

EAST OF OZ, NORTH OF SHANGRI LA

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Dedication: This story is dedicated to Lieutenant Hanley, Sarge, and the rest of the squad who taught us the meaning of duty and loyalty, along with the price that is always paid for freedom.

To my husband Jarvis, editorial advisor and punctuation maestro, thanks to ADA Advance Course English.

And to Doc II who managed to keep this zine going through hell and high water.



The war was over.

Not just in Europe, but the Pacific as well. Hitler and his coterie of Aryan madmen were all dead, fled or in prison. In the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japs paid the price for Nanking, Pearl Harbor and Bataan a thousand times over.

The war was over, for the moment at least. Now all that homecoming sons and daughters had to do was find the strength and hope within them to build a peace.

Soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines were returning from duty stations all over the world, welcomed home by Blue Star mothers and Rosie the Riveter girlfriends, Victory Garden wives and Red Cross sisters. Each and every one of them eager for a "Return to Normalcy", determined to finish school, learn a trade, get married and start a family. Although there were political rumblings in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and French Indo-China, Americans had enough of fighting "the war to save civilization" and while there was political dissatisfaction in various groups, for the most part Americans were determined to get on with their lives.

As he walked down the tree-lined street leading home, Sergeant Chip Saunders gazed at the brilliant fall colors surrounding him, trying to shake off how naked he felt without the weight of his helmet or the solid security of the Thompson slung from his shoulder. The sun was shining brightly but there was a chill in the air hinting of the dark winter days ahead. Though after the brutal snows of the Ardennes, an Illinois winter seemed tame.

He'd almost called his mother from the depot, but had second thoughts, remembering that the only phone on the block was owned by the Beechers and Mrs. Beecher was the biggest gossip in the neighborhood. Rather than having Ma and the Brat learn he was back fourth or fifth-hand, he decided to walk home instead. His duffle wasn't much heavier than the kit he'd hauled across Northern France into Germany and a four-mile hike was a stroll in the park for a man who'd fought his way through North Africa, up the Italian boot, onto the beaches of Normandy and across the Rhine.

Saunders remembered Kirby always complaining about his aching feet and swearing that once he got home, he was going to ride everywhere for the rest of his life. Saunders didn't mind walking now, since he no longer had to be on the lookout for sniper fire or hidden mines. Then the loud blare of a horn nearly startled him into diving for cover, until he looked around and saw Thomas Greenwood waving frantically from behind the wheel of his Model A.

"Welcome home, Chip! Great to see ya back. Have to deliver these groceries to the Carlsons right now, but you're gonna be at the tavern this evening, aren't you?"

Saunders acknowledged with a wave and a grin before continuing down the sidewalk, hoping he'd have a little time with his family before the whole neighborhood showed up, alerted by the ebullient storekeeper. As he walked down the sidewalk, his feet kicking through the fallen leaves, he gazed around apprehensively wondering how much things had changed in the years he'd been gone. Most of the

houses appeared the same, maybe a little older and shabbier, with sagging shutters and peeling paint. The Kendalls still had the tire swing hanging from their oak tree, the Newsomes' yard was cluttered with bicycles, skates, and a discarded doll, and of course there were the stars -- blue and gold -- in the windows for fathers, brothers, and sons, daughters and sisters who were serving their country or had made the ultimate sacrifice.

For a moment at the edge of his mother's neatly kept yard, Saunders gazed up at the lace curtains fluttering from the window, seeing the three blue stars and grateful for his brothers' safety. As he took the porch steps two at a time, he almost charged over a girl maybe two or three years older than his sister Louise. She had a large basket in one hand and was sticking a folded note into the pocket of her ruffled apron with the other. As he reached the porch, her blue-green eyes widened in surprise and she



almost dropped the basket.

“Chip? Is it really you?”

He reached out to steady her with one hand, his brows drawn down as he tried to recall her name.

“Yeah, I’m afraid I don’t remember”

“Celia Donovan. I was still in pigtails with skinned knees when you joined up.”

He gave her a brief nod and reached for the door, but she put her hand on his arm to stop him.

“Better let me go first. Your ma was letting out the hem in one of Louise’s dresses and had a mouthful of pins. You don’t want to take her by surprise, believe me.”

Following soft-footed behind the girl, Saunders hesitated just inside the doorway startled by the changes since he was last home. The chesterfield was pushed off to one side, leaving the center of the room occupied by a folding table surrounded by straight back chairs and covered with bags holding several different projects: bandage rolls, balls of yarn, fabric pieces for quilts and other items he couldn’t identify.

Celia called into the next room, “Mrs. Saunders, I forgot to ask you if you wanted to double your order for eggs and milk next week?”

“Oww,” the Brat squealed. “You stuck me, Ma.”

“Well, stand still and you won’t get stuck.” There was the sound of rustling fabric as his mother started to enter the room.

“Didn’t I leave you a note beside the ice box . . . ?”

As she came through the doorway, Mae Saunders gave a sudden cry as she saw her oldest son and then ran forward to hug him, sobbing with joy and relief as he picked her up and swung her around. A moment later Louise joined her mother and brother, trying to hug them both as she protested, between laughter and tears, “Goon, why didn’t you let us know? We could have met your train . . . and baked a cake . . . and told everybody.”

Chip let go of his mother long enough to grab his sister and silence her outburst by hugging her hard enough to take her breath away. “I wanted to see the two of you before the whole town got here.”

Celia Donovan stood on the edge of the ecstatic group with a brief wistful smile on her face. Catching his mother’s attention, she nodded, “Don’t worry. I’ll double your egg and milk order, starting tomorrow.”

Turning to leave, she paused to pin back a strand of honey colored hair that had slipped out of her neatly upswept French twist. As she did, Saunders caught sight of tears glittering on her cheeks before she hurried out, the screen door slamming behind her.

His mother shook her head with a sympathetic look. “Poor Celia. With Jack at the Springfield VA and Jimmy wild as a spring colt, she’s working herself to death trying to run that dairy.”

“Jack Donovan’s up at Springfield? How long has he been back?”

“Since late summer,” his mother replied. “He had severe back injuries and was sent to Springfield to see if the hospital there could help him.” For a long moment, Mae Saunders’ eyes were filled with pity for their neighbor, then she turned a thankful look at her eldest son, home safe and sound. “What would you like for dinner, Chip? We’ve saved up enough ration coupons for a small roast. Or I could make salmon croquets? Or chicken stew?”

“No stew!!” Chip protested before he could stop himself, then looked down at his mother’s startled face with an apologetic grin. “Sorry, Ma. Fix anything you want. I know it won’t taste anything like Army chow.”

“Perhaps not, but I’ll try not to bring back unpleasant memories. Tell me son, what you’d really like?”

“Well, you’re gonna laugh, but what I’ve dreamed about for the last year is a stack of your flapjacks, swimming in butter and drenched with all the syrup I wanted. A couple of eggs over easy and a tall glass of fresh milk.”



The next few weeks were hectic with approaching holiday preparations and Saunders let himself be caught up in the festive spirit, trying to ignore the sense of uneasiness that still haunted him from time to time. He still slept lightly, even in the security of his own room, starting up at the slightest sound,

though he managed to bury the memories of battles and other nightmares very deep.

He'd started working in the warehouse of the local hardware store, lifting and moving stacks of lumber, boxes of screws and bolts, and other building and repair supplies. With sons and brothers coming home, lots of long-deferred repairs were being made, rooms added and even new houses being built. The work was physically hard, but not mentally demanding and sometimes it left him with too much time to think, concerned about his brothers, Chris and Tommy, and hoping it was only military red tape delaying their arrival home. Ma hadn't received official notification about either of the boys being wounded so he allowed himself to believe there was nothing to worry about.

But there were other times he found himself being haunted by the sound and fury of battle. It had been a mild fall, with warm days brilliant with sunlight and colorful leaves shimmering against the sky in gold, scarlet, orange and bronze. The crisp nights still reminded him of bonfires and marshmallows roasting. This late Indian summer only gave them the barest hint of the cold, harsh winter ahead.

Then winter descended in a rush, as a sudden cold front hurtled through one afternoon, colliding with the late fall warmth and triggering a violent thunderstorm that sent trees and branches crashing and knocked out power for the whole town. Their stove was gas powered so Ma fixed supper as usual in a kitchen lit by the shadowy warmth of old kerosene lanterns that had been stored in the garage from when they used to go camping at the river. Despite his resolve to put the war behind him, the rolling thunder and the lightening flashes left Saunders edgy and ill-at ease, reminding him too much of the artillery barrages that preceded an infantry advance.

As he sat at the table with his jaw clenched and stomach roiling, toying with his food, the memory of those battles came back so strongly that his mouth went dry and he couldn't swallow. Louise tried to dispel the tension with empty chatter about the latest movie that she'd seen, but it took all his willpower not to snap at her to keep her head down so the Krauts didn't blow her brains out.

Finally, he couldn't bear to sit still any longer and mumbled an excuse to his mother, leaving his plate untouched. Pushing through the screen door, he stood there alone and shivering as the clouds suddenly dropped their burden of rain like a waterfall. Sheltered by the porch, he stared out into the deluge, recalling the times he'd slept and eaten, patrolled and fought in a hard driving rain like this one. As he gazed into the darkness, trying to bury those memories, he knew any sensible person would be inside, warm and secure, surrounded by their families. Like he should be, too . . .

Taking a deep shuddering breath, he raked his fingers through his hair and tried to shove the memories away, into the forgotten corners of his mind where they belonged.

As he started to turn and go back in the house, he spotted a girl running frantically down the street. Her dress was soaked and she was bareheaded, hair hanging in lank strings around a terrified face. Spying him on the porch, she lurched up the porch steps and staggered against him. As Saunders caught her, he stared at her reddened swollen face, recognizing Celia Donovan, who delivered their eggs and milk.

"You've got to stop him!" she sobbed, panting hard. "Before he kills Jimmy."

"Who's trying to kill Jimmy?" he demanded tersely.

"Jack." She managed to gasp, her knees starting to give way. "He's got a shotgun."

Saunders winced, remembering Old Man Jenkins blasting a load of rock salt at him and Chris when they'd tipped over his outhouse one Halloween. He grasped Celia's shoulders gently "Don't worry. It's probably not even loaded . . . and even if it was, I doubt Jack would do more than sting Jimmy's backside a little."

"You don't understand," she pleaded desperately. "They've been arguing, **bitterly**. Ever since the VA doctors sent Jack home last week. They said there's nothing more they can do."

She stared into his eyes, tears streaming. "Since then, all he's done is sit in the living room, staring out the window. He won't eat, I doubt he sleeps. He just sits there." She took a deep choking breath, "Until tonight when Jimmy came in. He usually goes out and has a beer or two after finishing his chores, but this time he was drunk. Weaving, barely able to stand."

Her hands clenched tightly on Saunders' arms, "He said he was leaving. That he'd spent enough of his life on a broken-down farm, taking orders from a woman. And he wasn't going to waste any more time nursemaiding a cripple. Then he started out the door"

She took several unsteady breaths before she managed to continue, "Jack didn't say anything just wheeled out of the room while I grabbed Jimmy's arm and tried to stop him but he slapped me and pulled away. When Jack came back, he had the shotgun. But Jimmy just laughed at him until somehow Jack

knocked his feet out from under him, then put the barrel against his head saying he'd blow Jimmy's face off. That's when I ran out the back door, hoping I could find anyone who could stop him before . . . before"

Saunders clenched his fists, not sure which one was the bigger fool, Jack or Jimmy. Then he squared his shoulders, realizing this was an aftermath of the war, one more battle that had to be fought.

"Stay here, Celia, while I go knock some sense into those two blockheads. Oh, and tell Ma where I've gone. She'll probably want to put a piece of raw meat on that eye."

"Be careful, Chip," Celia swallowed back her sobs.

As he smoothed the honey-colored hair back from her forehead, Saunders was surprised by the sudden protective feelings that rose up inside him. Celia wasn't more than a couple of years older than Louise. She didn't deserve this kind of hardship. No one did. He didn't care whose fault it was, he'd make peace between her brothers if he had to knock their heads together, like Kirby and Littlejohn.

Abruptly putting that image of his two buddies aside, Saunders knew he had no time to waste or one of Celia's brothers was likely going to do something he'd regret for the rest of his life. The war had taken enough lives and he did not intend to see it rob this family of anymore than they'd already sacrificed.

Gripping her shoulders, he ordered sternly, "Tell Ma I'll be gone a couple of hours and not to wait up for me. You can sleep in my room." He turned and started down the road in the pouring rain, falling by habit into the ground-eating route march that he and the squad had used whenever they had to get somewhere fast and then face the enemy.

Soaked to the skin before he'd gone half a block, Saunders shook the water out of his eyes, wishing for once that he still had his stiff Army-issue poncho. It may not have kept him completely dry but at least it held in the warmth and prevented the worst of the rain from dripping down the back of his neck. He missed his helmet as well and the security of the Thompson, slung from his shoulder, ready to be swung into action at the first sign of danger.

Not that he'd likely need to use it against Jack Donovan, but sometimes it helped to get a man's attention in order to reason with him.

The Donovan's dairy farm was just beyond the town limits. Judging by the size of the barn, pasture, and chicken coop behind the house, they probably didn't have more than a half-dozen cows and maybe a dozen chickens. There was a small kitchen garden and a neat row of petunias by the front steps, but the house and barn had a worn look about them, needing a coat of paint as well as other repairs.

He paused at the front steps, seeing no lights in the front of the house and guessed Jack and Jimmy were likely in the kitchen. Moving with the stealth learned in a hundred reconns into enemy territory, Saunders edged his way along the back of the house to the screen door. Celia had left the kitchen door ajar when she'd run out of the house and he paused there, listening.

". . . can't hold that gun on me much longer," Jimmy's voice was high pitched and nervous. "Sooner or later you're going to get tired, Big Brother, then I'm gone. I'm sick and tired of being stuck on this sorry excuse for a farm. I'm headed for the big city. Do some living before I die."

"You ignorant bumpkin. Can't even run a small time operation like this and you think you'll make it in the big city? You lazy, draft-dodging"

"It wasn't my fault I was **too young** to enlist," Jimmy flared back. "And besides you were the one who signed the hardship papers saying that I was needed on the farm."

"And a **wonderful** job you did, too, you lazy bum. Celia's working herself to death doing your jobs feeding and processing, besides handling deliveries and keeping the books. Not to mention cooking, cleaning and looking after you."

"I don't need looking after," the younger boy answered sullenly. "I can take care of myself just fine. A hell of a lot better than **you did**."

There was a sharp intake of breath and Saunders heard the last sound he wanted to hear in this volatile situation -- the click of hammers being drawn back.

With no more time to think, he charged into the room, depending on his battlefield instincts to reach Jack Donovan and stop him. The gun exploded with a roar and clouds of plaster and shattered glass rained down on the three of them. Jimmy Donovan had dived out of the line of fire as Saunders' lunge shoved the gun barrel towards the ceiling, knocking Jack out of his wheelchair to sprawl on the kitchen floor.

There was a stunned silence in the aftermath of the blast, until Jimmy sat up and wiped the plaster dust out of his eyes, waving a blood-spattered hand.

"You shot me, you bastard," he sputtered. "Your own brother!"

Grabbing the shotgun, Saunders cracked the breech, checking to be sure it was empty, before putting it out of reach.

Half-choked by the debris and dust as he climbed to his feet, he said, "You just got spattered with broken glass, Jimmy. Now stop whining and help me with your brother. I don't know if I broke anything when I hit him."

Sprawled on the floor amid the shattered plaster and broken glass, Jack pushed himself into a sitting position, coughing from the clouds of dust that were still settling and turned his attention on the meddler in their private family quarrel. "Just who the hell are you? Stickin' your nose in our private business?"

"I'm Chip Saunders, my family lives on Riverview Street. This little spat of yours sent your sister running into the middle of a storm, trying to find someone to stop you from killing each other."

"You're Chris's big brother aren't you? Been in the Army from the beginning, since North Africa?" Surprisingly there was almost a note of hero worship in Jimmy's voice.

Saunders coughed and wiped his sleeve across his face, trying to get the worst of the dust out of his eyes and nose before he answered, "Yeah, I was in the Army. Just like your brother."

He set the wheelchair upright, locking the wheels. "Let's get Jack back in his chair. We probably ought to be careful how we lift him. Cross your arms and we'll do a two-man carry . . ."

"Forget it," Jack protested angrily. "I'm not that much of an invalid and I can damned well get back into my chair without the two of you nursemaiding me." He glared at the two men, one a stranger and the other the brother he despised.

