressing of all, a growing list of dead and wounded that required personal notification of their next of kin.

Though glad to see Hanley on his feet, the captain gave him a jaundiced stare, noting the shadows under the deep-set green eyes and the harsh cough that the lieutenant was attempting to stifle. "What the hell are you doing back here, Gil? You look like death warmed over," he rumbled in a threatening voice.

"Got a signed discharge from the battalion surgeon," Hanley grinned gamely, struggling to suppress another racking cough as he held out the discharge papers that he'd sweet-talked the night nurse into signing the previous shift, dodging the Chief MD on morning rounds. "Besides I was getting bored, lying around all day."

"I've got a cure for **that**," Jampel snorted, pointing to the growing stacks of paperwork.

Hanley swallowed hard, hoping to avoid being tied to his ammo crate desk, filling out reports for the next week. "Actually, the doc suggested fresh air and sunshine would be the best thing for me."

Glancing through the tent flap at the gray overcast skies and wind gusts whipping through the trees, Jampel grimaced, "This isn't Miami Beach... but I'm glad you're back." He hitched one hip on the rickety table his aide had 'liberated' from a deserted farm house. "HQ just dropped a live grenade in our laps. I received a Top Secret message this morning, alerting me to the impending arrival of an OSS captain and requesting 'our utmost cooperation.'"

Hanley grimaced, recalling his prior experience with the OSS, retrieving the scientist father of a college classmate from behind enemy lines. He just hoped this wouldn't turn into a similarly risky operation, especially if it involved his platoon.

"Any hint about this mission?" he asked in resignation.

Jampel shrugged, "You know the OSS. Play their cards close to the vest. With one exception... G2 specifically requested Saunders as part of the team. Even included his serial number to make sure we had the right man."

"Did they say why?"

Jampel gave a rueful laugh. "Obviously I don't rank high enough to be given the 'classified' details."

He handed the dispatch to Hanley. "He requested half a platoon but we're under strength in this sector, so I could only spare First Squad... and you, if you're up to it?"

Hanley quickly scanned the tersely worded message, frowning at what it *didn't* say. Anything involving the OSS was sure to be both difficult and dangerous and like the rest of King Company, Saunders and his squad were dog-tired. He hoped that whatever the OSS expected of them wasn't as recklessly demanding as his earlier mission behind

the lines had been.

"How much time do we have?"

Jampel glanced at his watch. "He should have been here thirty minutes ago. First squad's bivouacked at the café. I'll send the OSS officer over when he shows up."

Hanley nodded grimly, wondering just what sort of outrageous mission HQ had dreamed up this time.

According to Captain Jampel, Saunders' squad had lucked out with their billet. Though the café's windows were shattered, it still contained a working wood stove and relatively intact roof. They could have hot food and coffee, warm water for shaving and keep their blankets dry when it rained, which seemed to be at least once a day.

Given the capricious French weather, Hanley was surprised to find his sergeant stretched out in front of the café. With his Thompson close at hand, Saunders' legs were crossed at the ankles and his camo helmet tipped over his eyes, sleeping like a baby despite the flagstone terrace floor. Any place that was warm and dry, with no one shooting at him was virtual paradise to a frontline GI like Saunders.

He nudged the noncom with the toe of his boot.

"C'mon, Saunders, time to roll out."

Saunders tipped the helmet and peered blearily up. "You're supposed to be in the hospital another week at least, Lieutenant."

"Can't have my number one squad sit around getting fat and lazy, could I?"

Heaving a weary sigh, Saunders rolled to his feet, shouldering the Thompson, as he gave a casual salute. "Since when is less than two hours of sleep a night considered a rest cure?"

Hanley returned the salute and took a long hard look at his sergeant. "We've got a mission on tap."

Saunders did not protest, but merely shifted the Thompson as he strapped on his web belt. "Another recon?"

"Not this time. Captain Jampel got a message from G2 this morning saying that the OSS needs a squad for a top secret operation... requesting *you* specifically by name." He cocked a dark brow at the noncom. "Is there something you'd like to tell me, Sergeant?"



Saunders was a master of the poker face and he put it to good use, although Hanley could tell by the wary look in his sergeant's eyes that mention of the OSS had raised his hackles. But Saunders had walled off parts of his past with barbed wire and it was obvious he wasn't going to let anyone breach those defenses.

"You've seen my records, Lieutenant," he answered flatly.

Hanley shot Saunders a suspicious look, well aware that if the sergeant had just taken part in an isolated mission like he had, the files would have been deep-sixed. There was no way he could find out why Saunders was leery of the OSS, unless the sergeant or OSS officer decided to enlighten him.

He frowned, feeling a growing uneasiness. He and Saunders had been buddies in England, before D-Day. Both sergeants, they'd knocked around together, drinking and partying, chasing the same girls.

Even after he'd gotten jumped up to second lieutenant, they'd maintained a close camaraderie, looking out for one another, trying to get through this war alive and in one piece. Saunders had always been close-mouthed about his past, not bragging about his

battles or the medals he'd earned. But this time, Hanley wondered if the past Saunders refused to talk about might affect the success of this mission.

Knowing better than to push any further, Hanley shrugged, "Let's get your squad up and moving, sergeant. That OSS officer could show up any minute."

As they stepped into the shadowy café, it took a moment for Hanley's eyes to adjust, then he noted that like any frontline unit with downtime, the squad was taking full advantage of it. Some by catching up on sleep; in a far corner, Littlejohn snored like a buzzsaw, while Billy tossed fitfully. Still others dealt with small homely tasks. Sitting beneath the shattered front window, Kirby squinted at the needle he was trying to thread as Kellogg hung his just washed socks over the sill. At one of the battered tables, Doc peered over the shoulder of red-haired, freckled Meddings, advising him to play the red eight on the black nine, while Cajé sprawled against the back wall, loose-limbed and watchful, taking a drag on his cigarette with his thoughts clearly six thousand miles away.

"Off and on," Saunders roused the squad to their feet. There was the usual undercurrent of bleary-eyed grumbling, but Hanley was pleased to note that Saunders' men were ready to march in less than five minutes.

Despite his earlier misgivings, Hanley glanced over at Saunders, noting the command presence that the sergeant wore as casually as the Thompson slung over his shoulder or the easy swagger of his stride. It was easy to see that Saunders was a natural leader, one whose men would follow him into hell and blast out its fires, knowing that he would bring them out if he had to carry them on his back.

"We've got a mission on tap," he began. "Details are sketchy at the moment. All I *do* know is that it involves the OSS."

In the background, Kirby started his typical grouching, "OSS, huh? Damn, that's what we get for bustin' outta that SS camp. A rep-u-ta-shun. Now, they expect us to do fifteen impossible things before breakfast. Without a cuppa coffee even. Not that the coffee's that good. Just goes to show you...."

"Shut up, Kirby," Hanley snapped, knowing once the BAR man got started it would take an artillery barrage to shut him up.

But before he could continue, a figure entered behind him. He was backlit in the doorway so Hanley could tell little about the man, other than that he wore an American uniform with "railroad tracks" on his collar. There was a heavyweight canvas bag at his feet and a bolt action rifle slung over one shoulder.

"Captain Jampel said this was where I'd find Lieutenant Hanley... and First Squad? I'm Davies."

Hanley saluted, though he was uncertain if Davies was their liaison, since he was totally unlike the smooth-talking, sharply dressed OSS officer he'd worked with before. This captain looked more like an absent-minded college professor than an intelligence officer, with narrow stooped shoulders, a nondescript forgettable face, and receding hairline. But as he pulled a dusty handkerchief from his pocket and removed his wire-rimmed glasses to clean them, Hanley got the full impact of fierce intelligence and stubborn resolve burning out of his clear, gray eyes.

The captain glanced at Saunders, giving the sergeant an ironic nod. Then as he took note of the ever-present Thompson at the sergeant's side, he arched one brow appraisingly.

Though never a stickler for military courtesy, Saunders surprised Hanley by coming to attention and giving the officer a very correct salute, which Davies crisply returned.

Nodding towards the squad, Davies asked, "Are your men ready to go? We need to get moving."

Hanley answered, "We weren't briefed yet... what we'll need in the way of ordnance... or other supplies."

Davies nodded brusquely. "All right, have your squad draw rations and ammunition for five days. While they do, I'll give you a rough idea of what we're up against, though exact details will have to wait until we meet with Andre Marchand, the *maquis* leader in Ville Sur Madelaine."

The squad muttered uneasily as Saunders sent them out to get the necessary supplies. Billy and Littlejohn were assigned ammo requisition and Saunders instructed them with low-voiced urgency, "Draw as many extra grenades as you can con out of the supply sergeant."

There was a perplexed expression on Littlejohn's face, but Saunders did not have time to explain. "Just do like I tell you, Littlejohn. Get movin'."

As Saunders readied the squad, Hanley questioned the captain, "I don't recall seeing that village on recent tactical maps."

"It's not, Lieutenant. It's east of our current lines, still under German control. HQ decided the village has no 'strategic' value and can be mopped up later."

Catching that slight emphasis, Hanley arched a brow, "But the OSS believes otherwise."

"We've received information from the *maquis* that a certain well-known research scientist has been 'recruited' by the SS. Given his field of study it's likely that the Germans are trying to coerce him into producing some kind of chemical weapon."

Hanley's expression was grim. "Chemical weapon? Like mustard gas in the Great War?"

"Worse. More toxic and even faster acting."

"And our mission is to prevent this? How?"

"Anyway we can. Blow up supplies. Sabotage the lab." Davies paused before continuing bluntly, "Remove the scientist from Gestapo control."

"What's security like?" Saunders inquired, grimly pragmatic as always.

"SS guards. But Andre Marchand, our contact and *maquis* leader in that region, couldn't give us an exact estimate of their numbers or weapons. He did say that most of the people from the village had been 'recruited' as unskilled labor in the factory."

"Which complicates the operation." Hanley shook out one of his cigarettes and made a careful job of lighting it, trying to gather his thoughts. "What about maps... or diagrams of the lab itself, so we'll at least know where to set the charges?"

"Marchand and his men will guide us once we reach the village." He gestured to the duffle bag at his feet. "I have the explosives we'll need, along with blueprints of the *original* plant, which produced fertilizer before the war. That should give us some idea about where the most critical equipment is located. Our objective is to destroy the lab. Failing that, we eliminate the scientific personnel... by any means necessary." The captain's gray eyes were as hard as granite as he lifted the large canvas satchel. "Let's get moving, Lieutenant."

Hanley nodded with a sour expression as he shouldered his carbine. Just what he needed, another close-mouthed OSS man and a mission with little solid intelligence, except speculation. Not the kind of situation that he liked to lead his men into, especially when he wasn't even sure what the mission was... simple sabotage or a full-blown rescue mission. Still, he could count on the fingers of one hand the times King Company had gone into battle with full intelligence or a clear objective. War was a messy business... and considering the OSS' reputation, he was afraid that it was likely to get a lot messier.

He shouldered his pack and nodded to Saunders to get the squad moving. The sergeant took point, Caje's usual position, and sent the scout back to bring up the rear,

allowing Davies to fall in beside Hanley. Despite the fact that he looked like a middle-aged school teacher, Davies still managed to keep up with the lieutenant's long-legged stride.

"Looks like a top squad, Lieutenant. Quick to follow orders, without asking a lot of unnecessary questions."

Hanley shrugged, "Sergeant Saunders is a sharp NCO. Gets the mission done, while still managing to watch out for his men."

"Uh-hmmm," Davies rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'm surprised that he's become such a team player. Not what I would have expected from the soldier I knew in North Africa."

Hanley felt curiosity sticking out all over him in big prickly lumps, but the captain did not elaborate.

As the day progressed, the squad hiked out of farmlands and hedgerows that the company had been battling through for the past month and into unfamiliar territory; foothills leading them into sharp trails and switchbacks that often doubled back on themselves. It was the kind of rugged and unwelcoming terrain that would be a nightmare for armor and infantry troops, but it was ideal for the hit and run tactics the *maquis* specialized in. It also seemed to be a very good hiding place for a top secret chemical weapons lab.

Davies pointed out features in the local countryside, indicating his familiarity with the area.

"You seem to know this area well, Captain. Did you visit it before the war?" Hanley inquired.

"No, but I spent a great deal of time in and around Ville Sur Madelaine when I was training their resistance forces."

"Then you *know* this Marchand and the men we'll be working with?"

"As well as you can know any man, in circumstances like these." He shaded his eyes with his hand and pointed to a little stand of trees beside a swiftly running stream. "We're a couple of miles from the village itself. And the factory is just a mile or so on the other side." He glanced around at the dark woods winding up the mountainside. "I don't doubt that one of Andre's men has us in his sights and will report our arrival. Before he and the others get here, I'll try to give you a little more background."

As the squad sat down and broke out rations, Doc recruited Meddings to help him fill their canteens. After a quick cold meal, Davies turned to Saunders, "If you'd be so kind as to introduce me to your squad, Sergeant, before I begin the briefing?"

Saunders pointed out his men, "Caje, our scout, Littlejohn, Nelson, Meddings, Kellogg, Doc... and Kirby, BAR man."

Months of surviving wartime France together had taught most of the squad to read Saunders' body language almost well as the hand signals that he used to communicate when they were in the field. They weren't sure why Saunders seemed edgier than usual around the OSS officer, but Caje, Doc and Littlejohn took their cue from the sergeant, maintaining a wary attitude around him. Kellogg, Meddings, and Billy were still too green to read the tightness in Saunders' expression, and Kirby, brash as always, was intrigued by anyone who'd known the noncom before Normandy.

Kirby glanced between the OSS officer and Sarge, sensing an odd vibe between the two men. Saunders' past was a



closed book to the squad, then here came someone out of that past, who clearly made their sergeant uncomfortable. He wasn't sure if it was the risks of mission itself or Davies' presence that left Saunders so uneasy, but the BAR man was no fool and hadn't survived the backstreets of Chicago by ignoring trouble when it dropped in his lap. Anything or anyone who worried Saunders scared Kirby green.

Running his fingers through his thinning hair, Kirby sighed. He'd finally gotten the Sarge's rough edges worn down enough so his part in this war was actually becoming bearable. He didn't think he'd be able to survive breaking in another noncom. Worst still, they might actually jump up someone from the squad... like Cajé. Then they really would be in a mess.

"We're on the outskirts of the Ville Sur Madelaine," Davies began, somewhat pedantically. "The Germans briefly occupied this village after the fall of France, and quickly realized they had little chance of winning over its population's 'hearts and minds.' Especially with Andre Marchand's band of guerillas whittling away at the troops originally assigned to this area—slitting the throats of patrolling sentries and ambushing motorcycle dispatch riders. The village was always isolated and provincial, and the German High Command saw little reason to waste their resources on an occupying force to pacify a few stubborn farmers.

"However, as our bombers began targeting the Reich's arms factories, they began looking for other, more deadly weapons to use against us. After discovering that Andre Marchand's brother, Gerard, was a renowned chemist before the war, they 'recruited' him to develop chemical weapons for the Germans to use against the Allied advance. Besides holding his wife and children hostage, they chose this facility because of his brother Armand's reputation in the Resistance, certain that he would not attack the facility for those reasons. So... *our* mission is to destroy the lab." There was a grim note in his voice.

There was a faint rustling in the trees surrounding them, and Hanley quickly brought up his carbine, noting Saunders also had his Thompson ready to fire.

"Hold your fire, *mes amis*. We have you surrounded. Put your weapons down."

"It's all right, Armand," Davies replied, gesturing for the other man to join them.

"This is Lieutenant Hanley and his men. They're here to help destroy the lab."

"And free my brother... and the rest of the villagers?" The voice wasn't exactly hostile but there was a definite edge to it. A tall, dark-haired man carrying a German Schmeisser stepped out of the woods. There were two others with him, a shorter man built like a blacksmith, carrying a shotgun, and the second, who appeared to be still in his teens but with an ugly burn scar marring one cheek and eyes as hard as stone.

"My lieutenants, Henri and Georges." Marchand gestured and Hanley nodded his head to acknowledge the introduction. Neither of the two *maquis* returned the courtesy, their faces remaining still and their emotions hidden.

Marchand stood there for a long moment, studying Hanley and the squad before turning back to Davies and saying in a dead flat tone, "You promised to bring enough men to *save* my people, Captain. These are barely enough to blow up the lab... and get everyone killed."

Davies made a quiet appeal, "I assure you, Andre, it is not my intention to endanger the villagers' lives. With the help of your men, we should have more than enough forces to carry out a dual operation. One group will plant and detonate the explosives to destroy the lab. The explosion will serve as a diversion so the rest can attack the guards and free the villagers."

"But what about Gerard?" Marchand's voice had a ragged edge. "He and his family are still imprisoned, under heavy guard, away from the others. Von Ritter will have all of them shot at the first sign of trouble."

"While I'm setting the charges, Lieutenant Hanley's men will attempt to rescue Gerard and his family. Besides, once the lab is destroyed, the Gestapo will have no further use for your brother and he will be safe."

"Safe?" the *maquis* leader retorted bitterly. "More than likely when we attack, Von Ritter will have given orders for the guards to put a bullet in Gerard's head *before* we can even reach him."

"It's his only chance," Davies continued in a deliberately patient tone. "Besides, these are seasoned troopers, Andre. They've fought the Gestapo before, so they're well aware of what they're dealing with. If anyone can get Gerard and his family out alive, they can."

Hanley blinked in surprise at hearing Davies' high opinion of the squad. But Saunders' expression was resigned, knowing the higher an officer's praise, the more unrealistic his expectations. He just hoped that Captain Davies had a good enough plan so that he and the squad wouldn't be expected to pull off a miracle.

Andre took in a deep breath and let it out raggedly. "Very well, *Capitaine*. Have your men follow me. We'll take you to our meeting place and then go over the plan of attack. Maybe, if God is on our side, your mission will succeed, without losing half the village in the process."

The *maquis* were all gathered at an abandoned farm just beyond the village. The cottage showed signs of a fire hastily extinguished, with shattered windows and shutters hanging askew, leaving what remained open to the weather. The henhouse was empty, its fluttering inhabitants long gone, and the barn also appeared deserted until they spotted a grim old man peering suspiciously from the doorway, with a muzzle-loading antique that looked like it belonged in a museum cradled under one arm.

After leading them into the barn, Marchand gripped the old man firmly on the shoulder, attempting to reassure him. <Captain Davies is here, Philippe, and he's brought men and weapons with him. Together, his men and mine will free your grandsons, so they can help you run this farm once again.>

Caje gave Hanley a low-voiced translation, including the old man's bitter reply that such promises were nothing without actions to back them up. Hearing Caje's interpretive skills, the old man

turned to him angrily and pointed to a hugely pregnant mare in the stall behind him, spewing out a vitriolic outburst that left Caje silent and blinking.