Saunders returned the look with an appraising one of his own, before going over to the sink to wash his hands. As he splashed the water onto his face and rubbed his hands through his hair, he resisted the impulse to look over and see how Celia's brother was doing. There were grunts of effort, followed by profane muttering, but Jack seemed to be able to make it back onto his wheelchair without any help. By the time he had cleaned the worst of the dirt off, Jack was sitting there, brushing at the gray and white streaks powdering his clothes. Saunders offered him a towel to wipe the sweat and dust off his face. "You want to tell me what this is all about?" he asked in a mild voice.

The two brothers exchanged such hostile looks that Saunders turned to Jack and asked in a low growl, "Didn't you get your fill of killing during the war?"

Jack's shoulders slumped, as the rage that had fueled his earlier outburst bled away. "Yeah, I got my fill of killing and then some. Seeing too many buddies pouring out their lives for worthless lines on a map. But dammit all, Saunders, can you blame me for being mad? Jimmy was too young to fight. I've got no problem with that, but he was supposed to stay home and keep the farm running. That was his **duty**, like mine was to fight for our country." Then he gestured out towards the barn and chicken yard. "But just look at this place, it's falling to pieces. And it's all **his** fault."

Saunders leaned against the table, his arms folded across his chest as he studied the younger brother, "He's right, Jimmy. Wasting your nights drinking and brawling isn't helping your sister run this place." Then he turned his gaze to include Jack as well. "Celia's a sweet girl and she deserves better than to have the two of you squabbling like a pair of two-year olds, frightening her out of her wits."

Picking up the plaster-spattered shotgun from the cabinet, Saunders wiped down the barrel and stock; it would need a good cleaning and oiling before it could be used again. He pondered taking it out to one of the outbuildings, just to remove the temptation from either of the Donovan brothers, and then decided they needed to learn to settle their family disputes without outside interference.

He was about to give them one last warning when he heard the sound of voices on the back porch, a familiar male voice cautioning, "Wait here, Celia, while I do a quick recon. I doubt Jack would actually shoot Jimmy, but we don't want to startle him."

Turning to the kitchen door, he saw Chris, his youngest brother, standing there in a rain-beaded Army uniform with Celia behind him, wearing the Brat's raincoat as she peered nervously around his shoulder.

She let out a gasp of relief upon seeing her two brothers whole and unharmed. Until she realized the extent of the damage from the glass and plaster-covered mess that the two of them had made of her once spotless kitchen and put both hands over her mouth, moaning in despair.

Brushing past Saunders, she gazed in disbelief at her demolished kitchen, taking in the sagging ceiling with its shattered glass light fixture and the dust and debris that covered the floor and cabinets.

Giving a brief choked sob, she said in a low whisper, "This is the absolute end. We might as well walk out, lock the door and take the key to the sheriff's house. There's no way we can keep going after this."

Momentarily ignoring his brother, Saunders clasped her shoulder gently, "Don't give up, Celia. Things always look worse when you're tired and upset. Why don't you, Jack and Jimmy come home with us? We'll put the three of you up for the night. And you can get a fresh look at things tomorrow."

Celia protested, "No, we couldn't impose. Chris has just come home and you have so much to talk about"

"We'll do that whether you're there or not." After taking a long look at Celia, wet and bedraggled as she was, Chris Saunders eagerly seconded his brother's offer. "I agree. You're neighbors and neighbors help each other out. There's plenty of room for all of you."



Mae Saunders was not surprised when her two sons returned with the entire Donovan clan in tow, all of them grim and exhausted. The boys had always been soft-hearted and Chris in particular was notorious for bringing home wounded creatures of all shapes and sizes to be nursed back to health or given a matchbox burial in the backyard. Fortunately she had a large kettle of soup on the backburner that she'd been adding leftovers to for later in the week. Bowls of soup and fresh hot biscuits, followed by slices of her rhubarb pie provided a meal that was both soothing and filling for her family and the unexpected guests.

Finding beds for everyone was not a problem either, once they got Jack Donovan settled in the downstairs parlor. Louise was delighted to share her room with Celia. And Jimmy took Tom's bed without too much protest. With their guests settled for the night, the Saunders' boys joined their mother at the kitchen table as she poured out a last cup of coffee for each of them.

Chip spoke first, aiming a fierce scowl at his youngest brother, "I still owe you a wallop for joining up and leaving Ma and the Brat to fend for themselves when you were supposed to watch out for them. And what took you so long getting home again?"

Chris's bright blue eyes went solemn as he gazed between his oldest brother and his mother "I probably should have told you sooner, Ma, but it was just too hard putting the words on paper." He looked down at his hands, tan and calloused with his new skills.

"I'm not coming home permanently, Ma. I've just got a 14-day leave. I've decided to stay in the Army. Make a career of it."

"Oh." Mae Saunders' eyes went very wide and her hands shook as she carefully put her coffee cup down on the saucer.

"I'm sorry, Ma. I know I should have written you, but I just kept putting it off. Figuring it would be easier to tell you face to face."

"What about your promise to finish school?" Saunders growled. "And make something of yourself?"

"I know, I know," Chris gazed down at his half-empty cup. "But, I finally found someplace where I fit, where I can do something important. Something that makes a difference in other people's lives." He turned and took in his brother's dubious expression. "You must have seen the same things I did, Chip, after your squad liberated French villages and concentration camps from the Nazis. Well, it was worse where we went. Many of the people we rescued had been enslaved by the Nips for years."

His face sobered as he continued in a low voice. "I've seen half-grown kids scarred and crippled from being used as slave-labor to build bridges and roads for the Japs, old people abandoned to starve. And the girls . . ." his cheeks flamed as he looked up at his mother. "Girls younger than Louise." He clenched his fists, his shoulders shaking with rage. "There are things no decent man tells his family, but it was awful Ma. Terrible . . . that's why I have to do this."

"I see, Chris. Or at least I think I do," Mae Saunders eyes looked inward, recalling hard times and tragedies she'd survived. "I've buried a husband and two of my children. Lived for months not knowing where our next meal would come from. I've seen the cruelties people are capable of." She clasped her youngest son's hands, "I always knew you were the tenderest-hearted of all my boys and hoped you might become a doctor or a preacher. But after what I've read and seen on the newsreels, maybe being a

soldier defending your country isn't so very different."

Chris turned towards his brother, who he'd always looked to for approval and understanding. Chip's expression was grim and for a long moment there was a tense silence between the two men. Then Chip let out a long regretful sigh, "I understand, Chris. I can't say I wasn't tempted, too. But during the final weeks of the war, I saw too much death and suffering. All I wanted to do was come home . . . and never pick up a gun again."

"I know what you mean, Chip, but if I do my job right," Chris said hopefully, "maybe American troops can stop things before they get out of hand. Then there will never be another war like the one we just fought."

"I hope not," Chip replied, though there was grim skepticism in his voice. Shrugging off the mood, he turned his attention back to his brother, "Well, what's your next assignment and how long can you stay?"

"I've got two weeks leave, then I'm headed to Germany, helping pick up the pieces that you guys blew apart. It sounds like mostly garrison duty and making sure that any surviving Nazi sympathizers don't get back in power. Not my idea of a picnic but someone's got to do it. At least, I'll have the next two weeks to spend with my family."

As he started to pull out his orders, a flimsy yellow envelope fell to the table and Chris stared down at it with a sudden guilty look on his face.

"I'm sorry, Ma. Jack Henderson at the Western Union office asked me to give you this as soon as I walked in the door, but Celia was here and then I went with her to see if Chip needed help. Afterwards I just forgot I had it."

Mae Saunders' ruddy cheeks faded as she clutched the handkerchief in the pocket of her apron, "A telegram. You don't suppose something happened to Tom, do you? It's been over a week since we've gotten a letter . . ."

Her fingers trembled so much that she could not open the envelope. She passed it to her oldest son, who quickly slit it open and scanned the contents with a puzzled look on his face before handing it back to his mother with a grin.

"It's from Uncle Herman. Aunt Maggie just had a baby. But she needs your help."

Chris's jaw dropped in surprise, "Aunt Maggie's married? And had a kid? She must be ninety years older than —" Then he stopped short after catching sight of his mother's exasperated look.

"My younger sister Margaret is only forty-five, young man, which is just a couple of years older than I was when Louise was born." Pausing, she studied the telegram in her hand.

BABY CRIES ALL THE TIME STOP SO DOES MAGGIE STOP
PLEASE COME HELP STOP
HERMAN MARTIN

"I'd heard Maggie got married less than a year ago, but nothing about her husband or that she was expecting. Well, she never was one for playing with baby dolls."

Mae turned her attention to her youngest son, "Chris, run up to the attic and bring down that box labeled 'Baby items'. There are probably a few things you boys left in good enough shape for Herman and Maggie to use for their little one."

She glanced over to Chip, "Did Herman say whether it was a boy or a girl?"

"Not a clue," her oldest son scanned the message again, before giving his mother a worried look. "You can't go alone, Ma. It's almost two hundred miles away."

"I don't intend to go alone, Chip. It's long past time Louise learned how to change diapers and mix formula. Beside Chris can come with us and get to know my side of the family. He hasn't seen his Aunt Maggie in at least ten years." She reached out and caressed her oldest son's cheek. "Everything will be alright, son. You don't need to come with me. Stay here and help Celia and her brothers."



By noon the next day, Mae Saunders, Louise, and Chris were standing at the railway station with their suitcases and a box filled with saccues, gowns, shirts, booties, bonnets, and a hand-crocheted blanket that Mae's mother had made when Chip was born.

"We shouldn't be gone too much longer than a week, Chip. So we should be back in plenty of

time for Thanksgiving. But you might want to order a turkey from Tom Greenwood just to be on the safe side.”



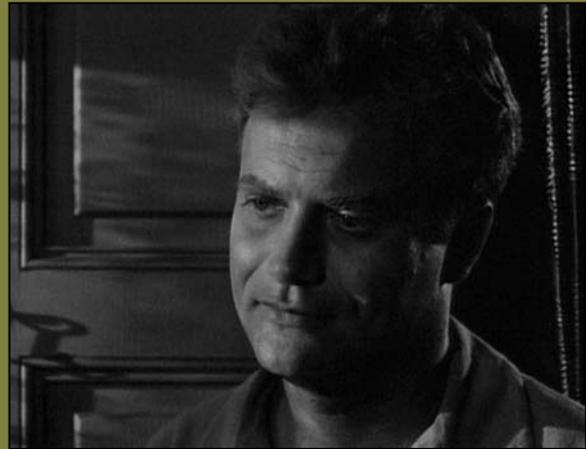
After seeing them off at the station, Chip went to the Donovan place to make some notes and measurements before he started the repairs on Celia’s kitchen. Most of the work would have to be done after he got off from his job at the warehouse. Still, he was surprised when he walked in later that afternoon and found Celia, her golden hair tied up in a bright red bandana and wearing a pair of Jack’s old dungarees, hard at work cleaning up the debris and dust that had spread everywhere.

Though most of the shattered glass and pieces of the walls and ceiling were too heavy for her to dispose of, she was able to start scrubbing down her stove, cleaning the gas range so it wasn’t clogged with dust. Unfortunately the debris hadn’t just covered the counter tops but gotten inside the cabinets as well, spreading over dishes, cups and bowls, as well as coating her pots and pans.

Though her day had begun before dawn, getting up early to feed the cows and chickens; then keeping watch over the processing of their dairy products, Celia was cheerfully energetic as she began cleaning her kitchen. Chip wasn’t sure if her calm and cheerful attitude was an effort to prevent further outbreaks of temper between her two brothers or whether it was just her natural sunny nature.

Joining her there, he began by tossing pieces of broken glass and shattered plaster into the waste bin, before he checked out the wiring and joists within the wall. After determining there had been no major damage, he took measurements and made lists of what he needed to put the house back in order. As he did, he noticed that Celia was humming to herself as she continued cleaning.

Taking a deep breath as he wiped the sweat and dust from his face, he glanced at her curiously. “You seem cheerful today, Celia. I thought you’d still be upset after last night. After all, weren’t you ready to give up and let the sheriff sell the farm on the courthouse steps?”



She gave him a cheeky smile, “I could say your mother’s hearty soup and rhubarb pie put the starch back in my spine, but I have to admit that having someone sensible around, offering to help with the repairs . . . Well, it was like seeing a ray of sun break through a bank of storm clouds. I felt like someone had taken a huge load off my shoulders.” She gazed around at her once cozy kitchen, seeing the holes in the walls and broken lights, sighing for a moment before turning and taking his hand. “I don’t know if we can pay for the repairs and still have enough left for taxes, but you’ve given me hope that somehow we’ll survive.”

As she gazed into his eyes, Chip felt a lurch inside as if his whole world had taken a sharp right angle turn. He was used to people depending on him, to lead them into battle or save them from the Germans. But this delicate girl -- the top of her head barely reached to his chin -- showed a serene determination and resolve that surprised him, and filled him with a desire to shield her from the trials and hardship she faced.



The following week, after finishing work at the warehouse Saunders stopped by to help Celia and her brothers begin putting their shattered kitchen to rights. The gas stove was working by the end of the first day, though the kitchen walls and ceiling were still a mess. Mae Saunders had insisted before she left that the Donovans should continue to take their meals and sleep at the Saunders house.

"There's plenty of room," she'd said warmly. "And I'll be much happier knowing someone is staying here to keep an eye on things and make sure Chip eats regular meals."

After the childish outburst of temper that had resulted in gunfire that nearly destroyed the kitchen and sent their terrified sister out into a driving rain, Jack and Jimmy Donovan had apologized to her and began making a real effort to help run the farm. Although he'd never been good in math before the war, Jack started taking classes, learning to keep the books and manage the finances of their small business. Jimmy changed as well, no longer going out every night after supper to drink with his buddies. Instead, with Saunders' encouragement, he began making repairs, painting and sprucing up the outbuildings, besides doing the general upkeep he'd been neglecting in the last few months. As a result, money began coming in regularly and the Donovan farm started to look like a thriving business.

After the clean-up was almost finished, Saunders arrived earlier than usual driving one of the warehouse's trucks. Celia waved out the window at him, but did not stop mopping the floor, thinking he'd just stopped by to speak with Jack. Then to her surprise, he began unloading the truck. As the sacks, boxes and tools began to pile up in the kitchen, she examined them then turned to him in protest, "All of this is brand new and these supplies are to rebuild and not just *repair* my kitchen," she protested. "We can't afford . . ."

"I get a discount on building supplies in my job at the warehouse. And when Mr. Durham, my boss, heard what happened, he donated three-quarters of this stuff. Said it was the least he could do after what happened to Jack, defending his country." A faint smile crossed Saunders face, "Besides, he says your dairy can't go out of business, since it's the only one selling cream sweet enough to cut the bitterness of his wife's coffee."

Hesitantly, Celia stepped back from the growing pile, tears sparkling on her lashes, "I don't know what to say Chip. How to express how thankful I am."

Saunders just shrugged and after unloading the supplies, he wiped the sweat from his face, took off his shirt and continued with the repairs that needed to be done. Throwing her arms around him in gratitude, Celia looked up into his rugged features and was left momentarily breathless by what she saw there. As he bent down to kiss her, that shy and tentative embrace suddenly changed as she moved into his arms with an eagerness that surprised them both. It continued for long breathless moments, before Saunders relinquished his firm clasp, steadying her as she swayed and her knees seemed about to give way.

His calloused fingers caressed her smooth cheek as memories surged up. The careless kisses of half a hundred French mademoiselles, caught up in the sudden passion of being freed from German oppressors. His fierce embrace of Anne during his furlough in London as the two of them tried to forget the bloody destruction they'd both survived and the uncertainty that lay ahead. And most of all, Rhiannon, who had saved his life and surrendered to his need, and was now some unimaginable time and distance removed from him. He pushed reluctantly away, his gaze turning away from Celia's face.

"I'm sorry . . .," he tried to begin.

"I'm not," she interrupted him. "I know there have been other women you've kissed who were more beautiful, more intelligent, and more sophisticated than I will ever be. But none of them could love you more than I do."



Later that week, even though the kitchen repairs weren't finished yet, Celia and her brothers moved back to the farm so they could tend the animals that needed daily attention, besides continuing with the repairs and general upkeep that had been neglected over the last months.

The weather was still surprisingly mild for late November, but most of the trees were bare and there had been frost rime on the windows for the past two mornings. Saunders could still wear the winter coat he'd left behind when he enlisted but dug the worn jeep cap out of his trunk. Pulling it around his ears, he recalled its welcome warmth on frozen mornings when even the foul scalding brew the Army called coffee barely thawed him and his men enough to go out on patrol. During the winter months, building would be slow but Mr. Durham had said there was enough inventory and restocking work to keep most of his workers busy through the winter. In an aside to Saunders, he had promised to keep him on even though he was the newest hire.

He'd protested, saying since he was still single he shouldn't be taking money from guys who were working to support their families, but Mr. Durham had assured him that wouldn't happen. Still it left him with an uneasy feeling, that he didn't deserve the man's kindness.

Late afternoons usually found him at the Donovan's farm, taking care of final details in the kitchen or delivering supplies for Jimmy's work. But today he'd stopped by the general store to pick up some canned peaches for a fancy dessert Celia said she wanted to fix.

"Canned peaches in a Thanksgiving dessert?" Tom Greenwood shook his head skeptically. "I never heard of such a thing. Now cherry or mincemeat pie, that's good old American food. But peaches? Ha!"

Startled, Chip glanced at the Currier and Ives calendar tacked beside the cash register. It was the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and he hadn't even given the holiday a thought. Usually Ma prepared for days before the actual meal itself; plucking the turkey, mixing up the stuffing, soaking dried vegetables and fruits, baking cookies and pies. But he'd been away in the Army for the past four years, years of hardship and rationing for the people back in the States. He didn't even know whether his family and neighbors actually celebrated the holiday anymore. He was about to ask if Celia had left a list of anything else he needed to buy, when the phone on the wall shrilled loudly.

Tom Greenwood picked up the receiver, "Cleveland General Merchandise and Dry Goods. What's your order? Huh. Uh-huh. You don't say? Well, it so happens he just walked in the door."

Handing the receiver to the surprised Saunders, the grocer said, "It's for you, Chip. Some guy named Kirby, calling from Chicago. Third time he's called this week so I guess it must be something important."

Saunders stared at the phone in disbelief, before taking the receiver from Tom's hand. "Kirby? Is that you?" he questioned, hardly believing his ears as the BAR man's sharp laugh exploded in his ear.

"Hell, yeah, Sarge. It's really me, ol' William G. Kirby, veteran and BAR man extraordinary, and soon to be bowling alley owner. Hey, I can't believe I finally caught up with you. I musta called a half-dozen times in the past week and that shopkeeper kept saying he'd give you the message when you came in. Don't you folks ever come into town?"

"I've been busy," Saunders answered deliberately, determined to stifle his sudden irrational joy at hearing a squad member's voice, even Kirby, as much a pain in the ass as he had sometimes been.

Kirby brayed with laughter, as he addressed an audience to his call. "Busy, he says. Like I haven't been running around, workin' my ass off trying to get the necessary funds, licenses, and payoffs to get that bowlin' alley of mine up and running. Ain't that right, Uncle George?"

There was a raucous, muffled reply in the background that Saunders couldn't decipher, but judging by the overall background sounds, Kirby must be calling from some public place. "Why'd you call, Kirby?" Saunders asked, his expression dubious. "I doubt you're missing the sound of my voice and I haven't got enough money to make it worthwhile for you to be calling me long-distance from Chicago to hit me up for a loan."

"Nah, nah, I'm in good shape financially, Sarge. Uncle George is gonna be my silent partner. He's investing the money and I'll run the place and we split 50/50 right down the middle." Kirby's voice softened a little, losing its harsh edge. "Nah, I was just calling to see if you heard from any of the other guys, like Billy or Littlejohn. Or even Doc, I know the two of you were tight and I just wondered if you'd gotten any news."

Saunders started to shrug off the question, but something in Kirby's voice stopped him. He pushed his cap back and rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead, "I don't think so, Kirby. There hasn't been any mail with my name on it, though things have been a little disorganized here in the past week, so something might have slipped through." He pulled the cap forward again, shoving one hand in his pocket, "What's up? How come you're so interested in my mail anyway?"

There was a momentary silence as the phone line popped and buzzed and Kirby said, "Well, there was this wedding invitation."

Silence.

"From Cajé."

More silence.

"It's gonna be in New Orleans in January, after the first of the year."

Still more silence.

“Doggonnit Sarge, he went and asked me to be his best man.”

Saunders gusted out a relieved breath, not really surprised at his scout's choice. He and Cajé had been close at times during those months of hardship and danger as they trekked across France and Belgium, into Germany and the heart of the Third Reich. But as the war had drawn to a close and Saunders had assumed responsibility for the whole platoon rather than just 1st Squad, they had grown apart. Particularly as Kirby had stepped up to bat and fulfilled the leadership potential that he and Hanley had seen buried inside the BAR man. Both Cajé and Kirby had wound up promoted to corporal in the final weeks before the fall of Berlin, but Kirby had filled Saunders' boots as 1st squad's leader, while Cajé stayed in the job he was best suited for as scout and marksman.

“Then he chose the best man for the job, Kirby.”

“Awwww, Sarge.”

“Look, Kirby, I don't have time to stand here and nursemaid your jitters. Cajé needs someone to stand beside him . . . and to watch his back. You're the one he chose, so shut up and soldier, soldier.”

There was a quiet chuckle that Saunders barely heard across the crackle of the wires, “Yeah, I guess you're right, Sarge. He did say his fiancée had a bunch of rowdy cousins and three stevedore brothers, so I better see if Littlejohn and McCall are invited too. We're gonna need all the reinforcements we can get.”

Saunders sighed as he rubbed the back of his neck, trying to calm the aggressive Irishman, “Look, Kirby, you don't have to fight St. Lo again. Once was enough. You and Cajé just keep your tempers . . . and don't lose the ring.”

“All right, Sarge. But we'll see you there, won't we?”

“I'll be there, Kirby.”

After handing the receiver back to the owner, Saunders pulled out his wallet.

“How much do I owe you for that call, Mr. Greenwood?”

“Nothing, Chip, I mean, Sarge.”

“Just call me Chip, Mr. Greenwood. The war's over. Are you sure I don't owe you something? I must have tied up the line for at least ten minutes.”

“Any orders I missed will be called back in the next hour, for sure.” He arched a curious brow at Saunders. “Sounds like you'll be doing some traveling too after the first of the year.”

Saunders only nodded, tucking his wallet back in his pocket. “Was there anything else I needed to get, other than the peaches?”

Mr. Greenwood consulted the lists thumb tacked to the wall beside the telephone, “Nothing else listed, Chip. Unless, you'd like to maybe take a penny sack of caramels to Celia. I just got some in today and I know they're her favorites.”

A ghost of a smile broke through Saunders' solemn expression; “Add them in, Mr. Greenwood. Tomorrow's Thanksgiving and we have a lot to be grateful for.”



Dashing up the steps, Saunders crossed the porch and opened the door, entering the silent house. With Ma and the Brat gone, the emptiness echoed like a song in a minor key. Though she usually prepared their evening meal in his mother's kitchen, Celia wasn't there, apparently busy doing chores or helping with the repairs at the Donovan farm. As he entered the hallway, Chip glanced down at the table where his mother left the mail, bills to be paid, sack lunches, lost gloves and other miscellaneous items.

He skimmed through the bills, not surprised to note that all of them were marked “Paid in Full”, even the ones that weren't due till the middle of next month. That was typical of his mother. If she had the money, she would pay everything on time and even early, just in case someone else needed the cash. He hadn't looked at the mail earlier, not expecting any letters now he was home again, but quickly spotted the thick ornate envelope that undoubtedly contained the invitation to Cajé's wedding. He tucked it into his pocket and as he was sorting through the bills one last time, spotted something that set alarms ringing in his head.

It was a flimsy yellow envelope with Western Union imprint on it and his name and address teletyped in the front window. “SGT. SAUNDERS,” it read. He gulped in a harsh breath.

Surely bad news about Ma, Chris or Louise would have had his given name, wouldn't it? His fingers trembled as he opened the message and glanced down to the sender. "Bernadette Rodgers. Who the hell is she?" he muttered to himself and then hurriedly skimmed the tersely worded message.

HANLEY IN DANGER STOP NEEDS HELP STOP MEET ME ROOM 21
WOODWARD HOTEL 1313 PRESTON ST CHICAGO 0600 NOV 29 STOP

BERNADETTE RODGERS

Almost involuntarily, his fist clenched, crumpling the message. Hanley in danger? Where and how? And why call him of all people? He hadn't seen the lieutenant or even heard from him in more than two years. And who was this Bernadette Rodgers anyway? Another one of Hanley's girl friends? Or someone he'd dated briefly and then gone on to greener pastures.

Unfolding the telegram again, he studied the date and time stated for the rendezvous and then glanced at the calendar hanging on the wall. Little more than a day away and tomorrow was Thanksgiving, with the trains running on a reduced schedule. He wasn't even sure he could catch a train out of Cleveland this evening. And if he did, what would Celia and her brothers think? That he was abandoning them? Leaving the job half done, with no promises of when . . . or even if he would be coming back.

Almost involuntarily he refolded the message, still unsure what he should do when he heard the rumble of wheels on the ramp he'd installed at the back door. Surprised that Jack Donovan would be stopping by so early in the day, Chip entered the kitchen to find Jack peering in the icebox, with half a loaf of bread from the bread box already in his lap as he pulled out the butter and cheese.

Looking up, he grinned at Chip, "Hey, want me to fix you a sandwich too? It's likely to be thin pickings at supper tonight. Celia's been slicing and dicing, cooking and roasting all afternoon so everything will be perfect for tomorrow's dinner."

"But your kitchen's only half-finished. It would have been easier to fix dinner here."

"She wants to show off her cooking skills I guess and that's best done on home ground."

Guiltily Saunders stared down at the crumpled telegram, still uncertain.

Catching a glimpse of the familiar yellow paper, Jack Donovan asked somberly, "Bad news?"

Saunders ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. "I'm not sure. If I can believe this, a good friend of mine -- Lieutenant Hanley -- is in trouble. But I don't know the woman who sent it. Or how she got my name and address."

"Who's Hanley?"

"My platoon leader through most of Normandy. He and I were sergeants together in England, then just after D-Day our lieutenant bought it on the edge of hedgerow country and they bumped Hanley up to his slot."

"Why not you? I've seen the hashmarks on your sleeves. You probably had more time in service than he did." Jack Donovan's expression was skeptical.

"And more time in the stockade too." Saunders gave a rueful grin. "No, they picked the right man when they promoted Hanley. He had what it took to send men out to die, but he never forgot they were more than just a name on a dogtag . . . or lines on a map."

"Sounds like a good man. And a good friend, so why are you hesitating?"

"I haven't seen him in almost two years. I don't even know where he is or what he's doing right now . . . and what kind of trouble I could be getting into." He smoothed out the telegram, studying the address intently. "And the last time I did see him was under very unusual circumstances."

"But he's your friend?" Jack persisted.

"Yes."

"Then answer this telegram and do what you have to do to save him."

"But what about Celia . . . and Thanksgiving dinner? And the repairs?"

"Do you love my sister, Chip?" The expression on Jack Donovan's face was somber.

The question took him by surprise and for a long moment Saunders pondered his true feelings for Celia Donovan. How he admired her toughness and resilience and how he wanted to watch over her and protect her. That was the kind of love his family had for one another and that was what he wanted to

share with Celia.

He nodded his head slowly and Jack Donovan clapped him on the shoulder, "Then there will be a lot more Thanksgivings for our family and yours to be together. Now, get upstairs and pack your bag. The last train leaves at 11:30 and you're going to have to be on it if you want to make that meeting with Bernadette Rodgers."



The airplane cabin vibrated with the thunder of the rotating propellers and Chip Saunders stared bleakly out at the dark gray clouds surrounding them. It was hard to believe that he was almost half way across the Atlantic Ocean heading back to a part of the world that he hoped never to see again. Berlin . . . once, the stronghold of so-called Nazi supermen and the madman who had nearly infected the whole world with his insanity. Now, in the aftermath of months of Allied bombing, little remained except rubble.

Yet apparently the shattered remnants of that city still nurtured unknown dangers and threats to Americans abroad. And somehow his friend and onetime platoon leader, Lieutenant Hanley B now Major Hanley B was caught up in the middle of it.

Or at least that's what Hanley's sister believed. The lieutenant had never talked much about his family, just mentioning in passing that his parents were still living and he had a sister married to someone who worked for the government.

As Saunders had knocked on the door of room 21, it was obvious that the tall woman who answered was a close relative of his onetime lieutenant, with the same sharp angled cheekbones and determined chin. Elegantly dressed in a dark silk suit with a ruffled blouse that matched her forest green eyes, she spoke first, "Are you Sergeant Saunders?"

At his silent nod, she held out her hand and introduced herself, "Bernadette Rodgers nee Hanley. Gil's my older brother."

After shaking his hand, she waved him into the room then took a cigarette out of a silver case with the initials BHR engraved on its front. As he brought out his Zippo to light it for her, she held his hand momentarily examining it. "Gil has one just like that."

Saunders just nodded, before asking in a brusque voice "Why'd you send me that message? I'm a warehouse worker, not a private eye. Besides, if your husband works for the government like the lieutenant said, he's in a much better position to get Hanley out of any trouble he's in."

Hanley's sister had taken a deep drag on the cigarette and strode towards the window, exhaling slowly as she looked out at the falling snow. "George works for the State Department and Gil's in Military Intelligence. At the moment the two are at odds with one another. In his last letter, Gil wrote that something dangerous was happening in Berlin. Although it didn't involve the Germans, he was certain it represented a threat to American interests."

"Miss . . . Mrs. Rodgers," Saunders tried to explain again. "I'm not even a soldier anymore and when I was, I was just a buck sergeant."

"Gil admired and trusted you," Bernadette interrupted. "He said you were a >survivor'. And if anyone can save him, I think you're that man."

Shaking out one of his own cigarettes, Saunders lit up and drew in sharply, remembering a man wearing the lieutenant's face who he'd met in another time and place. Avalon. Hanley had been a man out of time, who had somehow entered that strange place in the aftermath of the war they had fought in together.

Had that whole outlandish occurrence really happened? Or had it been some kind of hallucination? Was this when Hanley was supposed to step out of time to become the leader for another world? And what would happen to Avalon if Saunders saved Hanley from his fate?

"Please, Sergeant," Bernadette begged him. "Gil doesn't belong in Berlin. Just try to persuade him to give up that secret agent nonsense and come home."

Stubbing out his cigarette in the thick glass ashtray, Saunders nodded reluctantly, "All right, I'll do what I can. But it may take me a few weeks. I don't have a passport and I'll have to get up the cash to buy a plane ticket and make arrangements . . ."

"Oh, thank you," she gushed. "Don't worry, it's already been taken care of. My husband arranged for an official passport to be waiting for you at the airport and there's a special chartered flight leaving for

Berlin tonight. Someone from the Embassy will meet you there and brief you about Gil's current assignment. I know you can do it, Sergeant. I know you can save my brother."

Still numbed by the suddenness of this unexpected mission that was sending him charging to Hanley's rescue, Saunders gazed down into the darkness below his chartered flight winging its way to Berlin and wondered just what kind of trouble Hanley was involved in.

After his plane landed, it taxied to the far end of the runway, some distance removed from the lights and bustle of the postwar Berlin airstrip. Peering into the darkness, as a nasty mixture of snow and sleet sluiced down the plane's frame, forming a thin sheet of ice over wings, propellers, runway, and the stairs that had been lowered from the fuselage itself, Saunders spotted a figure bundled in a dark blue trench coat hurrying across the tarmac.

Stumbling up the icy stairs with a briefcase and folder full of papers, the figure resolved into a slender bookish looking young man, wearing thick glasses and a harassed look. Spotting the bleary-eyed sergeant, the young man demanded sharply, "Are you the *special* investigator sent by Liaison Officer Rodgers?"

Having no idea what Hanley's sister had told anyone about his so-called "mission," Saunders nodded only to be inundated by a veritable avalanche of rules and restrictions, dos and don'ts, places that were off-limits and places that he was absolutely forbidden to even think about going.

Five years in the Army had given him the ability to ignore nonessential regulations and ask the important questions. Shrugging off the outpouring of verbiage, Saunders asked bluntly, "Where's my passport?"

Pausing briefly in his diatribe, the clerk pulled it out of his briefcase and shoved it towards the sergeant.

"Where's Hanley?"

Momentarily taken aback, the clerk stuttered, "I'm n..n..n..not sure. He's military, not embassy staff. They frequent different clubs."

"Can you give me a couple of names so I don't have to hit every two-bit dive in this sector?"

"*American Cabaret* and *Der Schwarzer Katz* are the two I know about. Ask your cabbie for suggestions if he isn't at either of those."

Saunders nodded, tucking the passport in his inside jacket pocket along with his wallet which was stuffed with Deutschmarks. He thought about questioning the young man about where and how he could get a pistol, then realized that also was likely "against the rules" and decided not to set off another outpouring of decrees he fully intended to ignore.