"What's wrong?" Littlejohn spoke, his gaze resting avidly on the animal standing in the stall with her head hanging. His fingers ached to reach over and stroke her velvety nose.

"I'm not sure," the scout said with an eloquent shrug. "I didn't really understand what he was saying, except that something is wrong with the mare. She's due to deliver any day now, but without help, she'll die. The old man isn't strong enough to do whatever is necessary. Only his grandsons can help... and the Gestapo have them prisoner."

Littlejohn's expression was downcast as he stared at the mare, taking in her dull coat and sunken eyes, knowing she was likely half-starved, with no telling how many health problems due to lack of proper veterinary care. But he couldn't just stand by and do nothing.



"Maybe I could help...." he started to offer, only to hear Sarge's temper flare.

"Don't even start, Littlejohn. Our mission is to ambush the Gestapo and help the villagers get away, not play nursemaid to some plow horse." Saunders growled, "So get your mind on the job the Army's payin' you to do."

Littlejohn's broad shoulders sagged, but the big-hearted GI gave Billy the faintest hint of a wink. Despite his sergeant's stern warning, Littlejohn did not intend to let that farmer lose the mare and her foal if it was in his power to help.

Hanley caught Saunders' attention and jerked his head, indicating the sergeant should join them as Davies and Marchand scrutinized the blueprints of the building, along with a fairly detailed map of the countryside surrounding the village. Davies had anchored the scrolled papers with several rusting farm tools and as the late afternoon faded into shadowy twilight, one of the *maquis* lit a kerosene lamp, hanging it where its flickering light cast eerie shadows.

"Although these documents are from before the war, they can still be useful in determining where to place the charges." Davies pointed to specific areas. "Primarily, we need to hit the main lab facility—here. Then, if possible, set charges to destroy the holding tanks. Blasting them will assure that the Germans won't be able to transfer the chemicals to another facility."

"What about my brother?" Marchand's voice was cold.

Davies addressed the *maquis* leader in his most reassuring voice, "Like I said earlier, once the charges are set in the main lab, the sergeant and I will help Gerard and his family escape."

Saunders glanced over at Davies' duffle bag, noting with a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach that the captain's bolt action rifle now had a sniper scope in place.

Then Lieutenant Hanley spoke up, "Since we're planning a two-pronged operation, Sergeant Saunders should lead the group assigned to rescue the villagers, Captain. He's an expert at this kind of skirmish operations, very good at getting his men... and others... out of tough situations."

"Which is why I want him with me," Davies said impatiently. "Dr. Marchand is crucial to the Germans' success... and must be *removed* from their influence. And technically I outrank you."

"Technically you do, sir," Hanley replied in a level voice. "But you're OSS, primarily here to provide intelligence about the mission and be our contact with the *maquis*. I'm in charge of combat operations... and I'll assign my men as I see fit. Saunders leads the attack on the barracks area to free the villagers."

At first Saunders thought the captain would protest further but instead he gave the noncom a brief mocking smile, "Very well, Lieutenant. I defer to your tactical expertise. How do you plan to divide the rest of your forces?"

Hanley turned his sea-green gaze to the *maquis* leader, "What do *you* recommend, Marchand?"

"Half my men will keep watch while you set the explosives and the rest will take part in the attack on the barracks."

Hanley and Saunders exchanged wary glances. While they appreciated having the extra men, they also worried that the presence of trigger-happy, undisciplined *maquis* could complicate both operations. Still, all they could do was hope for the best.

Hanley addressed Saunders and the squad, deciding who would take part in each operation. "Saunders, you'll need Cajé and Doc to help get the villagers moving, once they've been freed. Littlejohn, Billy, and Marchand's *maquis* will ambush the guards and then cover the escape. Got it?"

Saunders and the four GI's accompanying him nodded their heads as Hanley continued, "Kirby, Kellogg, and Meddings will provide security outside the building, while

the captain and I are inside, setting the charges. Marchand and a couple of his men will attempt to free his brother. The rest of the *maquis* will remain in the woods, to provide back-up fire in case they're needed.

Hanley looked at his watch then up at the heavy cloud cover almost hiding a tiny sliver of a waning moon. "Not that it'll make much difference, but the moon sets at ten minutes after midnight. The charges will be set to detonate then, which should provide a distraction for Saunders' team to take out the guards."

"We'll be ready," Saunders nodded. "After we bust the prisoners out, do we head back to the farmhouse?"

Marchand shook his head emphatically. "No, just withdraw to the woods surrounding the village. With any luck, most of the guards will be too busy fighting fires and trying to salvage the lab to chase escapees."

Hanley nodded, and Saunders gave a casual salute before he and his men along with the dozen *maquis* accompanying them headed for the barracks.

Lady Luck is often quite fickle about where she disposes her favors and that night she was at the shoulder of Major Hans Von Ritter, supervisor in charge of the Weapons Development Facility in Ville Sur Madelaine. Though not a career Army officer, Von Ritter possessed skills and attitudes that met with the Gestapo's approval. Before the war, he'd been a chemistry professor at one of the smaller universities: hired on a yearly basis, never granted tenure, passed over for chairmanships that would have increased his salary and prestige. Rather than admitting that he was an inept, bungling researcher, never likely to be published, he chose to blame others for his failure.

So, he was among the first to applaud Hitler's denunciation of the Jews as "parasites on the Aryan race," feeding on others' genius and stealing the promotions that they had earned by their pure Teutonic blood. Hans was especially overjoyed when he was placed in charge of one of the first death camps and watched avidly as the Jews were marched into the showers and exterminated like the vermin they were.

Von Ritter's only regret was that the chemical used was so slow and inefficient. He wrote to his superiors, boasting that he could produce something quicker and much more deadly. Given his academic history showed no skill in the appropriate area of research, his letters were ignored until the Normandy invasion had the High Command grasping at any straw that might give them a new powerful weapon against the Allied troops that were pushing their forces back relentlessly.

Despite his scientific background, Von Ritter showed little interest in supervising Marchand's research. However, his paranoid mindset put him at odds with the facility's Security officer as he insisted on twice as many guards around the lab facility as advised, much to the man's chagrin.

Even more disconcerting was the heavy machine gun emplacement just outside the barracks area.

As Saunders and his squad moved into the area where the villagers were being held, the sergeant quickly spotted the heavily armed guard position and waved everyone to take cover.

"Sarge," Billy asked in a strangled whisper. "What do we do now?"

"Stay down and keep still," Saunders hissed. "Once Hanley and the captain set off their charges, the blast should draw off half the detail. Get out a couple of your grenades and have them ready when we hear the explosions."

There was an eternity of silence as they listened anxiously for the explosions that would divert the guards and be the signal for their attack. Despite the cool mountain air,

Billy could feel the sweat prickling in his armpits and down his neck. The night seemed to last a hundred years.

Sidling over to where Saunders was waiting silent and still as a stone, Billy said in a tense whisper, "Something must have gone wrong. They should have set off the charges hours ago."

Saunders glanced at his watch, before answering in a voice barely louder than a breath of air, "It's only been twenty minutes, Billy. They probably had to dodge sentries, too. Or maybe even somebody decided to work late. Just stay where you are and keep your head down, we'll know when...."

There was a brief blast of sound coming from the vicinity of the main lab. But the large chain of explosions that Saunders was expecting did not follow. He froze momentarily, knowing that such a small burst could not have destroyed the lab, nor would it provide the necessary diversion his group needed to get past the guards.

He tried to signal the *maquis* troops who were with him to stay down, but they were too keyed up and eager to attack and rescue their loved ones from the Gestapo's clutches. Charging recklessly with no regard for their own lives, a dozen of the *maquis* ran towards the machine gun firing shotguns, hunting rifles, and even one or two Schmeissers appropriated from ambushed German sentries. But they were mowed down in the machine gun's first burst of fire.

"TAKE COVER!" Saunders' voice rang out in the darkness as he scrambled forward to determine if anyone was left alive after that ill-planned charge. One man's face had been blown away, while a second was practically cut in half. Of the survivors, only one was seriously wounded with blood gushing from his upper leg. Two of his comrades were applying a tourniquet, while the rest returned fire as rapidly as their oddball collection of weapons permitted.

Going down on one knee, Saunders fired the Thompson in short irregular bursts as he tried to help the wounded man get upright, leaning on the shoulder of his rescuers. A second *maquis* scrambled over to join Saunders in firing at the well-entrenched Germans.

"Get back," he hissed. "We're outnumbered."

Nodding reluctantly, a third man joined the others as they struggled to get out of range, firing erratically and retreating towards the woods.

Caje moved up to Saunders' side, firing rapidly but with his usual lethal accuracy. Despite the fact that the Germans were well-concealed behind their sandbagged gun emplacement, the scout still managed to bring down two of the machine gun detail.

"What now?" His voice was ragged and sweat ran down his face and chest.

Saunders was sweating, too and dragged one arm across his forehead before answering in a husky voice, "The lab didn't blow as planned. Dunno what happened, but without that diversion to draw off the guards, there's no way we can get past that gun to rescue the villagers. We've got to fall back into the woods and find another way to free them."

"They're gonna be on guard for sure, after this little blow-up."

"We'll think of something," Saunders assured him, gripping LeMay firmly on the shoulder. "Make sure the rest of the *maquis* know we're not goin' up against that meat-grinder. I'll get Billy and Littlejohn started back towards the village. Oh and tell Doc, just stop the heavy bleeding, but don't waste time treating the wounded until we're safe."

Caje nodded, snapped off another half a clip and then moved back to the woods with his usual smooth stealth.

Saunders fired a long burst that emptied his SMG, hoping to force the Germans to keep their heads down while he made a break to join the others. But as he scrambled to his feet and started to zigzag towards the woods, he felt a blow smash against his

side, just below the ribs. At first there was no pain, just a sudden weakness as he dropped to one knee, then suddenly it felt like someone had rammed a red hot spike through his middle. Despite the pain, he struggled to his feet, charging blindly away from the German machine gun nest.

Barely conscious, he lost all sense of direction, and instead of turning toward the village and safety, he headed deeper into the woods. Minutes passed as he stumbled across downed trees and through thorny undergrowth that caught in his shirt and pants, leaving him tattered and bloody. Finally, despite the cool shadowy woods, Saunders felt a white hot light explode inside his head and he dropped to his knees and passed out.

Meanwhile, Cajé was helping Doc quickly bandage the most seriously wounded of the *maquis*. Littlejohn had taken a bullet in the shoulder during the exchange of fire and while trying to get to his buddy's side to help him, Billy had twisted his knee.

Cajé started to peel strips off Billy's hide for that, and then shook his head in resignation. He'd have done the same thing himself, though hopefully with less damaging results.

"Sarge told me to make sure the *maquis* withdraw, away from this area, until we can come up with another way to get the villagers out. How many wounded do we have?" He looked at the medic, not reassured by his grim expression.

"Just three serious cases. The guy the *maquis* brought back, a boy with a chest wound, and one gutshot. I think I got the bleeding stopped on the first, if he doesn't move around too much. But there's nothin' I can do for the other two. They need a *real* doctor."

Cajé took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "No chance of that, unless there's a village doctor in with the prisoners."

"Who won't do us any good till we bust 'em out." Doc looked worried, "Where's the Sarge?"

"Isn't he here?" Cajé felt a cold chill in the pit of his stomach. "He said he was goin' to tell Billy and Littlejohn that we were pulling back. Didn't he follow them?"

"We never saw him," Billy said in alarm. "After Littlejohn got hit and I jammed my knee trying to help him, we headed straight for Doc. Neither of us saw the Sarge."

"Somethin' must have happened," Cajé muttered uneasily. "I gotta go back and find him."

"And who's gonna take charge of this bunch, while you're lookin' for him," Doc's blue eyes burned. "He told you to make sure the *maquis* and the squad got to safety. That's *your* responsibility until he relieves you."

"But what if he's injured and can't make it back?"

"Then you'll have to take over and finish the mission," Doc said with a sympathetic look.

Cajé's dark eyes widened and though he did not say anything more, Doc could see the slump as he felt the sudden weight of command... and responsibility for all those lives... settling onto his shoulders.

Hanley pressed himself flat against the lab building's concrete wall, trying not to breathe, fighting off the sudden deadly impulse to sneeze at the sharp chemical odors escaping from the row of windows just over his head. Davies knelt in front of him; using a lockpick's tool taken from a small kit he carried in his pocket to open the lab door. With a sharp "snickt," the door opened and the two of them sidled into the dimly lit room, hoping that they would not encounter any guards or late-working technicians.

As they entered, the heavy chemical stench increased until it was all Hanley

could do to stifle an outburst of coughing. Davies quickly tied a white handkerchief over his nose and mouth, and Hanley fumbled in his pockets for several long moments before tearing open one of the bandage packs from his web belt and using it. It minimized the fumes that threatened to tear up the back of his throat but there was little he could do to protect his watering eyes.

"This must be the main storage area, where they keep the chemical components that they're experimenting with. Likely nothing here is lethal, only very unpleasant."

"Thanks for the reassurance," Hanley choked, resisting the temptation to rub his itching eyes, knowing it would probably only make matters worse. "Where's the lab facility itself?"

"It has to be fairly close," Davies replied flattening himself against the wall before opening the door into the hallway. "They don't want to have to move these barrels too far. It's too dangerous." He looked over his and Hanley's field uniforms. "Too bad there aren't any worker's coveralls handy. It would make us a lot less visible."

A pile of what looked like cleaning rags was discarded in one corner. Gingerly, Hanley picked one up, barely able to stifle his gag reflex at the powerful chemical odors coming from the fabric. They were the desired coveralls, made from a rough canvas fabric in utility gray, but heavily stained with chemical spills.

"Would these do?"

Davies cast a jaundiced eye over them, "If the fumes aren't so toxic we pass out. Still, we don't have much choice." And he hastily pulled one on, slinging the carryall containing the explosives hurriedly over one shoulder. "C'mon. We need to locate the central lab quickly so we can set the charges."

Reluctantly Hanley laid his helmet and carbine aside, relieved to see that Davies left his own rifle with its sniper scope tucked under the rest of the discarded coveralls.

"I just hope they aren't damaged by the chemicals in the fabric."

"I might say the same for us." Hanley glanced down at the stains that covered the entire front of his chest, wondering what effect the fumes might have on his lungs as well as his eyes and nose.

As they moved stealthily down the hallway, peering into various rooms in search of the main lab complex, they heard the sound of angry voices.

Hastily dragging Hanley with him into an empty storeroom, Davies peered out the narrow opening to the hallway they'd just left, trying to determine the reason for the uproar.

"Oh **shit**."

"What is it?"

"Andre Marchand. The Germans have him prisoner."

"They must have captured him while he was looking for his brother," Hanley said in a strained whisper. "Damn, I wonder what's happened to the rest of the *maquis* who were with him."

"I don't know." Davies' voice was remote. "We should have heard weapons fire if they were killed or captured."

Hanley felt a tight throbbing in his head. "What now?"

"We can't let Marchand remain in German hands. He knows too much... and besides he'll be one more hostage for them to use to coerce his brother."

Hanley glanced at his watch, seeing the seconds fly past at alarming speed. "It's nearly midnight. We've got to find the lab and set the charges *soon*, if we're going to provide the diversion for Saunders' attack on the barracks."

"Rescuing French villagers is *not* my first priority, Lieutenant. Our **mission** is to stop Gerard Marchand from producing a lethal chemical weapon for the Germans."

As Davies crept stealthily down hall, Hanley had no choice but to trail close

behind as they tried to follow the guards without being seen. Undoubtedly, they were moving further and further away from the critical lab facilities as they paused to listen intently at each doorway.

At last they heard the sound of angry voices inside what seemed to be an office, as someone ordered, <Tie him to that chair... and make sure his bonds are tight. I don't want him getting loose and trying to cut my throat, or his *brother's* either.>

There were the sounds of a scuffle and an outburst of vitriolic French profanity, before the sharp sound of a blow was followed by silence. There was a brief spate of orders in German, and Davies hurriedly dragged Hanley away from the doorway and into a work closet. "The Gestapo major in charge just ordered the guards to leave. He probably intends to work Andre over in front of his brother for the sake of intimidation, before having him shot. It's big risk, but this may be our only chance to get the two of them away from the Gestapo."

Hanley nodded reluctantly, seething that Davies had ignored their original plan and was endangering his men's lives. He only hoped they could free Andre and Gerard quickly enough that they'd be able to set the charges afterwards. He reached for his sidearm while Davies pulled out a very large knife. Glancing at Hanley's weapon, the captain shook his head as he placed a finger to his lips indicating that they'd need to be as quiet as possible.

Inching down the hallway, back to the room where Marchand was prisoner, Davies placed his ear against the door, just barely able to catch Gerard's low-voice protest, "...nothing to do with me, Major. I'm a scientist, not a soldier. Don't punish *my* family for my *brother's* sins! I've done everything you asked. It's not my fault that the weapon you want is so difficult to produce. I just need a little more time."

"Do you love your family, Dr. Marchand?"

An agonized silence was the only reply and the harsh German-accented voice continued, "Time is running very, very short for all of us. Unless I have something to show my superiors *soon* for the time and effort expended on this lab, then I'm afraid there will be serious repercussions. Perhaps sending your family to one of the death camps would increase you motivation?"

"No, no, I'll work harder, longer," Marchand pleaded. "I'll have the weapon ready by the end of this week, I promise."

"I'm sure you will." The major's voice held a note of snide satisfaction. "Especially with the body of your brother hanging from a gallows outside your laboratory window... to serve as a reminder of what happens to those who fail the Reich."

Davies and Hanley exchanged alarmed glances, knowing that they had to act now, before the officer summoned his guards to carry out the execution. Davies grabbed one of the charges out of his satchel. "I'll set this off in the storage facility. It won't do any real damage, but it may provide enough of a diversion." Then he dashed down the hallway.

Hanley pulled out his Colt and waited for the explosion. Fifteen seconds later, Davies' charge exploded, followed by several secondary chemical bursts which filled the hallway with smoke and fumes. As Hanley kicked the door in, praying that the diversion would work, he spotted the German officer with his sidearm still in its snap-down holster.

Andre Marchand was bloody and battered, tied to a straight chair, while his brother Gerard cringed beside him. The German officer's face was beet red as he screeched something in German at Hanley. Hanley waved his weapon at the German, indicating that the officer should move to the other side of the room and then pulled out his bayonet and slashed at Andre's bonds.

As the *maquis* leader slumped over, barely conscious, Hanley gestured for Gerard to help his brother to his feet, but Marchand shook his head in fear, "No, no, I

cannot. My family are still prisoners."