Putting on the lined trench coat that had been sent to the plane along with his sparsely packed suitcase, Saunders pulled up the collar and descended the icy stairs. After wading through the half-frozen slush outside the terminal building, he reached the taxi stand and hailed one of the garishly labeled battered autos that served as transportation within the city. Hanley's sister had given him the name of a hotel in the newly reconstructed business district, which wasn't far from the government offices where Hanley supposedly reported in.

But he had no intention of signing in and alerting every operative in the area. Though he hadn't gone on as many Special Ops missions as Hanley, he knew enough to keep his head down in enemy territory. But somehow he had to make himself visible enough so Hanley could find him, without drawing the wrong sort of attention that would endanger them both.

Even if he located the lieutenant, there was no real certainty he'd be able to convince him to abandon his mission and come home. It would be the equivalent of deserting under fire. Neglecting his duty . . . and if there was one thing Hanley had, it was a strong sense of duty.

But he'd made a promise to Hanley's sister and he had an obligation to try to fulfill that promise. Knowing Hanley as well as he did, he asked the cab driver, "*American Cabaret* or *Der Schwarzer Katz*, which has the prettiest *frauleins*?"

"*Der Schwarzer Katz*, of course. But they charge too much for their *schnapps*. I know where you can get a premium brand cheap and bring in your own bottle."

"Maybe another time, Fritz. Let's just get there . . . without taking the scenic route."

As they pulled out onto the icy streets, the driver was silent for a long moment before speaking up in a somewhat truculent voice. "My name is not Fritz, *mein herr*, and I am an honest man trying to make a living and feed my family."

The driver's words instantly recalled the different German soldiers he'd encountered as 1st Squad

fought its way across France. Some of them cruel, others kind, still others just trying to do their duty. Saunders glanced at the driver's ID posted on the back seat of his cab.

"Sorry, Gunter, no insult intended. Most cabbies in America just answer to >Hey, Mac'."

"Oh," There was a long silence from the driver's seat as he concentrated on navigating through the various construction barriers and detour signs in the icy weather. "*Bitte*, I am still learning this job. American customers, you are all so different."

Still worried about locating Hanley, Saunders did not feel like making conversation, but did ask the driver, "I'm trying to find a buddy of mine. We were in the Army together and he stayed in after the war was over. A guy from the embassy suggested he might be at one of the two clubs I asked about. Will you wait for me while I check them out?"

"I can do better. I will speak to the doorman so you do not have to pay to -- how do you say -- >check them out'."

Leaning back in the seat, Saunders felt slightly reassured at the driver's offer, though he hoped he wasn't making a mistake. He had pretty good instincts about people and this driver seemed like he truly wanted to help. Still, he'd have been much happier if he had some kind of weapon other than the plain utility knife that he'd carried in his pocket since starting the repairs on the Donovan's kitchen. He laughed to himself, without someone in his squad to borrow from, he'd finally gotten the habit of carrying a knife of his own. But a Smith and Wesson would have been a welcome addition.

The cab pulled up in front of a heavy wooden door and the driver got out and knocked twice, then exchanged words with a heavysset man who had answered the door. Motioning for Saunders to follow him, the driver said, "He says you can come in and look for your friend, but if you want to talk to any of the girls and >make a date', you have to pay him fifty marks up front."

Feeling like he'd fallen into a bad detective story, he followed the two Germans as they led him through the door of *Der Schwarzer Katz* and into a smoke-filled room, where a mismatched group of musicians playing piano, guitar and violin were attempting to play an off key rendition of "Take the A Train". The girls hustling the bar patrons for drinks and joining customers at the table for groping sessions were underfed and dispirited, their garishly glittering costumes showed signs of stains and inept mending. Though this hardly seemed like the kind of club Hanley would enjoy, Saunders glanced around the room seeing if he could spot the lieutenant.

The majority of customers at the tables seemed to be middle-aged businessmen drinking with a quiet desperation. There were also a few sallow cheeked younger men seated at the bar and eyeing the girls, who were probably embassy clerks or worked at low-level intelligence jobs. Back in a far corner, nearly hidden in the shadows, Saunders spotted a tall, lean figure sitting alone at a table. It was Hanley. Peeling two fifty *Deutschmark* notes out of his wallet, he handed one to the driver and one to the guard.

"It looks like I found my friend, so here's a little appreciation for your help." The guard gave him a big grin, "I'll send Ilsa to your table after you've had time to talk." Saunders shook his head, "We've got a lot of catching up to do. Maybe another time." The cab driver offered to wait for him, but Saunders shook his head again figuring that Hanley probably had his own means of transportation.

As the two departed, he stood by the door for a time, studying his former CO, surprised to see how much grayer the lieutenant had gotten in the past two years. The war had left Saunders himself changed in ways he was just beginning to discover and he was sure it was the same for other survivors as well . . . Cajé, Kirby, Littlejohn, and even Doc. Why should Hanley be any different?

Saunders scanned the room as he stood there waiting for several minutes, just in case Hanley was there to make contact with an informant. But no one seemed interested in joining him as he sat there, drinking alone. Finally, brushing off his coat like he'd just come in from the icy rain, Saunders walked over to the lieutenant's table.

At first, Hanley did not look up from his glass and half empty bottle. Then when Saunders just stood there, he glanced up and started to speak, "Look I'm not in the mood . . ."

Until he caught sight of the sergeant's face and allowed himself the ghost of a grin.

"I might have known, Saunders. Only you could find me in a dive like this. Have a seat. Have a seat and tell me what you've been up to since VE-Day."

Shedding his damp raincoat, Saunders pulled out a chair, glancing around one more time before seating himself. "Were you waiting for someone?"

"A possible contact, but I doubt he'll show, especially in this lousy weather. What about you

Saunders? What are you doing in this icy corner of hell anyway? I thought you'd be home and married to the girl next door by this time."

"Maybe in a month or two," he admitted. "I got an invitation to Caje's wedding after the first of the year. And Kirby called to tell me he'd been asked to be the best man."

Hanley gave a ghost of a chuckle, "Somebody better warn the family to call out the riot squad. With Kirby there, no telling what kind of mayhem is likely to occur."

Saunders nodded his head in agreement, "He's changed. He called me after the invitation arrived; wanting to make sure I wasn't angry Caje had picked him." He shrugged, "I let him know I thought Paul had picked the best man for the job. What about you, have you heard from any of the other guys?"

"A couple of post cards and a note or two from family members thanking me for >taking care' of their son." There was a brief bitter look on Hanley's face and then he brightened momentarily, "And I got a request from John Nash, for a letter of recommendation to accompany his application to medical school."

Saunders brow drew down a minute as he tried to put a face to that name and suddenly the light dawned, "Doc? You mean Doc's going to medical school and become a real doctor?"

"He's qualified enough on the 'caring' end of the scale. The rest is just a matter of taking the necessary courses and passing the exams. He'll make it." Hanley turned serious again, "So why the hell are you here?"

"Your sister sent me a telegram," Saunders replied. "Said you were in danger and needed someone to persuade you to get out of the spy business." He gave his friend a sidelong glance, "She'd already made all the arrangements so I couldn't refuse."

Hanley raked his fingers through his hair in a mixture of disbelief and dismay, "She sent you here to **rescue** me?" He waved to one of the waitresses and as she hurried over, he ordered, "Bring me another bottle of the same. And a glass for my friend here."

Moments later the second bottle and glass appeared and Hanley said, "Just add it to my tab. I'll settle up with Hans before I leave." Pouring both of them full glasses, Hanley shook his head, "I can't believe Bernie would pull a stunt like this. She dragged you away from home, hearth, and family on Thanksgiving, just to get me out of MI? I'll admit I haven't been the most cheerful correspondent lately, but I can't believe she'd go to this extreme."

Gazing grimly at his onetime sergeant, "Exactly how far did she go?"

"Chartered plane, official passport, and a briefing after I arrived. She's really worried about you, Hanley."

Hanley gave Saunders a troubled look and then knocked back his drink and gusted out a deep breath, "I guess I gave her plenty of reason to worry with my last letter. Let me give you a piece of advice, Sarge. I mean, Saunders. Never answer letters from your family right after writing a monthly operational report. Things always appear the darkest then, just before they go pitch black." He rolled the glass between his palms, staring into it grimly.

"You know how the last war was called >The War to End All Wars'? They're not even making the pretense that the one we just finished will be the last one. Even after the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, premiers and generalissimos are still rattling their swords and making threats."

He sighed deeply, "Sometimes it feels like I'm running in circles, biting my tail. But I'm not giving up and walking away, Sergeant. I've got a job to do here and I intend to go on doing it, beating out brushfires and stamping on the sparks, if that's what it takes."

Saunders nodded with a thin smile as he took a small sip of the whiskey that Hanley had poured. Even when he'd agreed to Bernadette Rodgers' tearful request, he'd known it was likely a fool's errand. Hanley was not a quitter, even when things were at their absolute darkest during the war, like when they had been ordered to take two bunkers on top of two impossible hills. He'd been wounded in the leg and unable to do anything during that operation except try to keep Hanley on an even keel. But through grit, and stubbornness and sheer determination, 2nd Platoon had taken that hill, paying a terrible price in the process, only to be ordered to withdraw, as the whole battalion fell back.

Finishing off the glass, he put it down, nodding. "I guessed as much, Lieutenant."

"It's Major now, Sarge."

"Then just call me Mister, Major." Saunders gave him a cocky grin. I gotta try to find a cab to take me to the airport this time of night. No telling how long it will take to get the plane I arrived on refueled and headed back to the States, but I don't want to waste any more time." He gave a ghost of a grin, "Maybe if I get back soon enough, Celia will have saved a drumstick for me."

"I'll come with you, Saunders, to see if I can expedite your departure in case there's any paperwork that needs to be dealt with." The two of them collected their coats and exited through the club's thick wooden door. Saunders was somewhat surprised to find the guard gone, but figured he was probably taking a break.

"What about your contact?"

"If he was going to show, he'd have been here by now. Which is probably for the best. He's the leader of a splinter group in Russia that wants the U.S. to supply them with weapons so they can overthrow 'Uncle Joe' and his pals. Not the kind of thing that the U.S. needs to get involved . . ."

But before he could finish, a dark nondescript sedan roared down the street, braking sharply as a burst of gunfire erupted from the back seat. One shot hit Saunders and sent him sprawling as another furrowed along Hanley's forehead, filling one eye with blood and knocking him to his knees.

Firing desperately at the shadowy figures exiting their car, determined to make sure they had finished the job, Hanley emptied the clip dropping two of his attackers. As they dived for cover, he

holstered his gun and tried to drag the sergeant back into the club they had just exited. But the door was barred and no one answered his frantic pounding. *Damn, it must be a set-up, with Hans in on it, to make sure he didn't escape.*

Hoisting Saunders' limp body over his shoulder, Hanley ducked down the alleyway, not sure if his sergeant was dead or alive but unwilling to abandon him. The gang was obviously after him; maybe if he left Saunders just inside one of the abandoned buildings here, they might not look any further once they finished him off. It was a risk he hated to take, considering tonight's temperatures would be well below freezing, but Saunders was a survivor and this might be his only chance. He staggered towards a shadowy entrance, hearing the guttural voices of his pursuers behind him. Suddenly a gust of warm air filled with the smell of growing things caressed his face and a halo of brightness glowed against the battered wall.



With no other choice but death, Hanley steadied Saunders' limp weight on his shoulder and stumbled into the light.



The sunlight hammered his face as Hanley stirred weakly, trying to escape the harsh rays burning his eyelids. Managing to turn over so his face was partly in shadow, he struggled to sit up, cradling his aching head in his hands. His fingers came away bloody, the smell of blood only adding to his nausea and disorientation.

Where the hell was he? **Who** was he?

Staggering to his feet, he took a deep gasping breath trying to identify his surroundings.

He was standing in the middle of a burned out field. Gazing down, he spotted the body he'd been lying beside. It was another man, dressed much like he was in a woolen suit and heavy top coat, possibly indicating they had come from the same time and place.

Looking closer, he realized the other man's coat was soaked in blood and flinched away, wondering what had happened to him? To both of them? Peeling off his coat and jacket, he tossed them aside, taking out his handkerchief to wipe the blood out of his eyes. Noticing an unexpected weight under one arm, he drew out a deadly looking pistol, instinctively checking to see if the clip was loaded. It was empty so he reholstered the weapon, looking for signs of life or human habitation. Anyone who might be able to help him . . . or just tell him where he was?

There was a dirt road beside the field and a stand of trees just beyond. Desperate to find some

shade out of the burning sun, he headed for their shelter, but as he approached the welcoming shade he noticed a heavy sickly-sweet odor and covered his nose with the blood-stained handkerchief he'd used earlier.

The smoke from the field had briefly hidden a stench of decay and as he looked closer, trying to catch his breath, he spotted a massive tree on the edge of the field, with objects hanging from its lower branches, twisting in the breeze. As he approached, he realized those hanging objects were **bodies**, their faces swollen and distorted, dangling from nooses.

A murder of crows fluttered overhead then dropped among the branches, avid to feast on the ripening flesh. Swallowing hard, he stumbled back to the dusty road and away from the trees. With no idea of where or who he was, he just wanted to get as far as he could from this place of desolation. Once he reached the road, he halted, glancing back towards the field as though he'd forgotten something, something important. Spotting the body of the man he'd awakened beside earlier, he frowned, trying to sort through his tattered memory.

A sudden jingle of metal startled him and he ducked into bushes growing at the edge of the field and peered out to see who was coming. It was a man dressed in a worn gray uniform with a kepi pulled low on his forehead and a bandana tied across his nose and mouth. He was riding one horse and leading another. He pulled up the reins tightly and stared at the tree full of bodies as his horses shied and sidestepped nervously.

"Settle down, you jugheads," he drawled, yanking on the reins. "It's jest dead meat Tariq's raiders left. Judging by the stink, it's been at least two days since they was here."

Shading his eyes as he peered into the burned field by the road, he spotted the body lying in the middle of it. "What the hell? That cain't be a survivor, can it?"

As he dismounted and started into the field to see if the body was breathing, Hanley stood up and stepped away from the bushes where he'd concealed himself, his hands in plain sight as he called out.

"Hello," he said uncertainly. "Can you tell me where I am? I remember walking down an alley, then hearing shots. I tried to run but there was this bright light . . . and when I woke, I was **here**."

The rider hesitated before striding cautiously over, his hand resting on the pistol tucked in his belt. Staring up at Hanley who was almost a full eight inches taller, he pulled down the neckerchief and hawked a dark brown squirt of tobacco juice at his feet, muttering something that sounded like, "Damned city slickers," under his breath.

Faded blue eyes raked across Hanley's well-tailored shirt and trousers before coming to rest on the caked blood dried on his face and the holster under his arm.

"You sure that's what happened, Slim? Judgin' by that lump on yer head, you musta been in some sorta fight. That's usually how folks come through, y'know, from the middle of a battle, escapin' an ambush, or washed away durin' a storm."

"Who comes through, how? And where?" he demanded, his voice raw in dread of the answer he wasn't sure he wanted to hear.

"You're drowning or dyin' of thirst or tryin' to keep a bluecoat from blowin' yore brains out, then . . . yore somewhar else. Someplace different, even though you ain't been through the Pearly Gates or shook hands with Ol' Scratch. A second chance, that's all. No harps or pitchforks. Just a new start, but ya gotta fight for it."

"I don't understand," he said hoarsely.

The man in the faded uniform pushed past him, kneeling to examine the body. "Let's see if yore buddy's still breathin' first."

"He's not my buddy," Hanley protested, with a sudden sinking feeling at those words. "I just woke up beside him."

The other man gave him a sharp look before continuing his perfunctory exam, "Ain't dead yet, but, it won't be long." He glanced around nervously. "Tariq's raiders left their callin' card earlier," he nodded towards the tree. "And they might be back lookin' fer stragglers."

Standing up and dusting off his hands, the rider continued, "Got no time for tendin' or buryin'. The Warder needs to know what happened here. You can ride with me or stay with the dead."

Hanley paused, looking down at the man he'd awakened beside, seeing the rugged features gone slack and sandy-colored hair. But there were no answers from his past, no name to put to the face.

Taking note of his hesitation, the other man spoke sharply, "Even if Tariq's men don't return, there'll be others eager to finish what the crows started." He nodded towards the tree full of bodies.

"Some of >em ain't choosy whether their meat's dead or still breathin'."

Hanley turned and strode over to road where the two mounts waited. At a nod from the other man, he started to climb stiffly into the saddle.

"Where are we going?"

"The Warder's camp. You had much experience shooting and ridin'?"