Gritting his teeth in frustration, Hanley dragged Andre's arm across his shoulder and snapped off a quick shot at the German officer, hoping that would resolve Marchand's fears. But Von Ritter was quick as a snake and ducked behind his desk, while Gerard just stood there with his head bowed and would not move.

Despite the smoke and fumes, Hanley doubted that any real damage had been done to the lab. And without the diversion that the major explosion was supposed to cause, he had no idea what had happened during Saunders' attack on the barracks. As he staggered towards the exit, supporting almost all of Andre Marchand's weight, Davies joined him.

"Where's Gerard?"

"The Gestapo still have his family prisoner. He refused to leave."

"Damn," Davies swore under his breath. "Why didn't you shoot him?"

Hanley gave Davies a hard glare. "And kill him in cold blood in front of his own brother?"

Davies glared at the barely conscious Andre Marchand. "It would have been a kindness if you had... and accomplished our mission without further bloodshed. No telling how many others will have to die now."

Chip Saunders awoke in a very unusual place, lying on clean sheets under a warm blanket. As he tried to shake the cobwebs out of his brain, he realized that the mattress under the sheets was thin and lumpy and the blanket covering him was threadbare, with several neatly stitched patches. Still, this was the most comfortable he'd been in a very long time. But as he tried to sit up, a sharp pain burst through his side and he fell back on the pillow with a groan.



At that sign that her patient had regained consciousness, a young girl with dark, curly hair and gentle, gray eyes looked up from the pot she was stirring, atop a wood-burning stove. Dropping the spoon, she rushed over to his side, chattering in French, "Non, non, non."

Judging by the outburst, she didn't approve of his attempt to get out of bed. Noticing a sudden draft around his legs as he tried to swing them onto the floor, Saunders realized with alarm that he was wearing nothing but his shorts under the blanket. He clutched the blanket over his lap, unwilling to expose himself any further, even if the girl had been the one who undressed him in the first place.

The girl seemed equally reluctant for him to try to stand up.

"Do *not* move... the wound is... how you say, infected. My *grand'mere* knows the old remedies and it will be ready soon." She glanced at the stove, then ran over and resumed her impatient stirring.

Saunders subsided back onto the cot, realizing though he was awake, his head was throbbing, his vision blurred, and the thin blanket covering him suddenly felt too warm. Peering in a daze around the room, he spied a second woman seated in a rocking chair in a corner. Her iron gray hair was pulled back in a bun and she had a colorful shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Judging by the fine bones in her face, she

had been beautiful once, but now that face was lined with grief and pain and her dark eyes rested on him with a mixture of hope and suspicion.

She snapped off a sharp phrase at the young girl who began stirring so energetically that whatever was simmering in the pot nearly splashed onto the floor. The grandmother clucked in disgust and pushing laboriously out of her rocking chair, limped over to the stove and stirred the liquid with a steady, smooth rhythm before raising the spoon to her lips and nodding in approval.

The old woman ladled a small amount into a cup, putting it into the hands of the girl and pushing her over to the cot where Saunders had raised himself on one elbow, "Here... drink," she said nervously.

The pounding in his head was growing worse, and the brief burst of energy that had brought him upright was quickly fading. Still, he looked blearily around, trying to locate his clothes so he could get out of here and find his men. No telling *what* had happened after their run-in with the Kraut machine gun.

Clutching the blanket around his waist, he tried to stand up but the old woman limped over and pushed him back on the bed.

<The wound is fevered, and you need to take the medicine and sleep. After that, you might be strong enough to sit up.>

Saunders did not understand what she was saying and the growing dizziness left him barely able to sit, much less stand. Taking the cup from her granddaughter, the old woman held the cup to his lips, forcing him to swallow its contents almost involuntarily. Whatever the brew was, it had a cool soothing taste that relieved his burning thirst.

"Angelica," the young girl spoke, though he wasn't sure if she was telling him *her* name or describing whatever the older woman was trying to pour down his throat.

Draining the cup, Saunders collapsed weakly back on the cot, as the old woman pulled the blanket out of his grasp and examined the dressing on his side. She limped away, quickly returning with a warm poultice that she applied to the wound. Despite his determination to get to his feet and go looking for his squad, he felt himself drifting back into darkness.

<Comfrey... boneknit... heals many wounds.> The old woman placed her cool hand against his fevered forehead, but Saunders did not understand those reassuring words.

On the outskirts of the village, Kirby sat with his BAR resting across his outstretched legs and watched in wary exhaustion, hoping the Gestapo troops they'd encountered the night before weren't in hot pursuit of the squad. Last night's screw-up had cost them heavily, with nothing to show for it. The Sarge was missing, Littlejohn and Billy out of action, and at least half of Andre Marchand's *maquis* fighters were dead or wounded.

Doc had set up an aid station in the village chapel, but was rapidly running out of bandages, sulfa, and morphine. Earlier that morning, when he'd been helping Littlejohn get as comfortable as he could on the church's cold stone floor, he'd overheard Doc reporting to Hanley, "I've done the best I could to get the bleeding stopped and bandages applied on the worst of the wounded, but we've got one gutshot, a serious chest wound, and several others I can't do anything for, except keep 'em comfortable."

Doc had stared at the lieutenant with a very troubled expression, "And sir... I'm down to my last five ampoules of morphine. Who do I give it to... the living or the dying?"

Kirby shivered as he glanced over at Billy, who had also heard the question and was fussing with Littlejohn's blankets trying not to listen to the answer. Kirby shrugged,

glad for once that his temporary possession of sergeant's stripes and the responsibility for making those kinds of hard decisions was brief and long past.

He clasped Billy's shoulder, attempting to reassure the younger GI. "Look, I'm gonna go find Cajé and see if he's been able to scrounge up anything more than cold rations. If the lieutenant says it's okay, we'll build a fire and heat some coffee."

"Don't rush on my account," Littlejohn's deep voice rumbled. "I seem to have lost my appetite."

As Kirby sat there, just outside the church, Cajé joined him, squatting on his heels in front of the shattered wall. His dark eyes were hooded and withdrawn and the cigarette dangling from his mouth was unlit. Propping his BAR against the wall, Kirby groped through his pockets and looked forlornly at the single smoke remaining in the pack before shaking it out, lighting it and lighting Cajé's as well.

He drew the smoke deep into his lungs, watching warily as Cajé seemed to snap out of his dark brood and inhale his own cigarette, shaking off his earlier distress.

"Boy, we're in deep shit for sure this time," Kirby muttered.

"Maybe the lieutenant'll let us go back and try to find Saunders. I didn't see him get hit, maybe he just got lost and couldn't find his way back in the dark."

Not wanting to dash Cajé's hopes, Kirby didn't make the scornful response that statement deserved. Saunders *never* got lost and had eyes like a cat when it came to seeing in the dark, especially whenever Kirby tried to nap on guard duty or sneak out to visit some sweet French mademoiselle.

"Yeah," he grunted in agreement. "Maybe the Sarge just got temporarily misplaced."

But before they could finish their smokes and ask for Hanley's permission to look for their sergeant, the lieutenant approached and addressed them, "If you haven't already done so, break out your rations and eat something. Doc's building a small fire to heat some coffee. Cajé, you're temporary squad leader till Saunders gets back. Finish breakfast, then join Captain Davies and me for a strategy meeting with Marchand. More of his men are coming down from the hills to help with our attack on the lab tonight."

Cagé nodded, his normally reserved expression showing sudden apprehension at being asked to fill Saunders' boots.

Kirby muttered under his breath as soon as the lieutenant was out of earshot, "Damned OSS officer. I knew he was trouble the minute we saw him. Now, we gotta face off with those SS guards **again**, with Sarge missing and half the squad out of action. It just ain't fair."

Brooding silently as Kirby groused, Cajé reviewed the events of the last twelve hours. He knew it wasn't his fault that Saunders was missing and there were so many dead and wounded among Marchand's *maquis*. They'd followed orders and attacked according to plan, but as often happened in battle, something had gone wrong... and it had cost a great many lives, without achieving their objective, the destruction of the lab.

Still, they had to try again, no matter what the cost. Because if Gerard Marchand succeeded in producing the chemical weapon that the Reich demanded, then the deaths of Allied troops wouldn't be measured in the dozens, but in the thousands... maybe even hundreds of thousands.

Finishing his cigarette, Cajé glanced around at the abandoned village, seeing fellow Frenchmen cleaning their weapons and checking ammo. They were obviously preparing for another attack, despite their losses. Staring at those grim and resolved faces, he indulged in a brief interlude of wishful thinking. That just once, the lieutenant might say "This job is too tough for us, it'll cost too many lives. We're calling in the Air Corps and blasting this valley to hell and gone."

He briefly contemplated that appalling image and what it would mean for the

villagers held prisoner by the Gestapo. Frowning, he shook his head, thankful that the decision was Hanley's to make and not his.

Caje stood up and offered Kirby a hand up. "C'mon, I'm not that hungry, but maybe Doc's hot coffee will keep me awake during the briefing."

As they approached the campfire where Doc had the coffee heating in a large pot scavenged from one of the empty houses, they overheard his intense conversation with Hanley, as Marchand stood off to one side.

"I'm telling you, Lieutenant. I've done all I can with the supplies we have. I even sent Meddings around to check in some of the houses for bandages, cognac, and anything that might help me treat these men. But the Gestapo didn't leave much when they rounded up the villagers. However, Marchand has a suggestion I think we oughta consider."

Badly battered from last night's encounter with the Gestapo, Andre Marchand looked like he shouldn't have been on his feet. Doc had cleaned and treated his abrasions, applying iodine to the worst of them.

"The village's *medical* doctor was taken prisoner by the Gestapo with the others. But before he set up practice two years ago, nearly everyone consulted Gabrielle, a wise woman and healer."

"Wise woman?" Hanley's dark brows rose as he glanced sideways at Doc with a skeptical look. "You don't mean some kind of *witch*, do you?"

"I've heard about people like this back home, Lieutenant," the medic offered. "When folks couldn't afford a doctor, these 'healers' would use the old-fashioned remedies—horehound for cough, willow bark for rheumatism, foxglove for heart palpitations."

"That's not the same. Some of these men are gravely injured. They need a *real* doctor, not some kind of mystical claptrap. We can't let just anyone treat them."

"Most of the *seriously* injured are my men, Lieutenant Hanley. Gabrielle was probably the one who treated their colic and broken bones when they were children."

Hanley saw the resolve in the *maquis* leader's face, and shrugged. "All right, it's your decision. So, where is this healer anyway? And how can you be sure she'll come help?"

"She lives with her granddaughter in a cottage in the woods, near Phillippe's farm, where we first met. He's known her for years and is probably the only one she'll listen to."

"Will he agree to show us where she is? He seemed a bit upset when we were there before."

Marchand sighed. "Philippe is not one of my followers. The only reason he allowed us to use his farm for a rendezvous was because we promised to free his grandsons. If I come to him empty-handed, he will not look upon my request kindly."

"Then let me go," a deep voice rumbled from the door of the church, where Littlejohn leaned against the doorframe with Billy at his side.

"Why you?" Marchand asked in disbelief. "You're an *American*. You hardly even spoke to him. Why do you think he would listen to you?"

"My folks are farmers, back home in Nebraska. I know what he's goin' through trying to keep things going, without any help. I can explain why we haven't been able to free his grandsons yet and why we need the healer."

Hanley stared at the soldier skeptically. Because he wasn't as outspoken or quick on his feet as some of the others in his platoon, the lieutenant knew he sometimes took the big man for granted. But Littlejohn was smarter than most people gave him credit for, he was a good marksman, and he had the biggest heart of any of them. If anyone could persuade that French farmer to help, it was Littlejohn.

"All right, Littlejohn. If you think you're up to the mission... but I don't want to send you alone. Especially since you aren't able to fire a rifle with that bad shoulder."

"Let me go," Nelson volunteered eagerly. "I'll look out for him."

Doc stared at Billy in disbelief. "You can't hardly look out for yourself, Billy. Besides, how are you gonna keep up with that bad knee?"

"The swelling's gone down a lot, Doc," Billy protested. "I just need to walk a little bit to loosen it up."

Staring at the young GI skeptically, Doc started to protest further and then caught the expression on Littlejohn's face before nodding his reluctant approval.

Lieutenant Hanley exchanged glances with Marchand. "Will they need someone to go along as translator?"

"Philippe understands and speaks English very well, but sometimes pretends that he does not when he does not wish to hear what you are saying. Like my mother used to say about Gerard, 'He is not hard of hearing, only hard of listening.'"

"All right, Littlejohn, Billy. See if you can fetch this 'wise woman' back. But keep your eyes open, we don't know if the Krauts are out there, looking for us after the attack last night."

Some ninety minutes later, after more than a mile and a half of up-and-down hill scrambling, Billy Nelson was having serious doubts about volunteering to take care of his buddy. The sun was almost directly overhead and even though they were shaded by trees and bushy undergrowth all around, the air seemed stifling. He pushed back his helmet, wiping away the sweat that trickled down the side of his face and neck.

"Let's take a break, Littlejohn. I'm beat and my leg feels like its got pins and needles sticking all up and down it."

"We just took a break fifteen minutes ago, Billy. Besides, it's not much further. Just up this hill and we should be there."

Billy glared at his friend and pulled the rifle strap further onto his shoulder as he took a deep breath and made the last push up the hill and into the deserted clearing where Philippe's barn, henhouse, and cottage were located. Littlejohn approached the house, peering through the boarded-up windows before knocking on the wooden lintel where the door hung askew.

"Anybody home? We've come to ask for your help, sir. We need to know how to find Gabrielle the healer. Marchand and his men need her help... badly."

There was no verbal answer to their questions, only what sounded like a scream of agony coming from the barn. Littlejohn dashed across the barnyard, with Billy limping behind, trying to get his rifle off his shoulder and in a position to fire. The two of them charged into the darkened barn heedless of the danger, only to discover Philippe kneeling by the chestnut mare that lay in the straw, drenched with sweat as her sides heaved. As Littlejohn watched, a contraction rippled down her belly and she gave an almost human moan. The old man pushed down on her belly as the contraction reached its peak as if he could help her foal come into the world, but it was no use. He wasn't strong enough.

As Billy stood there wide-eyed, still holding his M1, Littlejohn dropped to his knees beside Philippe, asking, "How long has she been in labor?"

"Nearly twelve hours. Her waters broke early this morning but still the foal does not come. I knew it was not turned right, and once the contractions started, I tried to pull the legs into place... but I'm too old, too weak. If only my grandsons were here." The old man pounded against the side of the stall, angry, frustrated, and deeply sad as well.

He stood up and went over to a shelf filled with tools and picked up a long knife with a sharp curved blade, "I cannot watch her suffer any longer. Stand back while I do what I must."

Littlejohn stared at the old man, his gentle blue eyes wide with alarm, "Are you going to try and cut her belly open... deliver the foal that way?"

Behind Littlejohn, Billy swallowed hard. He'd seen a lot of terrible things since landing at Normandy Beach, but this deliberate slaughter of a helpless animal left him shivering with dread.

"No," Philippe shook his head, his face grim but wet with tears. "Even if I could save the foal, how could I feed it with my beautiful Fleur nothing but a butchered carcass? I have no milk cows, not even a nanny goat." He scrubbed at the tears trickling down his face. "No, let me do what I must and slit her throat. She's already suffered too long."

"NO!" Littlejohn protested. "Let me try. I'm stronger than you... and I've done this before, with one of our big draft horses." Peeling off his shirt, he splashed water from the bucket in the stall on his hands and arms before lying down behind the hindquarters of the sweating, panting beast. As Littlejohn tried to reach up inside the mare, his wounded shoulder began to throb. Stretching out his uninjured arm, he grasped one of the foal's slender forelegs but to no avail, the other was out of his reach. He struggled to pull one-armed but the slippery foal kept getting away from him.

Finally, he turned to Billy who was staring at him eyes wide and mouth open. "I can't reach it, Billy. My shoulder won't let me stretch high enough to pull it out. You've got to do it."

"ME?!?" Billy's voice climbed to a semi-hysterical falsetto. "You want me to lie down BEHIND that horse and reach up INSIDE HER... and pull her baby out?!?" Billy's face went from red to white to red again as he struggled with that very frightening image.

"It's not hard. I watched the vet do it once... and then I had to do it myself, the winter before I was drafted. You just have to get a grip on both legs, wait for the contraction and pull with it. Don't jerk, just give a slow steady pull."

Billy's nerves had steadied somewhat, but he still stared at the laboring mare uneasily. "Are you sure about this, Littlejohn? What if I hurt her... and she kicks me? I'd be right behind her." He stared uneasily at the harshly panting mare.

"Don't worry, Billy," Littlejohn reassured him, "she's too weak to kick you that hard. Now, come on, I see another contraction starting. Lie down and reach up inside her. You'll feel one leg already down, you've got to stretch and grab the other and pull it down, then the foal should be able to come out."

Much against his better judgment, Billy knelt behind the mare, wetting his hands and arms as Littlejohn instructed him, then gingerly reached inside.

"Lie all the way down and reach higher, Billy. You can't get hold of anything that way."

Grimacing as he groped blindly for something he could only guess at, Billy felt a slender wet, sticklike object under his fingers and as he groped upwards, his shoulders screaming at the strain, he found another fragile foreleg pressed backwards. Moving slowly and carefully, he got to his knees as he pulled downward. Moments later he had



a wet, bloody foal dropped into his lap as he stared in dumb-founded amazement at its perfect delicate ears and velvet nose.

"We did it!" Billy gasped in amazement looking up at Littlejohn, who had a relieved and proud expression on his face as he corrected his young buddy.

"No, *you* did it, Billy. How does it feel to bring a life into this world?"

"Okay, I guess. Kind of scary." He glanced down at his blood-and fluid-stained pants and shirt. "I just hope the lieutenant isn't upset about the mess."

"I think he'll forgive us if we bring back that healer like he ordered."

Littlejohn turned his attention to Philippe who was stroking and soothing the sweaty mare as she lay there shivering and exhausted in the straw. "We need your help, sir. Andre Marchand said that you could tell us where to find the healer, Gabrielle? Can you take us to her?"

"Of course. Her cottage is not far. Just let me tend to the mare." With Philippe's urging the mare scrambled weakly to her feet and stood there, sweaty and trembling, with her head hanging.

Pulling aside a dilapidated harness and several pieces of rusty farm equipment, the farmer opened a hidden bin and pulled out a small sack of oats, which he poured into the mare's manger. After asking Billy to bring a bucket of fresh water from the pump, he closed the stall door and also secured the barn door. "I doubt that she would wander off, as weak as she is, but there are predators, two-legged and four who will eat anything they find."