"I . . . don't remember," he answered in a low voice. Hesitating just a moment before picking up the reins to follow his rescuer, he asked bluntly, "Is this Hell?"

The other man paused before he answered "Wa'al, it's war, Slim, which oughta be answer enough. Sure you wanna ride with us?"

Hanley nodded, still numb inside as the rider continued, "By the by, my name's Jackson Elliott, Sergeant. What's yourn?"

He froze. His past was a blank, with no hint of who he was or where he'd come from. Then remembering what Elliott had tagged him with earlier, "Slim . . ." he exhaled harshly. "Just call me Slim."



Saunders struggled back to consciousness and lifted his head, coughing at the low-hanging smoke. Pushing up on one elbow, he shielded his eyes and peered around looking for Hanley, but there was no sign of him. Only the burned field and an empty sky. He tried to push

himself upright, to get to his feet but the loss of blood left him too weak and he collapsed again, his breathing a harsh rasp.

As he lay there, a dense fog began creeping across the fields, even though the sun was still shining brightly overhead. The rolling mist muffled sight and sound, and two figures rode out of it, on horses that tossed their heads and snorted nervously as they drew near the tree with its harvest of the dead. One rider was a woman of middle years, with a haunted, hunted expression on her face. Her companion was an old man who seemed to be little more than skin and bones held together by rawhide tough knots of tendon. Both of them wore muted gray cloaks that helped them blend into the fog.

The woman stared up at the ravaged bodies with a bleak look on her face while the old man's attention was drawn by a low groan coming from the field just beyond it. He dismounted and limped over until he spotted the oddly clad body lying in the middle of the field. Kneeling with difficulty, he pressed arthritic fingers to the man's throat, somewhat surprised to find that not only was the flesh warm but the pulse was strong and steady.

"Cerridwen, this one is alive. Wounded badly but within our power to save."

Wearing a bitter expression, she replied harshly, "We promised Timon's mother we would save her son. The least we can do is bring his body home for burial and not waste our time on a stranger, Myrrdin."

"Timon is dead. There's nothing more we can do for him. This man still breathes. Have you forgotten our duty?"

Cerridwen pushed the hood back from her forehead, showing dark hair threaded with silver, "Why waste our powers saving him? Between Tariq's raiders and the Warder's troops, our chances of survival grow smaller by the day. We're hard-pressed to protect our own."

"That's Morrigan's choice, not ours," the old man nodded as the wispy beard on his chin fluttered in the breeze. "Until we are no more, it's our obligation to do what we can to save this man's life."

The woman, nodded reluctantly. "All right, old man, I'll help you bring him to the tower. After that, he's your problem."

As the two of them struggled to pull Saunders upright and across a horse's saddle, he mumbled vaguely, "Hanley, watch out! They're firing, get down. **Get down!**" then he went limp, sagging against Myrrdin.

"He sounds like a warrior," Cerridwen observed sourly as they secured Saunders' limp body across her saddle. "Perhaps Morrigan will find him useful after all." Mounting behind Saunders, she gave the old man a hard look before demanding, "I agreed to help you rescue the stranger, surely you can use a small bit of your power to spare Timon's body from the carrion eaters."

Myrrdin gave a deep sigh, "I'll do what I can."

Closing his eyes and concentrating until a hot glow filled his hand; the old man loosed it in the direction of the bodies and then watched holding his breath. A long second passed as the small blue sphere hovered like a hummingbird, before wavering to the top of the tree which burst into flame as though doused with Greek fire.

As the horses squealed, frightened by the sudden blaze, Myrrdin struggled to mount his jittery animal while Cerridwen pulled up her hood, half-concealing her face.

Staring back at the inferno, Myrrdin whispered to himself, "Farewell, dear boy. I wish I'd had the courage to act sooner."



Holding on to the pommel for dear life, Hanley let Elliott lead him to their destination. Eventually he managed to find a kind of balance in the saddle, but the mount he was riding had a rough gait that threatened to jar his teeth loose. By the time they reached the bivouac area, his body ached almost as much as his head. But Elliott had little time to nursemaid his newest recruit.

"I gotta report to the Warder, Slim. Tie your horse at the picket line and wait for me. We got no supply system as such, but we oughta be able to find you some reg'lar clothes and a weapon before we go up agin Tariq and his bloodthirsty bunch."

As his guide hurried away, Hanley slid stiffly down from his mount and stared in bemusement at the vast diversity of mounts and riding gear tethered there together, from long-legged standardbreds with military saddles, to rough-coated ponies covered with colorful blankets, to ragged mules that looked like they'd just been unhitched from the plow. There was even a group of heavy draft animals standing placidly by as packing frames loaded with wooden boxes labeled AMMUNITION were placed on their backs.

There was a kind of familiarity to this milling hive of activity that tugged at the black curtain hiding his memories. Like he'd been part of a similar fighting force sometime in his past. But there were disparities as well and he stared at the groups of men decked out in everything from battered chain mail to ragged homespun or uniforms from other times and places as they sharpened spears or swords, tested the pull of bows, or checked their ammo.

Startled by this diversity in the soldiers of the Warder's troops, Hanley began to wonder just what Elliott had meant about getting a "second chance"? If this wasn't the battle of Armageddon, just what was it? What other reason was there for so many people from different times and places being in this particular location?

The answer to that mystery eluded him though the violent throbbing in his head gradually subsided and his name -- Gil Hanley -- abruptly surfaced. Most of his last memories still remained vague and out of focus as he tried to put the pieces together. Slowly he began to remember a dark alley and bursts of gunfire that had torn through the darkness, wounding the man beside him. The rest of what had happened was blank, except for the excruciating pain in his head that dropped him to his knees with blood pouring into his eyes. Why he had been there and who the man with him had been remained a blank slate.

His licked his cracked lips and swallowed, gazing hopefully around for someone who could tell him where to get a cool drink of water. But before he could go looking for any clean bucket that might serve as this group's equivalent of a Lister bag, Elliott returned.

"You'll ride with my troop, Slim."

"Hanley," he interrupted. "My name's Gil Hanley."

"Whatever you say," the rebel trooper shrugged. "But we gotta git a move on and find you a weapon and some reg'lar clothes before Tariq's horde attacks."

Eager to shed his heavy wool pants and mud-caked shoes, he followed the sergeant. Though there was no supply system as such, someone in Elliott's company had an extra set of worn pants and another offered a roughly mended shirt, while still another handed over a pair of worn boots that he claimed "pinched his toes". Hanley got a chance to wash the dried blood off his hands and face while he was changing and shortly afterward, one of Elliott's men brought him a Winchester rifle. Studying the weapon, he sighted down its barrel and checked the firing action. It was clean and well-oiled though not the modern carbine he was used to. Still, it was better than going into battle armed with nothing but an

empty pistol.

Before he had time to ask Elliott about what to expect in the coming battle, there was the shrill sound of a bugle blowing **Troops Assemble** and all around him, groups of men poured out their coffee or tea, doused campfires, grabbed up weapons and ran for their mounts.

Riding with Elliott's troop, Hanley had absolutely no knowledge of the foe they faced, other than the sergeant's description of them as "a horde of devils." The best that he hoped for in the battle ahead was to stay astride of his skittish mount while it half-reared and danced around as he urged it to keep up with the rest.

Pulling up his own mount so he dropped alongside his newest recruit, Elliott advised him, "Just hold your reins snug enough so they don't fly loose and concentrate on keeping a hold on your weapon. The horse is battle-seasoned and will stay with the others, while you try not to get yoreself killed."

"How will I know the enemy?"

"Stay with this troop and you'll be right in the middle of them."

His head still throbbed in the aftermath of the bullet that had slashed across his forehead, but Hanley was beginning to feel almost normal again. He'd shaken off the sense of numbness that had clung to him ever since he'd awakened in this strange place though he remembered nothing more than his name.

With a loud whoop, Elliott lifted the reins of his horse and charged at the oncoming horde. Screaming like banshees the rest of his men followed him into the melee as Hanley surrendered all thought to the urgency of battle and the desperate business of survival. The men they faced were of Oriental stock with dark eyes and flat cheekbones and most of them wearing rough-sewn furs and leathers.

Their weapon of choice seemed to be a short bow which they wielded with uncanny speed and accuracy but Hanley also battled men carrying swords, spears, and even maces. Once his ammunition was gone, he grabbed a spear from the man he'd just shot and continued lunging and stabbing as he handled the weapon with grim resolve, determined to survive.

By that time, there was no sense of order as the battle simply became a bloody melee with no object but survival. Pausing a moment to wipe the stinging sweat out of his eyes and try to catch a breath, Hanley spied a man wearing a familiar uniform astride a foundering horse. With arrows in its throat and chest, the beast had reared up desperately trying to escape, then it toppled over and took its rider down with it. Shocked by the sight of a regular Army uniform amid the homespun and buckskins, Hanley was suddenly haunted by the image of a worn face under a camo helmet flashing through his mind -- grimy, unshaven, with a half-smoked cigarette dangling from his lips.



Saunders? Is that you, Sergeant?

Urgently he spurred his horse over to the downed man, using his spear to jab at the surrounding riders and force them to retreat. As his foes drew away, there seemed to be a momentary lull, and Hanley paused to take a breath. There was no one around him any longer except the wounded and the dead. Dismounting stiffly from his blowing animal, he knelt beside the body of the soldier he'd just saved and turned him over.

The man was breathing harshly, with a gash along the side of his head obscuring his face with blood. As Hanley wiped it away, he could see his faulty memory had deceived him. Whoever he'd just saved was at least fifteen years older than Saunders and wearing a black patch over a scarred and empty socket. Looking closer Hanley realized that the uniform wasn't from the war he knew, but a worn set of AEF khakis that had seen much better days with tarnished captain's bars on the shoulders.

Hanley knelt there, clutching the reins of his lathered horse and stared numbly around at the aftermath of his first action in this forsaken place. The screams of wounded men and beasts echoed in the growing stillness as the noise of the battle itself faded. The stench of blood along with low-hanging smoke from the guns caused Hanley to cough and try to clear his lungs as a succession of images

abruptly kaleidoscoped through his mind. *The landing on the beach at Normandy, burning tanks and exploding bridges, ambushes and recons, pitched battles and one-on-one struggles between their German foe and the men of 2nd Platoon, especially the tough-as-nails sergeant who'd led 1st Squad.*

"Saunders," he muttered to himself. "Where the hell are you, Sergeant? And where the hell am I?" He struggled to reconstruct the shards of the memory that had forsaken him earlier.

"It was Berlin, after midnight. I was supposed to meet my Russian contact, but there was Saunders, in that same rundown bar, walking along with me right into the middle of an ambush. Just because my sister Bernie asked him to come rescue me."

Hanley stared down at the man that he'd just rescued, who took a deep gasping breath as he regained consciousness. Struggling fitfully as he opened a dark bloodshot eye and stared up at Hanley. "Do I know you, soldier?"

Hanley shook his head in denial as he helped the other man sit up, "No, I'm new here. Sergeant Elliott brought me in just before the battle."

He stared grimly at the torn and bloody bodies surrounding the two of them and muttered, "I thought I was through with war and wholesale killing after Japan surrendered."

As the other man climbed stiffly to his feet with Hanley's help, he said, "It seems I owe you my life, soldier. My name's Winters, Thomas Winters, Captain, American Expeditionary Forces. Though my people here call me the Warder."

"I'm Gil Hanley, Major, U.S. Army." Hanley replied numbly.

"Well, Major, if you'll excuse my lack of military courtesy, I need to locate my seconds and take stock of our tactical situation." Winters gazed around at bloody ground, taking note of the survivors having their wounds tended, while others of his troop were standing guard over prisoners.

Hanley nodded, still distracted by his sudden realization that he'd abandoned his wounded sergeant and wondering if there was any chance of finding him now.

Winters studied the face of the man who had just rescued him, seeing a firmness and resolve there, despite his current mental state, "If you'd care to come with me, there's coffee and tea in my tent and you can tell me how you came here, Major."

Hanley shook his head, half-dazed as he looked anxiously around and spoke with increasing urgency, "I need to borrow a mount to find my sergeant. We arrived together, but I had a head injury that made me forget who I was . . . and who he was. When Elliott showed up, I came with him. **But we left my sergeant behind.**"

He took a deep harsh breath that was almost a sob, "I have to go back and try to find him, Captain. I owe him my life a dozen times over."

Winters nodded sympathetically, although he had many other things on his mind. Looking around for Elliott, he spotted the rawhide tough Southerner directing a group of stretcher bearers as they gathered up the wounded and the dead. After calling the man over, he asked him about what had happened early that morning before the battle.

Elliott glared at Hanley for a long moment before he answered, "Waal, I was ridin' in from the Barker steading where I'd picked up a spare mount when I spotted a treeful o' corpses. Recognizin' it as Tariq's handiwork, I rode over to see if I knew any of the dead. That's when I spotted him, with his head all bloody and wearin' a banker's suit."

He hawked another dark squirt of tobacco juice at Hanley's feet, showing his opinion of bankers before continuing. "The man with him had on a sim'lar suit, though it looked like he worked with his hands.

Still, he was bleedin' bad and didn't appear long for this world. Knowin' I had no time to waste, I brought the one standin' and left the one bleedin'."

He glanced at the dead bodies surrounding the two men, "Look's like he's earned his keep for this day's work."

"You might say that, Sergeant," the Warder answered wryly. "Any sign of Tariq? Or that shaman of his, Bokala?"

"Not so far, Cap'n. But I ain't seen no nightmares runnin' loose either, so maybe someone managed to put a silver bullet in that hoodoo man's black heart."

"One can hope," Winters frowned as he looked back at his dead horse. "I need a remount, Sergeant, as quickly as possible. Then take Major Hanley to my tent."

Sliding out of the saddle, Elliott held the reins as the Warder mounted.

"Any other orders, sir?"

“Just the usual, Sergeant. Treat the wounded, bury the dead and question any prisoners. Oh, and send someone to the site where you found Major Hanley and see if his sergeant is still there. Bring him back here, alive or not.”

Hanley started to protest, wanting to search for Saunders himself and then realized Winters was right in sending one of his own men. He hadn't the slightest idea which direction he and Elliott had traveled from that scorched field to arrive at this place.

“Thank you,” he said hoarsely.

As the captain rode away, the sergeant looked sidelong at Hanley's obviously battered state, “Think you can walk as far as his tent?”

Hanley smiled grimly at the other man, “I marched across France and halfway into Germany with Second Platoon behind me, fighting Krauts all the way. I'll make it to your captain's tent.”



Saunders stirred, stiff and sore, but without the sharp pain in his shoulder he'd felt earlier. Opening his eyes he looked around hoping for some hint of where he was. He remembered meeting Hanley at that rundown club in post-war Berlin and then getting caught in an ambush, but what happened after that was a blank.

His memory insisted the war was over and that he'd gone home to his family. But a darker, more suspicious part of his mind told him that was wishful thinking and he was still a sergeant in King Company, slogging through France, determined to beat the Nazis. Since he was wounded, there must have been a battle, even if he didn't remember the details.

Glancing around at the forbidding stone walls of his current location, he muttered in a raspy whisper, then fell silent as one of his caretakers approached.

She was an older woman, wearing a plain dark dress that was covered by an apron, with her silvery gray hair pulled into a neat bun on the back of her neck.

“My name is Brigid and I'll be taking care of you. Do you want some water?”

Though there was a lilt to his nurse's voice, she had no trace of a German or a French accent.

Saunders nodded warily, and she raised his head and held the cup to his lips. He started to gulp it down but she cautioned him,

“Not so fast. Take slow sips or it will come back up.”

Remembering the water discipline of his training days, Saunders heeded her warning, allowing the liquid to trickle down his raw throat as he savored its welcome coolness. After giving him another two or three swallows the woman pulled the cup away.

“That's enough for now. I'll give you a little more in a few minutes.”

“Where am I?” he demanded hoarsely. “Are you German or is this an Allied base?”

The woman's silver brows drew together as though she did not understand what he was saying, “This is a healing place, that's all. Within the Canton. My granddaughter Rhiannon and I tend the injured and ill that are brought here.”

Rihannon!?!

Saunders looked urgently around, remembering the woman he'd met in a mystic place that his squad had stumbled into during the darkest months of the war. But as he got a closer look at the figure fidgeting nervously in the corner, his heart sank.

“Come over here, Annie, and help me straighten this bed.”

Hesitantly the girl obeyed her grandmother, warily approaching the bedside as Saunders stared at her intently. Her hair was the same fiery red, though plaited in pigtailed that dropped past her shoulders and her startled eyes were green with hints of gold in their depths. Wearing an oversized apron and a



timid expression, she couldn't have been more than twelve years old.