While Philippe was tending the mare, Littlejohn manned the pump so Billy could wash the worst of the mess off his arms and chest. Billy glanced up at his buddy, and the new blood oozing through the bandage that Doc had applied. "Your shoulder's bleeding again. Why don't you rest here while we go fetch that healer and head back to the village?"

"Nope. Gotta go with you, Billy. I don't intend to be left behind. The lieutenant needs every man he's got if we're going to finish this mission... and I can still throw a grenade with one arm." He grinned slyly. "If someone'll pull the pin for me."

Billy shook his head at that sly jab, recalling the time he thought he'd lost the pin to one of the grenades he was carrying and Littlejohn had found it. "All right, but just don't drop it, like Crown did... or the Sarge'll never let us hear the end of it."

There was a brief catch in his breath as he saw Littlejohn's strained look at his mention of their missing noncom. But he continued putting up a bold front, "You know the Sarge. He's probably already back at the village."

After Philippe was finished making sure his mare and her new foal were safe and secure, he led Billy and Littlejohn into the surrounding forest. "It's not far," he assured them. "No more than another mile at the most."

"How come she doesn't live in the village?" Billy asked. "If she treated people's illnesses, you'd think she'd want to be near where her patients live."

"Ah, but her medicines come from the forest. Leaves and herbs, roots and berries which she gathers, preserves and mixes into whatever cure her patient needs. Though some of the remedies can be stored, especially over the winter, Gabrielle preferred to mix them fresh. Said they were more effective... and less likely to have a bad reaction."

"You know an awful lot about this healer," said Littlejohn. "Are you one of her patients?"

Philippe tried to shrug off the question, "'She's too 'old-fashioned' my grandsons used to say. 'Who knows what's in those potions she's always brewing up?'" He heaved a deep sigh. "So I went to the new village doctor as they wanted... but the medicine he gave me for my arthritis wasn't nearly as good."

A short time later, he peered through the shadowy trees spotting a small snug cottage. "We're here."

As they approached, Billy noticed the rabbit hutches behind the cottage, along with a neatly hoed and staked garden, filled with lots of greenery and a few brightly colored vegetables peeking through the leaves. Going up to the door, they heard the sound of voices arguing through an open window, one high-pitched and obviously female, and the other male, low-voiced and rough, with a stubborn edge to it.

"Someone is with her." Philippe's expression was alarmed. "A man. But I do not recognize...."

Billy unshouldered his rifle and prepared to kick down the door and go in firing. "Maybe it's the Gestapo."

"She's not afraid, just scolding. Calling someone 'a stubborn fool.'"

Littlejohn listened intently at the window, before turning with a vastly relieved expression to his two companions. "That's the Sarge's voice, Billy. I'd recognize that growl anywhere."

The old man pounded impatiently at the door, calling out in French, <Gabrielle, Bridgette, it's me. Philippe, your neighbor. Andre and his men tried to blow up the factory, but didn't succeed. He has many wounded men... and no doctor. He needs your help.>

There was a bitter outburst from the older woman as she stomped over and yanked open the door, <Now he asks for my help. When that... that fancy-pants city doctor is not available, only then am I good enough to bind his men's wounds. Well, maybe I have better things to do. There are vegetables to bring in, and animals to tend. I even have a patient to care for. An *American*. And he has had no complaint about my old-fashioned cures and remedies.>

Billy and Littlejohn rushed past her and over to the cot where Saunders was struggling to get to his feet, his blood-stained shirt draped across his shoulders. He was clutching his boots in one hand and had the other pressed to the bandage covering his left side. His face was covered with a cold sweat, but his bright blue gaze was as intense as ever.

"Your timing couldn't be better... I thought I was gonna have to go *through* that stubborn old woman. What's happened to the lieutenant... and Captain Davies? Did the rest of the squad get away? What are the two of you doing *here*, anyway?"

"It's a long story, Sarge, and we'll tell you later," Billy looked up at his buddy, wondering if Saunders really was well enough to travel, especially since they'd be making another attack on the lab that evening. "We gotta see if Philippe has convinced the old... the healer to come with us. Maybe you should stay *here*, till we blow the lab for sure."

Saunders did not even acknowledge Billy's tentative suggestion, only dropped his boots and shoved his feet in, catching his breath sharply as he leaned over to lace and buckle them. Seeing the furious resolve on Saunders' face, Billy hastily knelt to fasten the boots as unobtrusively as possible, while Littlejohn helped his sergeant pull his shirt on, trying not to notice the red stain oozing through the bandage.

The younger woman tossed her dark curls in irritation and hurried over with another bandage that she tied over the first one and split her angry remarks between Saunders and Billy. "*Grand'mere* is right, you know. If you leave now, the wound is likely to bleed again... maybe even become infected. If it does, then who will take care of you?"

Apparently Philippe had succeeded in persuading the old woman to come with them, and she pulled out a large multi-pocketed carry sack and began loading it hastily from drawers and bins all around her kitchen. As she did so, she continued a rapid-fire

dialogue with Philippe, gesturing towards her granddaughter, her garden, and the cottage itself.

Bridgitte tried to interrupt but was the recipient of a terse and sharply worded set of instructions, which left her cheeks flushed and an even angrier look on her face.

"Looks like your grandmother is coming with us, Bridgette. So you don't have to worry about someone to take care of me." Saunders' voice softened. "Thanks for finding me and bringing me here, after I passed out. You saved my life... and I'm grateful."

As Gabrielle reached for a gnarled oak walking stick, Littlejohn took her carry sack and hoisted it up. Billy headed out the door with Saunders' arm resting over his shoulder, and Philippe offered Gabrielle his arm as though they were going out on a Sunday stroll. As they left, Philippe turned to Bridgette and made a hurried appeal.

<If we're not back by noon tomorrow, could you check on Fleur and her new foal? I left enough for tonight, but she'll need to be fed and watered in the morning.>

By the time they arrived back at the village, the sun was definitely past the noon mark. Littlejohn headed for the village church that Doc had turned into an impromptu aid station. Clomping through the door, he dropped the heavy sack beside the medic. Doc looked up in surprise as an elderly French couple followed the GI inside, with the woman shaking a scolding finger at Littlejohn and peering intently into the sack he'd just deposited on the stone floor.

As her outburst died to angry mutters, Littlejohn introduced her, "This is Madame Gabrielle... I don't know her last name. She's the healer that Marchand sent us after." He gave Doc a lopsided grin. "And we found Saunders, too."

"You found the Sarge?" Doc's whole face seemed to light up. "Where is he? I thought he'd been wounded? And what happened to Billy?"

"He's with the Sarge. He was hit. But Madame Gabrielle and her daughter found him in the woods and brought him to their cottage so they could treat his wound. Billy wanted to bring him here first, but he was determined to check in with the lieutenant."

"Well, I guess it's not that bad, if he could walk all this way. How's your shoulder doing?"

"Not too sore." Littlejohn moved his arm tentatively. "It was getting a little red, so Madame Gabrielle put a poultice on it and it feels a lot better now."

Doc tried to hide his look of alarm as he reached for the bandage to see just what the so-called healer had used on the open wound. Suddenly he was deluged by a flood of rapid fire French questions and instructions as Madame Gabrielle began checking the dressings and peering into the faces of the wounded *maquis*. Philippe gently took Doc's arm and led him over to the young man she was examining and the three of them began to confer.

Dropping wearily into a quiet corner behind the baptismal font, Littlejohn watched as Madame Gabrielle stumped from one patient to another, examining their wounds, looking into their eyes, listening intently to their chests and abdomens. She reminded him a lot of his Great-Gran Peabody who'd been a nurse during the Civil War. She knew her potions and pills, but it was common knowledge that she mostly bullied her patients into getting better. No one **dared** even think about dying when she was tending them.

Sometime later after he'd finished making rounds with Madame Gabrielle, Doc returned to check on Littlejohn's bandage. He wasn't quite as worried as he'd been earlier, since her treatments were common remedies that the old timey healers used, but he wanted to check just to be sure there were no signs of infection.

Just then Hanley, Davies, Marchand, and Saunders entered the church. The *maquis* leader hurried over to where Madame Gabrielle was peering intently into one of the coffee canteens that she was using to steep some herbal brew, asking her about the condition of his men.

Hanley pointed Saunders in Doc's direction, turning a deaf ear to the sergeant's protests, "Just sit down and let Doc take a look at you, all right? I know everyone else is convinced the woman is a miracle worker, but I prefer to have someone I trust check things out."

Doc pulled down the dressing to get a closer look at the wound, relieved to see that the site was clean, with no sign of redness or swelling. "It looks okay, Lieutenant Hanley. There's no sign of infection right now."

"Then I can lead the squad in tonight's attack," Saunders demanded.

"Now just a minute," Doc objected. "I didn't say you were fit to return to duty. The wound may be clean, with no outward signs of infection, but it's nowhere near closed. You start running and jumping around in the middle of a battle and something's liable to bust loose and leave you bleeding to death. You're in no shape to lead the squad."

Doc held his breath waiting for Saunders usual protest, but instead Davies spoke up, "Would he be able to come to the edge of the woods and take a position to provide cover fire for us after we set off those explosives?"

Not wanting Saunders to be in the middle of the battle in his condition, Doc started to appeal to Hanley. Then he caught sight of the lieutenant's grim look. Even though they were expecting more reinforcements from other *maquis* groups before they attacked the lab again, there was no guarantee that these men would follow orders any better than Marchand's original men. There was no lack of fighters, but few of them had any experience in fighting as a unit or following orders in the middle of a battle.