As the two of them tightened his sheets and plumped his pillows, Saunders pulled the tattered pieces of his memory together, recalling his mission to save Hanley. They'd been ambushed right outside the club's door. But what had happened after they were caught in that burst of gunfire? He remembered the brutal impact when his shoulder was hit, but everything after that was a blank until he woke up here. And where was Hanley?

He glanced at the girl again and shook his head. No, the name was a coincidence, nothing more. Recalling the older woman's mention of the Canton, he wondered if this place might be in Switzerland. Though from what Hanley had said about his meeting, he could be anywhere between Berlin and the Russian border.

After straightening his bed and checking if his dressing needed to be changed, the woman asked him if he would like some more water.

"Maybe later. When I was brought in, was anyone else with me? A tall man with dark -- no, graying -- hair? Green eyes and a smooth talker? Wearing a suit and heavy coat?"

"There was no mention of another patient. Perhaps he did not need a healer's care."

Saunders struggled to sit up, "Where would he be, if he wasn't hurt? Where would I find him?"

Alarmed the woman pushed him back down, "You were alone when they found you. No one else was there."

A cold voice spoke from the shadows, "Leave, Brigid. Just make sure you bring your granddaughter to Bokala's tent tonight. His spell requires blood from a red-haired girl child."

Saunders felt a sudden uneasiness at the terrified look on the woman's face as she put her arm protectively around the girl. Struggling to regain her composure, she patted his good shoulder, "I must leave now, but someone will be nearby if you need anything. Try to get some rest."

As they left the room, Saunders watched closely, trying to determine how the door was secured. He wasn't sure if he was a prisoner or a patient, but something about this place felt *wrong*. Once he located some shoes and clothes, he intended to make a break for it. Then he would try to find Hanley.

But before he could plan any further, the voice from the shadows accused him, "You're a soldier, aren't you? I smell the reek of killing and blood on your hands."

Pushing up on one elbow, he peered into the dark corner searching for its source and spotted a small figure swathed in black from head to toe, sitting in a straight back chair. Her shoulders were squared and both feet planted firmly on the stone floor.

Despite his uneasiness, he answered her question honestly, "I was. Fighting to defend my country."

The hair straggling across her forehead was the color of old ivory, but her eyes were dark as midnight. She glared at him with the same ferocity as the old French woman he'd crossed paths with months before. Kirby had been badly wounded and he and Caje were trying to get the BAR man to a field hospital before he bled to death. They'd requisitioned the truck she was using to bring a casket back to her village to bury her son. But the old woman had no sympathy for the problems of an American squad from the same army responsible for the artillery fire that had killed her son.

Behind the old woman loomed another figure, hooded and wearing a cloak the color of clotted blood. Though most of his features were concealed by the hood, what Saunders could see was covered with a skull tattoo, showing only darkness where his eyes should have been. Though not a superstitious man, something about that ominous presence sent a cold chill shivering up his spine. As he tried to shrug off that sudden uneasiness, he wondered why those memories of the old woman and her mission to bury her son had suddenly resurfaced so sharp and clear. He could still hear Kirby's feeble joking remark as he and Caje had lifted the BAR man into the back of the truck next to the coffin

"Gee Sarge, you think of everything."

Saunders shook his head sharply, trying to banish his recall of the rest of that desperate journey, trying to elude their German pursuers. Especially when he'd used the coffin to prop up a sagging bridge so they could cross and the old woman's terrible cry when it shattered under the weight of the German truck following them.

She frowned as though she could pick his thoughts out of the air and then spoke, "You're new to this place?"

Saunders remained silent, sensing her hostility and not wanting to say anything she might use against him.

Her dark gaze narrowed, “Cerridwen wanted no part of bringing you here, believing you were tainted with Timon’s blood. But she was wrong. Though there is the blood of many on your hands, Timon isn’t one of them.”

He flinched, remembering too many battles, skirmishes, and patrols where young men had died because of him: following his orders to locate an enemy gun, bring back information, capture a prisoner, or take a coveted position that was nothing more than random lines on a map. As the battles spilled through his memory in a fierce kaleidoscope of images, she continued staring at him as though she could see those memories reflected in his eyes.

“Yes, you’re still a man of war, though you think you’ve found peace.”

Glancing back at the hooded figure, she ordered, “We must pry deep inside his mind for the images we need.” The shaman waved a skeletal tattooed hand and a cloud of darkness surrounded them.

Leaning forward in her chair, her gaze locked with Saunders’ and despite his resistance, the memories surged up like fetid gas bubbling out of a swamp. He and the squad had been captured and were being taken to a German POW camp. Cole made a break for it and had been shot. Gates was exhausted and hardly able to stand and all the others, Caje, Kirby, Doc, Littlejohn and Billy were watching him in desperation, hoping he could resist their Gestapo captors and somehow discover a way for all of them to escape.

But they were mistaken; he wasn’t as tough and cunning as they thought he was. He was powerless, impotent, giving in and giving up, just like Gates. Saunders shook his head in denial as the memories spooled past in new and horrifying detail. Seeing Billy shot down as he tried to escape, Caje’s bloodied and broken body dropped into the grave that they’d just dug for Rankin, watching in horror as Kirby, Doc, and Littlejohn were all dragged away for questioning by Steiner only to be returned as little more than bloody lumps of flesh. And only he had survived, remaining a prisoner of the Germans as they rolled across Allied lines like an unstoppable juggernaut.

“NO!!! Dammit, that wasn’t what happened. I brought them back, all of my squad. And Akers’ men too!” Saunders roared, before his voice ebbed to a hoarse whisper. “All who were still alive.”

Morrigan stared at him with the faintest hint of a satisfied smile on her face as Bokala’s dark cloud oozed away.

Just outside the heavy wooden door, Cerridwen listened with her expression impassive and her hands clenched.



By the time they arrived at the Warder’s tent, the rush of adrenalin that had brought Hanley through the day’s battle began to ebb and noting the ashen color of his face, Elliott seated him on a sturdy camp stool.

“Jest rest yoreself a spell. The Cap’n won’t be too long and then the two of you can have a nice long talk about where you came from and how you got here.”

Despite his best intentions, Hanley dozed until the sharp tattoo of hoofbeats outside the tent wakened him and he staggered to his feet, hoping it was the man the Warder had sent bringing Saunders back. Ducking outside, he saw Winters and Elliott questioning the man who had returned empty-handed.

“You weren’t able to find any sign at all?”

“There was no body in the field when I rode up. Though there was sign of two other riders, so someone musta found him.”

“Thank you, Foster. Return to your unit.”

But the man wasn’t through reporting “That tree full of dead men Elliott reported was burnt clean to ashes. Like someone had called down lightnin’.”

“Hold yer tongue, Foster,” Elliot snapped, “and report back to your unit.”

As the rider turned his horse away, the Warder and his sergeant exchanged troubled glances before he spoke, “That sounds like Myrrdin’s doing, burning the bodies. If so, Hanley’s sergeant is likely to be a guest of Morrigan.”

As the two men approached the tent where Hanley was standing, they were discussing the next phase of their campaign. Although desperate to find out what had happened to Saunders and where he might be, Hanley controlled his impatience and offered to help any way that he could in the aftermath of

the battle.

Winters accepted his offer gladly and would have accompanied him around the camp, checking on ammunition and supplies, along with the battle readiness of the surviving troops. But Elliott clearly had other ideas.

“Tending the troops is my job, Cap’n. You and the Major here just set a spell and talk about Morrigan and the Canton. He needs to know what we’ll be going up against.”

At first Hanley thought Winters might protest, but suddenly he had a severe coughing spell that left him breathless and pale. With Elliott holding one arm and Hanley the other, the two of them guided him into his tent and seated him beside a table full of maps.

“You just stay here and catch your breath, sir. I’ll see to the men.”

Wheezing, the Warder waved Elliott off, “Go do your job, Sergeant. The Major and I will handle the strategic planning.”

After helping Winters inside the tent, Hanley stood in front of him, noting his ashen color and the harsh sounds of his breathing, “You were caught in a gas attack, weren’t you?”

Winters nodded, his color slowly improving, “The damage to my lungs has been gradually worsening.”

Not sure what to say, Hanley was surprised by Winters’ urgent appeal, “You’ve led men in battle, haven’t you?”

Shrugging, he replied off-handedly “I was a sergeant on D-Day, when we landed in France. After we lost our lieutenant in the *bocage* country, I got bumped up to fill his slot. I wasn’t half the soldier my sergeant was, but we both managed to survive and keep the platoon going.”

“Another war in France? A worldwide war?” Even though he had asked the question, Hanley could tell the Warder was not surprised. “Just how many years of peace were there?”

Pausing for a long moment, not really wanting to answer, Hanley finally spoke, “Maybe twenty years, if you don’t count flare-ups in the Far East and elsewhere.” Hoping to break off the discussion of war and battles, Hanley asked, “What can you tell me about Morrigan and the Canton, the people who may have my sergeant?”

Winters shook his head grimly, “They were our allies until I antagonized them. Healers and seers, herbalists and wise women.” Noting Hanley’s skeptical look, “I know it sounds like I should be locked in Bedlam, but those kind of powers truly exist in this place. I should know, until I drove him away with my meddling, Myrrdin was doing his best to heal the damage the gas attack did to my lungs.” He coughed again, a deep racking spasm that left him pale and breathless. “But thanks to my meddling and Morrigan’s lies, they believed I intended to burn them at the stake for practicing the ‘dark arts’. All I wanted was for them to regulate and oversee their own people, but I frightened them with my demands. As a result, most of them left the local villages and formed their own community, the Canton. They also chose Morrigan, a practitioner of the darkest kind of witchcraft, as their leader rather than Myrrdin, the mage who’d been treating our sick and wounded.”

Hanley wasn’t sure what alarmed him most, the fact that Winters believed in “witchcraft” and “hocus-pocus” or the possibility that Saunders was in the hands of people who practiced it. Still he was dependent on the Warder and his troops to retrieve Saunders, if it was possible, so probably the best thing was keep his mouth shut and eyes open.

While they waited for Elliot to return with his report on the readiness of the troops for another battle, the Warder reached over and unrolled a large map of countryside. “Here, Major, you can get a general idea of the kind of terrain where we will be going up against Tariq’s surviving troops.”

Hanley leaned forward and studied the map, intensely curious about this mysterious place where he’d arrived. He examined the countryside, noting the beautifully portrayed depiction of farms and villages, besides the forests, streams and mountains.

Winters said apologetically, “I’m afraid it’s more artistic than topographic. None of the people who’ve come through to this place have been surveyors; so we’ve relied mostly on a local artist’s eye for detail, just making rough estimates of distances, heights, and other measures.”

He continued gazing down at the map with a fond look on his face as he ran his fingers across the artistically detailed countryside, “Most of this land is virgin territory. Pristine, virtually untouched, not cursed by factories and machines. While the local farming methods may seem old-fashioned, they produce enough to feed their families and trade with their neighbors.”

Hanley’s brow drew down and he interrupted, “I don’t see what this has to do with finding my

sergeant.”

“This country may seem primitive and uncivilized to you, Hanley, but after the hellish conditions I survived in the trenches at the front, it was a paradise. As I explored the countryside and tried to find out where I was, I came across other soldiers who’d stumbled away from bloody killing grounds in America, across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. No matter what side they had fought on, once they realized their war was over, they were eager for the chance to make a better life. Most of them just wanted to put down their weapons and pick up the plows, hammers, saws, and other tools of the trades they had abandoned when they heeded the bugle call of war.”

“I’m not a farmer or a hunter or herdsman.” Hanley protested. “Despite your description of the bucolic delights of this place, I prefer more modern comforts: soft beds, clean clothes, fast cars and beautiful women. And besides, I have a duty to fulfill in Berlin, trying to prevent the outbreak of still another war.”

“But you’re needed here, Major. You saw the savage, bloodthirsty foe we faced.” Red-faced with emotion, Winters began to cough again, a deep harsh racking cough that left him pale and breathless, barely able to stand. Hanley guided him back to his stool and then after glancing around, found a pitcher of cool water and poured it into the metal cup beside it. Pressing the cup into the Warder’s hand, Hanley stepped to the door of the tent, giving him a chance to drink the water and regain his composure.

“If everyone was as eager to put aside their weapons as you say, then who is this Tariq we just battled?” Hanley questioned.

Winters heaved a huge sigh of regret, “My fault again. I got complacent, I guess. Believing anyone who came here was tired of fighting. Or maybe I just didn’t pay attention during World History when my professor described how the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan slaughtered, raped and pillaged their way across most of Asia. At any rate, I guess when we didn’t ambush and slaughter Tariq Khan’s Mongols when they first came through, they assumed that we wouldn’t resist them.”

“After several months of violent raids, we were able to recruit and train enough men to face them in direct battle. The battle we just fought,” he stated flatly, a cold look on his face. “I won’t repeat my mistake of underestimating Tariq . . . or his shaman Bokala. We’ll put an **end** to any survivors, no matter where they take refuge.”

Hanley frowned, knowing he had no choice but to help fight that ruthless enemy, if he wanted to survive. But what about Saunders? Could he find his sergeant and somehow manage to get the two of them back to the world where they belonged?

“These mages that you mentioned before, have any of them found a way to leave this place? Is there any way we can get back to our own world, our own time?”

“What if I told you there was no way home? No chance of finding a way back to the world that you left?”

“I’d still have to try,” Hanley’s expression was stubborn.

Before the discussion could go any further, Elliot returned followed by a dark-haired, swarthy skinned man wearing buckskins and with a corn cob pipe clenched in his teeth.

The Warder greeted the *voyageur* with a grin and a hearty handshake, “Jean-Luc, when are you going to bring me some of that possum stew, you promised?”

“When M’sier Possum cooperates, *mon capitaine* and jumps in my bag. You keep me busy scouting and my men and I cannot do any hunting.”

“What’s the word on Tariq and his surviving troops?”

“We cut Tariq’s trail while we were scoutin’ and just as you thought, they are heading for the Canton, straight as the arrow flies. By midnight they’ll be in Morigan’s territory.”

“How many survivors?”

“*Cent hommes*. How you say, ten double hands?”

“A hundred?” Hanley asked, recalling a little of Caje’s French. “A hundred riders?”

“Oui, m’sieur. A hundred men, with horses, another dozen stragglers on foot, though whether they will survive till morning . . .,” The Frenchman shrugged. “Who knows? Tariq is a hard man and desperate. He may decide to . . .,” Jean held his finger to his throat and pulled it across with an eloquent shrug.

“You mean, kill his own men?”

“If they slow him down, *oui*.” The *voyageur*’s face was somber. “Besides he still has Bokala and you know how *dangereux* that one is.”

The Warder's face was grim, "Thanks for the warning, Jean. Your men will be scouting tomorrow, so be ready to ride at dawn."

"*Oui, mon ami.* We sleep the sleep of the angels for this day's work."

Turning to Elliott, Winters asked, "What's your report on the number of battle-ready troops, Sergeant?"

The Southerner chomped down on his tobacco chew, looking around for a place to spit, then shrugged and tucked it back into his jaw at Winters' exasperated look.

"We've got enough men to mount a light company, each man with full kit of powder and bullets. You heard Jean's report. Hardly enough to hold a barn dance. But like they say, >a desp'rate man's a dang'rous man.' Worse trouble's stirrin' elsewhere, with Bokala taking shelter with Morrigan. You mix that bone-rattlin' hoodoo of his along with Morrigan's dream-spinnin', and the two of them's likely to stir up more trouble than Ol' Scratch on a Saturday night."

Winters answered in a calm voice, "Thank you for the report, Sergeant. Now, get some supper and find your bedroll."

"But sir," Elliott protested. "No tellin' how much trouble'll be waitin' fer us."

"We'll face that situation tomorrow, Sergeant. Now, get some sleep and that's an order."



Saunders woke, gasping as he tried to push the nightmare tainted images out of his mind. The memories were bogus, that much he knew. Still as he struggled to sit up, he stared around the room urgently, looking for any sign of the old woman and the dark cloaked figure with her. He wasn't sure whether she'd used drugs or some form of hypnosis to tamper with his mind, but to his relief, the straight back chair was empty and there was no shadowy presence in the corner.

He was alone for the moment. Time to make his break while he had the chance. Tossing the blanket aside, he swung his feet to the floor. Once his head stopped spinning, he glanced around the room looking for any kind of disguise he could wear so he didn't stand out. Fortunately he was already wearing rough woven trousers, if he could just find a shirt and shoes, he'd have a better chance of getting away.