Saunders had proven his courage and cool-headed deliberation in half a hundred skirmishes from North Africa to France. Even if he wasn't able to lead his squad in the mission to rescue the villagers, he could still keep the Germans pinned down and distracted while Hanley and Davies were setting the charges. Hanley stared at the OSS captain's remote expression, hoping that "cover fire" was all that the other man expected of his sergeant.

As the afternoon progressed, the *maquis* replacements began drifting into the village, two or three at a time. Most of them were carrying modern American or English weapons that they had been given by the Allies. A few had German weapons "liberated" from their former owners, usually by having their throats cut on sentry duty. One or two farmers had nothing but scythes and mattocks, but eagerly accepted weapons belonging to the dead and wounded of Marchand's followers that they no longer had any use for.

The growing dusk turned into that misty gray twilight common to the mountains, where visibility was barely an arm's length in front of their faces. Ammunition was hastily distributed and knives and bayonets had a final deadly edge put on them. In that gray half-light, the two groups split up to tackle their separate missions.

Trailing behind Cajé in that shadowy half-darkness, Kirby muttered to himself, "Blasted pea-soup fog. Thought we'd left this junk in London. Can't hardly see the nose in front of my face, much less some Kraut machine gun nest. We're gonna wander all around these mountains... till we starve to death. Or get eaten by a bear." He said the last with a certain gloomy satisfaction.

He jumped as Cajé seemed to materialize out of thin air... or very thick air, holding his fingers to his lips as he breathed, "Shut up, Kirby. The Germans may not be able to see us, but sound carries in this kind of fog. Now, pass the signal back, we're getting close. So, absolute silence from here on."

Kirby passed the word on to Meddings in a low breathy growl and could barely hear as he whispered down the line to Billy. Muttering under his breath while he waited for Cajé to give the signal to attack, "Guess it's a good thing that Littlejohn wasn't okayed to return to duty as part of this attack. That big lummoX would probably trip over his own feet and give us all away."

He felt a sharp knife prick his throat, as Cajé growled, "At least he'd keep his mouth shut when he's told to. Now be quiet, Kirby... and follow me. Oh and get out those extra grenades that Saunders had us bring."

Kirby groped at his web belt, trying to reach the grenades and getting tangled up with the BAR's sling, ammo, and the bloody-bedamned bipod that he'd been intending to remove for the past two months. After an eternity of thrashing around on the hillside, sounding like he was wrestling with a pair of hungry alligators, he managed to creep up behind Cajé, within throwing distance of the German machine gun nest.

As Cajé started to pull the pin, Kirby grabbed his arm, "Hey, I thought we were s'posed to wait for Hanley and the captain to set off the explosives?"

"Not this time, Kirby. This time, we're the diversionary action. Now throw those grenades... and then open fire!" The last words were in a penetrating voice that pierced the mist, followed a few seconds later by a similar command in French. <OPEN FIRE>

As the roar of gunfire rattled through the mist, Kirby could have sworn that he heard the staccato chatter of the Sarge's Thompson, coming up the hill behind him.

"That's impossible," he muttered to himself. "Saunders is with the lieutenant and that OSS captain. Even *he* can't be in two places at once." Then there was no more time for thinking, only continuous fire as they charged the enemy, determined to accomplish their mission.

As they approached the laboratory area of the building complex, Davies knelt beside Saunders as he chose an area just beyond the trees where he could see most of the building exits, but was not within easy view himself. As Saunders took his position with Davies' rifle and sighted down the scope's crosshairs, the OSS captain spoke with cool deliberation, "Even if we succeed in blowing up this lab, we can't let any of the Germans escape and take Dr. Marchand with them."

"I understand," Saunders' voice held absolutely no emotion.

Shouldering the bag that held the charges, Davies joined Hanley as they skulked down to the edge of the building, just beyond where they'd located the main storeroom during their ill-fated attempt of the evening before. They had to locate the central laboratory where the lethal gas would actually be produced. Sneaking up as the guards were taking a break, Davies garrotted one with a thin wire, and then slashed the throat of a second while Hanley struggled with a third, shoving his knife into the German's heart.

The door was locked, but Davies pulled out his tools and quickly had it open. After he and Hanley entered the semi-darkened room, the lieutenant stared in momentary awe at the gleaming steel and glass equipment that the Gestapo had brought to this factory for the sole purpose of creating death and destruction.

Davies' hand tightened on Hanley's arm as he passed him half of the charges. "No time for sightseeing, Lieutenant. Just plant these where they'll do the most damage."

Hanley stuffed the bundles inside his jacket and moved through the room with stealthy efficiency, hastily distributing the destructive bundles. Within ten minutes the two officers were empty-handed, having assured that nothing would remain of the lab but shattered glass and twisted metal debris.

Before they could leave the lab, Hanley placed a restraining hand on Davies' shoulder. "What about Marchand... and his family? If we could find them..."

"Blow the lab first," Davies bit off harshly. "Then in the confusion, we'll do what we can."

Hanley was not reassured by the icy note in the captain's voice, but followed him back toward the woods so they could set off the explosives. Just as Davies was about to trigger the blast, they heard the muffled thump of grenades followed by a prolonged burst of fire. Hanley just managed to identify the bass rumble of the BAR, accompanied by the rapid chatter of various *maquis* weapons, then with a resounding roar like the end of the world, Davies set off the charges.

The lab went up in a wall of flame that nearly blistered Hanley's face. Rubbing his watering eyes, he staggered back towards the woods, certain that nothing could have survived that inferno.

Davies dragged him further away, muttering, "The flames should reach the chemical storage area before too long. Once that's gone...."

Several more explosions rattled through the buildings as Hanley tried to get a better view, wondering if this fire might even endanger the barracks area where his men were trying to free the villagers. Though with any luck at all, this blaze would draw the guards away and simplify their mission.

He noticed that numerous half-dressed men, some in uniform and others wearing civilian clothes or workers' coveralls were charging out of other buildings like ants whose hill had been kicked.

Several of them were throwing buckets of water at the blaze, to no avail. Still others were running into buildings that were not actually ablaze but in imminent danger, in an effort to salvage papers and other valuable materials. Von Ritter stood well away from the blazing building, shrilly screaming orders but no one was listening to him.

Off to one side of the burning lab complex, Hanley saw a man wearing pants and no shirt, trembling with shock as he clutched the woman and two small children huddled beside him. It was Gerard Marchand. Apparently their German captors had not yet spotted them or perhaps even believed that they had not escaped the burning building.

Hanley snatched the carbine off his shoulder, determined to help Marchand and his family escape, but Davies held him back, "**No**. There are too many soldiers in the area. We'd never be able to get them away."

Suddenly a single shot rang out and Hanley turned a stern, yet disbelieving frown in Davies' direction, "That's *why* you set Saunders up with that sniper weapon... to make sure...."

But before he could complete his accusation, he realized that Saunders had not targeted Marchand. Instead, Von Ritter stood there backlit by the flaming building, with a dark, bloody hole between his eyes, just before he collapsed in a boneless heap. Saunders fired a second, and then a third shot, dropping Gestapo officers in their tracks.

Hanley ran over to Marchand and swept up his wife and the child in her arms, staggering briefly at the combined weight. "Come on, Marchand. Run... **now**, before Saunders runs out of bullets."

Davies hesitated for just a moment then he dashed over and grabbed up the second child, steering Marchand by the arm, away from the blazing laboratory. "Get moving, man! They're not going to stand around gawking all night. We've got to get out of range."

Half running, half staggering, the six of them managed to reach the woods, while Saunders continued picking off any Gestapo guards foolish enough to try and follow. As they retreated away from the burning laboratory, heading in the general direction of the village, Hanley listened intently trying to determine how the squad's battle to free the rest

of the villagers was going. Judging by the overwhelming sound of Allied weapons, Marchand and his band of *maquis* had succeeded in their mission.

With the lab complex going up in flames and most of their weapons with it, Hanley sincerely doubted that any of the SS guards were willing to tangle with the *maquis* or his squad at the moment. Especially since Saunders had taken out their commanding officer and most of his subordinates with a few well-placed shots. Though that had not been Davies' original intention.

Moments later, Saunders joined them with his helmet at a jauntier angle than usual as he shouldered Davies' rifle.

"Your orders were to take out Marchand," Davies said sourly, disregarding the fact that the man he'd ordered killed, along with his wife and children, was standing within earshot. "To make sure the Germans couldn't use his knowledge to create a weapon that could halt the Allied offensive."

Saunders pulled his helmet down and gave Davies a very serious look. "I never liked killing civilians, Captain. Even when I *knew* that they were German agents, passing on information that got our people killed. That's why I asked for a transfer to a combat unit in North Africa. At least the guys I was shooting at then had an even chance to shoot back at me."

He stared at Marchand's battered face as he clung desperately to his wife and children. "Dr. Marchand didn't *choose* to work for the Germans, so I decided to put the bullet where it would do the most good. Right between that Gestapo major's eyes."

"But if you'd missed...." Davies' anger had subsided, though he still refused to meet Marchand's eyes.

"I didn't." Saunders winced slightly, unshouldering the rifle and handing it back to the captain. "It's all yours, sir. Let's see if Cajé and the *maquis* need a hand getting those villagers home again. I wanna get my Thompson back."

Hanley stared at his sergeant in disbelief, knowing Saunders would rather share his toothbrush than the SMG. "Who'd you loan it to?"

"Billy."

Saunders grinned at Hanley's look of disbelief. "And if he's jammed it, I'll skin him with a dull knife... if I can borrow one."

end