He staggered away from his cot, leaning against a cold stone wall as he opened several drawers in the plain wooden chest across the room. The first one had numerous small bottles, sealed with melted wax, while the one beneath contained bandages. Grabbing a handful, he stuffed them in his pocket and continued down to the next one. Luckily it contained several shirts and pairs of soft-soled slippers. He'd have preferred field boots, but beggars can't be choosers so he awkwardly pulled them on. The shirt was loose enough to fit over his bandages and the slippers gave his feet some protection.

Breathing harshly, he staggered to the door and pressed his ear against it, listening for any sound in the passage beyond. Everything seemed quiet, so he slipped out and hurried down the hallway, looking for signs of an exit from this gray walled prison. He edged his way along the walls, keeping to the shadows in hopes that if he heard anyone approaching he could try to duck out of sight before being spotted.

As he headed downwards hoping to find an exit, Saunders tried to pull his scattered thoughts together. Although he had no idea of where to begin looking for Hanley, his encounter with the old woman and her shadowy companion convinced him that the farther he was from this stonewalled holding pen, the better off he'd be.

A sudden murmur of voices ahead froze Saunders in his tracks and he turned back and began to pull on a warped and splintered door just behind him. Despite his efforts, the door only opened a narrow crack at first, until he gritted his teeth and yanked harder, forcing it to give way just enough for him to squeeze into its dusty, closet-sized interior. Breathing harshly while he struggled to pull the door closed, he leaned against the opening as the speakers came into view.

It was a man and a woman, arguing. Saunders listened intently, hoping to discover some clue about this place that might improve his odds of escaping.

". . . can't believe that she's allowing that bone-rattling fraud to cast a spell **here**. To read the omens and come up with some strategy if the Warder's troops decide to attack."

"Tariq's only plan is to use our people as shields against them."

Saunders' heart pounded as he suddenly remembered Hanley's exact words just after his squad arrived in Avalon.

"Actually it's Major, Sergeant. Or at least it was before I took a wrong turn on a dark Ger — dark street — and wound up here." And later, his explanation of how he became Warder. *After he died, I was chosen as Warder and the responsibility of protecting these people fell to me.*

Was this Hanley's fated arrival in Avalon?

If it was, this place wasn't the haven it was before. Saunders shuddered, recalling the burned-out field where he'd first regained consciousness, then awakening in this tower where two terrifying figures had made him relive the horror of the time when the squad was captured by the Gestapo. It had to be a hallucination. This couldn't be Avalon, the pristine, magical land where he and the squad had found themselves after their battle with a ruthless band of German raiders.

But if it was Avalon, then the young girl who'd been with the older woman who'd treated his wounds really was *his* Rihannon.

Rihannon. Beautiful and mysterious, just like Avalon itself. She had brought him back from the brink of death with her mysterious healing powers. And when duty had taken him back to the war, he'd left her with a promise: *I don't know what's ahead for me or my men but once the war is over, I'll find a way back to you.*

Avalon.

He slumped in despair. He had returned to that one-time refuge but it was the wrong time. This might be when Hanley was supposed to arrive in order to become the Warder, but Saunders didn't belong here. Not now, not in this time.

"I wasn't looking for Shangri La," he muttered. "I've already found my paradise."

What would his family do if he never returned home? What about Celia? What would become of her? And the promises he had made?

As Saunders leaned against the wooden door, he wasn't sure whether he actually uttered a sound at that sudden realization or whether the two people in the hall had somehow sensed his emotional turmoil. But one of them stopped in the middle of the hallway, grasping the arm of his companion.

"Cerridwen, wait. I sense someone nearby. Someone in pain."

Before he could duck further down in the dark space, the old man limped over to the battered door and tugged on it with all his might. With a harsh groaning of hinges, it lurched halfway open revealing the man they had rescued earlier, his wheat-colored hair smeared with dust and cobwebs and a desperate look on his face.

Stumbling out of the cubbyhole where he'd been hiding, Saunders grated out, "Don't scream. I won't hurt you. Just tell me where to find the Warder and I'll leave. No one has to know you saw me."

As the two exchanged glances, Saunders took a closer look at Cerridwen, remembering the woman who had saved Littlejohn's life. Her hair wasn't the fall of silver he recalled and her features were softer and less well-defined. Surely that proved he was in a different time than he remembered. Hanley's time, not his. But what could he do now he was here?

"Come to my workroom, young man. That dressing needs to be changed, unless you want to risk losing your arm. Afterwards we'll direct you to the Warder's camp. Though it will be safer if you wait until after dark."

Surprised by this sudden offer of help, Saunders hesitated until Cerridwen hissed, "Come quickly, fool. Morrigan's eyes and ears are everywhere."

Nodding weakly, he stumbled along barely managing to keep up as the two of them hurried swiftly down the hallway. It took all of Cerridwen's willpower not to berate Myrrdin for this reckless action. Bringing in someone wounded from the side of the road to spare him from renegades and wild animals was one thing, but taking his part after Morrigan had shown an interest in him was foolhardy in the extreme. Especially now the shaman Bokala had joined her and could be lurking in the shadows anywhere. Defying Morrigan's will was likely to get them banished . . . or worse.

Myrrdin seemed unaffected by the roiling emotions around him; his only objective seemingly to bring the man to his workroom and change the dressing on his wound. What his plans might be afterwards were beyond Cerridwen's comprehension.

After they reached the workroom and closed the door, he reached inside a cabinet and pulled out a box filled with an odd assortment of sealed bottles and wrapped packets. Numbed by the sudden realization of where he was, Saunders was uncertain about what he should do next. His best chance for

survival seemed to be to get as far away from this place as he could. If he located Hanley, at least he might be able to help make Avalon into the haven it became.

“Change his dressing, Cerridwen, while I see if my scrying crystal shows where the Warder and his troops are at present.”

The woman balked, protesting, “Surely you’re not going to help him escape? Morrigan thinks he can be useful to her.”

“She intends to use his memories brought to life by Bokala’s blood rites to destroy the Warder.” Myrrdin spoke in a low contemptuous voice, gesturing toward Saunders. “Tampering with his mind gave her images of men and weapons to use against the Warder’s troops. Reliving those memories again will likely kill him . . . or worse, drive him insane.”

“Why should we care, Myrrdin? It’s our lives versus his. He chose to be a soldier, didn’t he? Besides the images Morrigan wants to use are from battles he’s survived.”

“Morrigan understands nothing about the horrors of war and if she and Bokala succeed in evoking those memories against the Warder’s troops, it will call up the darkest, bloodiest magic known to this world. And destroy the people she is trying to save.”

Seemingly oblivious to the argument going on over his head, Saunders reached up and clutched the older man’s arm with surprising strength, demanding in a hoarse voice, “Myrrdin. She called you Myrrdin.”

Baffled by the man’s intensity, Myrrdin shrugged, “Well, it’s more of a title, Far Seer, than a name, though I haven’t answered to anything else in a long . . .” His voice trailed off as the man’s fierce blue gaze bored into his. “Why do you ask?”

Saunders took a shaky breath and answered in a low uncertain voice, “I was here once before. My squad and I were in the middle of a battle and suddenly, we were somewhere else. A wild, beautiful country called Avalon and protected by the Warder. Who turned out to be a man I’d known before, by the name of Gil Hanley.”

He glanced over at Cerridwen, who stared haughtily back at him, “You were there, but older and in charge of a place called The Healer’s Grove, where the sick and wounded were treated. And there was a Myrrdin too. Only he was a boy, barely into his teens. Both of you were respected members of the council that advised the Warder.” Saunders voice trailed off, as if he realized how improbable his so-called memories sounded.

Cerridwen sniffed in contempt as she replied, “I can assure you I would never serve as one of the Warder’s underlings, for any reason. And so far as we know, his name is Winters and he was a soldier in the Great War, before he found his way here. And as you can see, Myrrdin is long past boyhood. These delusions of yours were doubtless the result of a drunken binge.”

But Myrrdin seemed less skeptical, “There are several boys I’ve been training in the skills my master taught me. What do you remember about him?”

Saunders shook his head as he stared down at his clenched fists. “Only that he was young . . . and he showed us the way home. Can you do that?”

“You mean retrace the path that led you to this place?” Myrrdin’s brows were drawn together thoughtfully as Saunders gazed up at him with a desperate hope.

But the old man shook his head, “There’s little reason for any of our people to desire returning to their previous lives. Most were fleeing persecution and death.”

“Persecution and death,” Saunders repeated, his expression numb.

He stared down at his clenched fists for several interminable seconds before whispering in a barely audible voice, “I’m sorry, Celia. I should have said good-bye.”

Then moments later he raised his head, his gaze raking over his two rescuers.

“Just tell me how to find the Warder,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

There was a long pause filled with despair and Myrrdin’s own resolution, as he addressed the



troubled young man.

"We will help you find a way home. You have my word on it."

After helping Saunders put his shirt back on, they hastened down the dark halls and out of the tower itself. All around them was an enveloping mist, so thick that they could barely see a foot in front of them.

Myrrdin halted so quickly that the two following nearly bumped into him. He hissed in a low voice, "Stop, don't go any farther. There's danger . . ."

Suddenly a band of leather and fur-clad figures materialized out of the fog. Their short, powerful bows had arrows on the string and were drawn taut waiting for the word from their khan, seated on his horse behind them. His stolid expression and enigmatic dark eyes showed nothing of his intentions for his newly acquired prisoners. Then the line of warriors parted like grass before a sirocco wind as two cloaked figures approached. The one in gray threw back her hood, revealing the harsh bitter features of Morrigan, the woman who had interrogated Saunders earlier. The figure in black who'd been with her only raised his enough to reveal the death's mask tattoos that covered his face and hands.

"Tired of our tender care so soon, Sergeant?"

Saunders did not reply, determined to resist her tampering with his mind and memories as long as possible. She turned her cold glare on the man and woman with him.

"Such betrayal I should have expected from you, Myrrdin. Your sympathies with the Warder and his blood-thirsty followers are already known. But you, Cerridwen, I thought you were one of us. A healer. A nurturer. A caretaker of the women and children who have suffered at the hands of those like him." Her icy gaze raked across Saunders, as though he was less than human. "And now you would help him to escape."

Myrrdin started to speak, but at a gesture from the shadow cloaked shaman, one of the bowman pressed his drawn arrow against his throat in a clear display that no words of defense or explanation would be spoken.

Cerridwen looked into Morrigan's eyes, then spat on the ground in contempt. "I'm nothing like you, old woman. You suck the life and breath out of everything you touch."

As she spoke, the skeletal hand of the Mongol shaman raked across her cheek leaving an icy white mark causing Cerridwen to stumble and fall, gasping in pain.

"Bring them with us," Morrigan hissed to her Mongol escort. "We'll use their powers against the Warder's men, if the ghosts that one . . ." she nodded toward Saunders, "calls up are not enough. One way or another, I will put an end to the Warder's rule."



Early the next morning, Winters, Elliot and Hanley gathered their surviving troops and started out for the Canton, where Morrigan's people had their own settlement and Tariq's Mongol warriors had retreated. Before they left the bivouac area, Winters had given Hanley a pair of field glasses.

"Here, you'll need these to get a close look at Morrigan and see what sort of forces she plans to use against us."

The day had dawned bright and clear and as they rode towards the valley, Hanley found himself feeling an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*, as though he'd gone through a similar experience. Then it came to him, leading his entire platoon up two silent, seemingly deserted hills to capture the bunkers that overlooked the road and were stalling a vital American advance.

Hanley shook his head trying to forget the harrowing images from that day. Saunders and his squad had been part of that mission, but the sergeant had been wounded and taken out of action early. And soon after even more of his men fell, wounded and dying as he ordered them to advance time and time again while the machine gunners whittled away at their numbers.

He shuddered as he recalled the names of the dead, Morgan, Chester the machine gunner, Einstein, and a dozen more. Even worse were the fearful accusing faces of the living, Caje, Littlejohn, Kleinschmidt, and even Doc, as he ordered them to attack those damned hills over and over again. Kirby managed to lead the final desperate charge that took the last bunker, only to be told to retreat minutes later on orders from HQ. Hanley still had nightmares about that battle, haunted by the faces of the living and the dead.

His face was grim and his mood dark as Elliott rode up beside him.

"You look like the Warder's ordered you to charge Bloody Roundtop all by your lonesome."

Hanley tried to shrug off his mood, "I was remembering a battle Saunders and I managed to survive, just barely. Attacking two bunkers with a single platoon of riflemen. No artillery support, no mortars, no tanks. Just flesh and bone against concrete and steel. Not much chance of winning, but they did anyhow, though there was a terrible price."

"Thar' always is," Elliott said, his rough speech momentarily softened. "Even if you survive the bloody charges and the hot lead tearing away at the men around you, you're changed forever. Heart and mind, body and soul, nothin' is ever the same."

Hanley looked at the unshaven, gray-clad sergeant, thinking how much the man reminded him of Saunders. Same laconic down-to-earth practicality and bone-deep loyalty. He hadn't realized how much he had missed that steadfastness, until it was no longer beside him. He didn't know whether they would ever be able to somehow get back to that dark, freezing alley in Berlin, but he wasn't going to stop looking for his sergeant until he found him.

Trying to return his focus to the job ahead, Hanley turned to Elliott, "What can you tell me about this Morrigan?"

"She's a piece of work, for sure. Been here longer than anyone can remember. Older than the hills, tougher than rawhide and poisonous as rattlesnake venom. No one's r'ally shore wh'ar or when she came from, but she's got powers no one in their r'at mind wants to run afoul of. Word was she came from Salem, not falsely accused of witchcraft, but the real thing."

"Is that why Winters is so upset about Tariq and his troops heading there?"

"It ain't so much Tariq's troops he's worried about, but what evil Bokala and Morrigan can stir up between them."

Hanley had his doubts about the dangers of whatever wizardry they might be facing, but he wasn't eager to go up against the superlative lethal horsemanship of Tariq's surviving horde. Still, this might be a way to locate his missing sergeant, if Elliott was telling the truth about these people's powers.

As they approached the valley where the Canton was located, the bright, clear sky they had ridden through that morning began to change into an eerie brassy hue, with storm clouds gathering and a death-like stillness in the air. Their mounts sensed something more than just a change in the weather and became skittish and extremely difficult to handle.

"What do you think, Hanley?" Winters asked. "Should we leave the horses here and move up on foot to attack? Or keep mounted and hope for the best?"

"I may have been in the infantry, but I always took advantage of any ride I could get: jeeps, tanks, motorcycles, even a recon plane once," he observed, taking in the unsettled weather moving in all around them. "I doubt if Tariq's men will be able to control their horses any better in this kind of disturbance. Natural or not, this wind and rain will play havoc with anyone's tactical plan. So we've got as good a chance as he does to stay mounted in the battle ahead."

"I just hope you're right, Major," the Warder replied, gazing uneasily around.

"Me too," Hanley muttered under his breath.



As the storm clouds thickened and greenish-blue bolts of lightening flickered across the sky, Saunders, Myrrdin, and Cerridwen were tied to the saddles of three Mongol ponies, bringing up the rear of the group riding towards the entrance of the Canton's valley. Saunders struggled against his bindings, determined not to be led like a lamb to the slaughter, but they only grew tighter the more he tried to loosen them. Myrrdin rode with his head down, barely seeming to breathe and beside him, Cerridwen sat numb and still, riding to whatever fate awaited her without protest.

While Saunders tried to escape, Morrigan watched him in amusement, like a cat studying a mouse captive within its paw. "Look below and you will see true evil. The Warder and his whole army coming to attack this stronghold, even though he knows there are only women, children, and a few old men living here."

Saunders did not reply, but continued trying to loosen his bonds. He wasn't a good rider, but if his hands were free, he might be able to jerk the reins and kick his mount into a sudden run, which could take

his captors by surprise. Morrigan glared at his defiant expression and waved her hand, creating an image in front of him, "This is the enemy whom we will destroy using your memories. Look upon them one last time. Soon they will be no more."

Staring at the riders in the vision, he saw the uniforms and armor of a dozen different times, just like the Avalon he remembered. The man leading them wore a worn AEF uniform with captain's bars and had a patch over one eye. There was a gray-clad rebel soldier behind him, and beside the rebel he thought he saw a familiar face. *Angular cheekbones, strong chin, dark hair heavily threaded with gray – it was Hanley!* Even though he'd guessed this was the time when Hanley had actually come to Avalon, it was still reassuring to see he was actually here. Still, it left him with a cold chill inside wondering why Hanley hadn't told him before that they'd come through together. *Unless he didn't know. Or he didn't want Saunders to know what had happened to him here.*

The Morrigan watched her captives in amusement, sensing the doubt and uncertainty in the soldier. Such emotions would make her task that much easier and she ignored the Mongol warriors waiting impatiently behind her. They were just bait in the trap to draw the Warder and his troops into her web of power. She had no further use for them, but she would have been outraged to discover that their khan Tariq was equally contemptuous of her.

Even though he knew his troops were outnumbered, Tariq was sanguine about the conflict ahead as he spoke to Bokala, "My men are the best riders and fighters by far and we can easily defeat them, Shaman. There is little need for you to use your powers."

The shaman's voice sounded like the whisper of wind through old bones, "Morrigan will be testing her own control over the captive as she draws ghosts and shadows from his past to send against the Warder's troops. Your men have no need of this distraction, but surely they would welcome the chance to cut down their enemies like ripe grain before the scythe?"

Tariq nodded, an avid look on his face, licking his lips as though anticipating a rich meal. "Yes, the opportunity to bathe in their blood as we have in the past would be most welcome, Shaman. And what about you? Will you be able to draw out their souls to feed your hunger?"

The shaman shrugged, "If not theirs, then the women and children of the Canton will serve as well in the weeks to come."

"What about the old woman?" Tariq gestured towards Morrigan who was gazing contemptuously down on the approaching troops. "Won't she protest when you begin feeding upon her followers?"

"Why should she, when she will be the first to die?" The shaman's eyes gleamed like hellfire from beneath his hood.



The dark skies overhead were laced with lightening, making the terrain around them shadowy and difficult to see. The Warder pulled up his mount temporarily gazing up at the hill where Tariq's men waited.

"Damn, it looks like they hold the high ground, Sergeant. Any thoughts about what we should do next?"

"If we had a brace of cannon, sir, I'd suggest blowing their heads off. But seein' as how we're a mite short on heavy weapons, I'd warrant our best chance is to charge up that hill like our hosses had red pepper under their tails . . . and fight like drunken rivermen."

Winters gave his sergeant a bleak grin; "I can always count on you to cut straight to the bone, Sergeant. Well, pass the word down the line, we'll charge on my command. Try not to bunch up and a twenty dollar gold piece for the man that puts a bullet between Bokala's eyes."

Elliot shook his head grimly, "I doubt plain lead will do much good 'ginst that >un. Most likely you'd need a round with a cross carved in it."

Winters shook his head at the sergeant's odd notions before waving for the bugler to sound "Charge". He tossed off a brief salute to Hanley and at the clear call of the bugle, urged his horse into the storm of arrows pouring down from the hillside. Hanley kicked the ribs of his own mount, following as close to the Warder as possible while staying low and firing his weapon at the pony-mounted Mongols.

There were screams of agony from men and beasts as they fell in the face of that onslaught and as they went down thrashing, men took shelter behind their mounts' dying and bloodied bodies. Hanley's

horse stumbled, but did not go down, however as he saw the arrow hanging from its chest, he knew it was only a matter of time before it dropped. Sliding out of the saddle, he slapped the beast's flank sending it headlong against the Mongol charge. Staggering, it knocked down two ponies and their riders before finally dropping.

Taking shelter behind the body of another dying animal, Hanley raised his rifle and looked around to see how many of their enemies were still mounted and in action. To his relief, the number of mounted Mongol bowmen had been reduced by half. However, much to his shock, the Warder's troops were suddenly attacked by a squad of American GIs wearing the uniforms that he remembered from his days battling across Northern France. As he spotted the tall, broad-shouldered soldier aiming a bazooka in their direction, he recognized Littlejohn, the gentle giant of First Squad.

"Littlejohn," he called out in disbelief. "It's Hanley. Lieutenant Hanley. We're friends, don't shoot!"

But his cry did not stop Littlejohn from firing with deadly effect and it also drew the attention of the big soldier's comrades in his direction. To his horror, a heavily bearded Cajon began firing his Garand at the troops around him with his usual accuracy. Hanley hesitated for long moments, then seeing that deadly weapon take its toll on four of the Warder's men, he reluctantly aimed his weapon at his scout. With a swift shot, he dropped LeMay. Unfazed by the death of his best friend, Kirby turned his BAR towards Hanley and began pouring hot lead into the body of the horse he'd sheltered behind. Hanley froze, unwilling to shoot another one of his men, no matter what kind of illusion this turned out to be.

Besides the lethal effectiveness of Saunders' squad, the surviving Mongol attackers were still firing arrows randomly from behind the bodies of their dead and dying ponies. He looked frantically around, trying to locate the Warder and find out what he might know about this sudden appearance of Hanley's former comrades. It was bad enough feeling guilty for deserting Saunders, but having to fire on his own men left him angry and frustrated. He didn't know who the enemy was anymore.

Reaching inside his jacket, he pulled the Warder's field glasses out and peered up at the hillside where the Mongol warriors had gathered just before they charged. There were no more enemy riders in reserve, but to his astonishment the whole area was illuminated by a ghostly light which highlighted several observers of the battle below. One figure was indistinct, cloaked in shadows the color of clotted blood, while mounted beside him were a man and a woman immobilized by oddly glowing poisonous green cords. To his shock he spotted Saunders there as well. His sergeant's face was blank and empty while the old woman beside him seemed to be drawing some kind of energy from him and shaping it into troops and weapons that she sent into battle against the Warder's men.

"Saunders," he gasped in dismay, wondering how he could get up that hill and free his sergeant from the woman's power. As he put the glasses aside, he looked desperately around at the bodies surrounding him. He'd emptied his own weapon during the first charge and everything around him was shattered and useless, except for the pistol he'd managed to retrieve. But it only had three rounds and was useless at this distance. Especially since he was still pinned down by Kirby's lethal BAR fire.

"Dammit, Sergeant," he muttered to himself. "Just how the hell do we get in these fixes?"

To his amazement, he spotted Sergeant Elliott working his way towards him, using the dead and wounded as shelter while he squirmed in Hanley's direction, carrying a rifle with a scope. Hanley expended his last three bullets for covering fire, trying to avoid aiming at Kirby, Littlejohn and the others, but Elliott seemed to have no hesitation and soon had dropped Kirby beside his weapon and forced Littlejohn to keep his head down. The sergeant's shoulder was bleeding badly as he handed off his weapon to Hanley.

"You gotta do it, Major. You're the only one able to make the shot."

"Gotta do what, Elliott? Where's the Warder?"

"Badly wounded and too far back to be sure of his target, or he woulda done it himself."

"Done what?"

"Shoot your sergeant. He's the one she's drawing the images from."

Elliott's face was pale as ashes and the front of his shirt was soaked with blood, "I'd do it myself, but my aim ain't steady enough. You're the only one who has a chance."

Reluctantly Hanley took the rifle from Elliott's grip and looked back through the rifle's sight. As he did, he got a startlingly close view of the tableau on the hillside. As he focused on the shadowy figure beside Saunders, Elliott grimaced, "Don't waste your ammo on Bokala, it won't do no good. You gotta stop Morrigan from usin' his memories agin us, before it goes any further. She's only sendin' men now. But the Warder says she can draw other things from his mem'ry, tanks, artill'ry fire . . . and worse."

Hanley began inching up the hill over the bodies of the wounded and dead. Hoping that he could reach Saunders before the sergeant called up a German 88 and blasted them into tiny bits. Once he was within range, Hanley peered into the sight and focused on his sergeant's empty face. Then abruptly he turned his aim to the old woman, though the blackness of the abyss in her eyes chilled him to the bone. Hesitating for just a moment, he fired.

The bullet hit dead center, right between Morrigan's eyes.

She didn't even blink.

Hanley gritted his teeth, realizing now why Elliott had told him to shoot Saunders. The woman was too powerful to be killed with just a bullet. He swung the weapon towards Saunders and fired a second time, but he was too late. The trigger was frozen. He pulled it repeatedly, cursing in frustration but to no avail. Morrigan gathered her powers, drawing from Saunders and the others and started to hurl a deadly bolt of force directly at him.

Suddenly the old man who'd been immobilized by the poisonous green cords, shrugged them off and pointed both of his hands at Morrigan, trying to drain the power she had just drawn from her prisoners.

For just a moment they struggled, like two children playing tug-of-war, until a burst of white light enveloped everyone standing on top of the hill. Morrigan screamed, writhing in pain within its brilliance while the shaman burst into flame and a cloud of malodorous smoke. For a moment, Saunders stood alone, outlined in a beam of pure energy then suddenly he vanished as though he'd never been there.

"NO!" Hanley cried in anguish as he lurched to his feet and staggered to the top of the hill with the rifle still clutched in his hand.

By the time he arrived, nothing remained of Bokala but ashes and bleached bone. Morrigan lay beside him, twitching and convulsing for several moments until Hanley reached for her wrist to check her pulse. He recoiled in horror as her body dissolved into a gray oily smoke. Going over to the two survivors, he saw the woman who had been a prisoner along with Saunders had torn off her bindings and was kneeling in the grass beside the body of the old man.

Clutching his hand, she moaned in desperation, "Don't leave us, Myrrdin. Who will take your place? Who will be our seer?"

The man gasped as his gnarled fingers stroked Cerridwen's once dark hair now silvered by the fiery energy of his magic. "Don't cry. My time was almost done anyway. Better to spend the last dregs of my magic saving what I could."

She pressed her hand to his chest, trying to pour some of her own life into him, "No, you can't go. What will become of us?"

"Remember the stranger's words," he answered. "They'll tell you what to do."

Before she could continue, Hanley knelt by the old man's side, demanding in an anguished voice.

"Where is he? Where's the man who was just with you?"

Myrrdin's voice was fading, along with his life; "Where he belongs. I sent him . . . *home*."

The last word was a faint exhalation of air they could barely hear and Hanley stared at the old man's wasted body, whispering desperately, "But what about me? Where do I belong?"

"Who are you?" Cerridwen demanded, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Gil Hanley," he replied. "If that means anything."

"It means a great deal," Cerridwen answered in a low murmur. "You belong here. Saunders told us how as Warder you kept the peace and governed wisely. Protected the healers and heeded their counsel."

"But I'm not the Warder, not now."

"You will be. One day." Cerridwen's voice was filled with certainty as Hanley stared at her in disbelief. "And you must be as wise and just as he promised."

Left numb and uncertain by her prediction, Hanley turned and started back down the hillside to



begin picking up the pieces of the Warder's dream.

CODA

Saunders hit the turbulent black water with enough force to knock the breath out of him and its chill left him gasping as he clawed his way to the surface. Riding atop the white-capped waves, he gazed desperately around but saw nothing but empty ocean and a grey threatening sky. There were no signs of life for as far as he could see, no distant ships or islands, not even a soaring seagull. The adrenaline fueled burst of energy that had gotten him to the surface just after his arrival was beginning to wear off, and the shock of the cold waves began to affect him by slowing his heart and stiffening his muscles. Saunders tried to kick and flail his arms in desperation, determined not to surrender without a fight. He might be a prospective candidate for Davy Jones Locker but the crusty old sea devil wasn't going to get him without a fight.

Using the dog paddle he'd learned in Basic Training to keep himself afloat, Saunders rode up and down the dark waves until he spotted a boat in the distance and began yelling while flailing his arms wildly to catch its attention. With frustrating slowness, the craft changed its heading and began to draw ever closer to him. Trying to conserve his depleted energy, Saunders floated on the top of the waves as the boat drew nearer, until it was close enough for one of its sailors to call out to him. Though he did not know the language, as it turned and began to use its oars to come nearer, he suddenly recognized its odd configuration. It wasn't a fishing trawler or a pleasure craft or even some kind Coast Guard rescue ship B it was a Viking long boat, complete with a dragon on its prow and banks of oars.

For the barest moment Saunders hesitated, wondering if it wouldn't be easier to stop fighting and just suck in a lungful of water rather than be trapped in a savage time and place so far away from his family. But the fire of life burned too hotly inside of him to surrender, so he kept sculling his arms to stay afloat as the boat drew closer. As they tossed out a rope with a flotation device on it, he was strong enough to help by climbing hand over hand as they pulled him out of the cold waters and onto the rough deck of the ship. To his relief, his rescuers were wearing the dungarees, heavy sweaters and pea coats of fishermen, rather than furs, chain mail and winged helmets he associated with Viking raiders.

As he dropped to the rough plank deck, shivering violently with his teeth chattering, someone threw their coat around him and after several harshly muttered words that he couldn't understand, one of the crew pulled a small flask out of his pocket, wiped off the mouth and offered it to him. Saunders hesitated for just a moment before taking a long swig, and passing it back to the owner. Whatever was in the container must have been about 180 proof and lit a welcome fire in his belly that slowly began to spread to his half-frozen arms and legs.

Moments later two men helped him to his feet and led him to the man who seemed to be in charge. He had been manning the helm, using a primitive rudder to steer the boat and turned it over to one of his crew before attempting to question Saunders. The first three or four tries had not sounded familiar at all, just random collections of sounds heavy on the consonants.

The next one chilled his blood almost as much as the icy waters, "*Sprechen sie Deutsch?*" Saunders gazed suspiciously at his rescuers who weren't wearing anything resembling a German uniform and shook his head again, not willing to even try his limited German in this situation. Resigned to the fact that he wasn't going to get any kind of comprehensible story out of this mysterious stranger that they had just pulled from the sea, the Captain pulled out his pipe and began to fill it while staring off at the horizon.

Just before sunset, they brought the dragon boat into harbor. Saunders had dozed off tucked in an out of the way spot where he would not be underfoot during the docking of the antique vessel. The captain shook his shoulder to wake him and when he looked up there was a man dressed in a tweedy, casual suit standing over him, holding out his hand.

"My name's Andersen, Professor of History at the Institute for Advanced Studies."

Saunders looked up blearily and took the man's hand, muttering, "My name's Saunders. I'm an American."

"I guessed as much," replied the professor, continuing with his questioning. "Captain Ultrech and his crew were testing the seaworthiness of a replica of an ancient Viking vessel that was unearthed during the war. He said he found you in the water, far from any of the regular sea lanes. There haven't been any downed planes in the area in months, so we were most curious how you got there?"

Swallowing hard, Saunders debated between honesty and survival . . . and chose the survival. "I

don't know," he answered bleakly. "The last thing I remember was meeting an old friend in a club in Berlin. We went outside to get a breath of air . . . and after that, everything is a blank."

The professor reached forward and fingered the rough homespun fabric of Saunders' ragged shirt, "That's unusual cloth. I haven't seen anything like it outside a museum."

"I don't remember." Saunders replied grimly, wondering if he was going to spend the rest of his life trying to answer impossible questions.

Fortunately, the professor did notify the American Embassy that one of their citizens had been found off the Danish coast. There was a brief flurry of long-distance phone calls and urgent telegrams, then three days later Saunders found himself in possession of an official passport and a ticket to New York.

After arriving, he met with Hanley's sister and gave her the only possible answer he could, "We were ambushed in Berlin and he's 'officially' listed as missing. But . . . he's on a long-term mission that will save many lives. You may not hear from him for years."

Bernie gave him a deep penetrating look, "Thank you, Sergeant, for letting me know. Gil was always one for tilting at windmills and taking on lost causes. I hope he'll be happy 'over the rainbow'."

Shaking his hand, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, "George has tickets for you on the Silver Comet. Though you'll have to change to a local in Springfield, you should be home by midnight, the 3rd of December."

Nodding wearily, Saunders boarded the train and tried to sleep, but was haunted by too many nightmares. It was as though whatever had happened in Avalon had resurrected the worst memories of his wartime experiences. For a long time he looked at the ticket to Cleveland, wondering if he shouldn't cash it in and catch a train as far away from Celia and her family as his money would take him. But he had made a promise to Celia . . . and her brothers, to help rebuild her kitchen and maybe her brothers' lives as well. And he kept his promises.

It was long past midnight when the train stopped at Cleveland and he got out at the station. Although the main depot was closed and a light snow was falling, there was someone waiting for the train, dressed in a heavy coat with a scarf over her head.

It was Celia and she ran eagerly into his arms and kissed him passionately.

He returned the kiss and clasped her in his arms, feeling alive for the first time since he had left Avalon. "How did you know when I'd be here?"

"Mrs. Rodgers called. Your lieutenant's sister. She said that someone should meet you at the train. Welcome home, Chip."

And with his arm around her waist, the two of them walked through the gently falling snow, back to their home.

The End

Links

Jo Davidsmeyer's Combat! Fan Site:
www.jodavidsmeyer.com/combat/main.html

Lady Garand & Kirby's Cutie – Combat! Photo Gallery:
www.geocities.com/lady_garand_2000/

The Story Nook:
www.storynook.net/Combat.html

Bayonet's Stories:
www.i2k.com/~dpierce/terry

Company HQ:
deimos.ca/combat/

Mary Wright's Dogface Tales:
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