

LABYRINTH

By Doc II
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'A labyrinth is a right brain task. It involves intuition, creativity, and imagery. With a maze many choices must be made and an active mind is needed to solve the problem of finding the center. With a labyrinth there is only one choice to be made. The choice is to enter or not. A more passive, receptive mindset is needed. The choice is whether or not to walk a spiritual path.

*At its most basic level the labyrinth is a metaphor for the journey to the center of your deepest self and back out into the world with a broadened understanding of who you are."*¹

This story started as a challenge for Mojo, just a bit of fluff featuring Saunders for her enjoyment. I never really forgot how much I loved the images it evoked, and when I decided to tackle NaNoWriMo last year, I decided to write an entire story around the challenge. If you want to see if you have what it takes to apply your butt to the chair and write close to 2000 words a day for a month, I recommend you visit www.NaNoWriMo.org and join in the fun in November.

Many thanks to my wonderful beta readers as always: Skye, Maq, Mel, KT – writing doesn't happen in a vacuum. Thanks to Ranger for sharing her family and tour guide skills with a crazed group of Combat! fans. Chocolate and booze a'plenty to my buddies in the trenches, they know who they are.

And to my family: may we never have another year like this one. I love YOU more.

¹ <http://www.lessons4living.com/labyrinth.htm>



Paris – Fall 1944

A sea of olive drab-clad men ebbed and flowed around the line of troop carriers, slapping each other on the back, laughing, paying off bets and telling tall tales. Exhaust fumes hung over the narrow street, mingling with the smoke from countless cigarettes and the lingering scents of cheap aftershave and cheaper liquor. Three days of R&R in Paris had done much to restore the flagging spirits of King company, and the soldiers were determined to squeeze in as much recreation as possible before they climbed aboard the trucks and returned to the front lines.

A knot of noncoms exited a store front, hitching their gear back into its familiar configuration about their bodies. It only took three days for the belts and weapons and packs to feel alien and heavy. It would take much less for it to become a part of them again, rifles extensions of their arms and ammo as important as breakfast.

Sergeant Saunders cradled his helmet in the crook of one elbow, scrubbing at his blonde hair with the opposite hand. He put off the moment when he'd place it on his head, knowing that the constant ache in the back of his neck would awaken, as well as the awareness of the reason for wearing it in the first place. *Funny how a few days in a strange town, with plenty of sleep and regular hot meals, could take the edge off a man.* Saunders felt flat-footed and out of place, unwilling to round up his men and restore the mantle of command to his own shoulders. He sensed someone walk up behind him, heard the snick of the lighter and smelled bitter tobacco. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, trying to hang onto the memory of a hot shower and clean uniform, too many drinks in too many dark cafes, not enough pretty girls, and the laughter of his men.

"Think you'd sneak off to the front without saying goodbye to an old buddy?"

Relief flooded through him. Saunders turned with a grin and ducked under the half-hearted punch thrown by a tall red-headed man. "Rory, I thought you were workin' this morning." He snatched the cigarette out of the other's hand and stuck it between his own lips. The weight that had settled over his shoulders lifted at the sight of his old friend and comrade.

Kirby and the others gathered around their sergeant and the red-head, laughing and slapping the newcomer on the back. "Rory! You plannin' on comin' with us?"

The red-headed sergeant straightened his shoulders and glared at Kirby. "That's Sergeant O'Brian to you, William G." He laughed and slung a long arm around Saunders' neck, hauling him away from the rest of the men. Looking over his shoulder, Rory smiled at the squad, white teeth flashing in his freckled face. "You boyos get the trucks loaded, now, run along!" He laughed at the grumbles arising behind him and steered Saunders to the crumbled steps of an old hotel. Folding his lengthy legs beneath him, the sergeant perched on one of the few remaining intact risers. He pulled a crumpled pack of Luckys from his pocket and fished one out, fumbling for his lighter.

Saunders watched him blow a perfect smoke ring and laughed. "Amazed you're up already. Last I saw you, you were standing on top of a bar, matching shots with my men." He scratched his nose, shifting his helmet from one elbow to the other. Tamping the ash from the end of his pilfered cigarette, he took another deep inhalation.

The other man shrugged. "Occupational hazard here at Headquarters. They expect you to show up every morning, no matter how much fun you got into the night before." He scratched his ear, then rubbed his cheek, fingers trailing across the twisted scar that ran from temple to ear.

Saunders said nothing for a moment, remembering the day Rory got that scar, more than a year before. "You doin' okay, Ror? Blowin' stuff up and all?" He watched his friend closely, watched the hazel eyes darken and grow distant...



A year earlier in Africa...

"Rory!" Saunders dragged himself over the hot sand, leaving a thick trail of blood that quickly soaked in, leaving only a dark red stain. His left arm hung at an unnatural angle and he could hardly see

in the fierce wind: his goggles had been wrenched from his head and lost in the debris from the wreck. "Rory!"

The vehicle lay almost upside down, its tires still spinning. Beyond it, the rest of the patrol raced away, machine guns blazing at the Germans chasing them. The Kraut halftrack chugged along almost lazily, picking its targets and then blasting away. Nobody seemed at all interested in the lone disabled jeep and its occupants. They disappeared, Americans and Germans alike, over the next rise and were gone.

"Chip?" The voice was almost inaudible, the word wrapped with a grunt of pain.

Saunders crawled into the shade created by the overturned jeep. He could see most of O'Brian, sprawled underneath. The man's face was covered with blood from a deep laceration etched across one temple. His eyes opened suddenly, and he grinned at his friend. "Chip. Think we got ourselves a little mess here." O'Brian coughed, gagging and retching helplessly.

"Naw, just a little inconvenience." Saunders worked his way partway under the jeep, evaluating his buddy's situation. It looked like somebody was looking out for them this day, for once. Most of Rory's long body hung free from the weight of the vehicle, although battered. His uniform jacket looked like it had been pulled through a razor wire fence, with the man in it. One foot was caught under the accelerator pedal and now pointed in the wrong direction. Saunders flinched, a movement he immediately regretted as a wave of pain flared in his left shoulder and spread throughout his body. He pictured Rory caught by the pedal, flailing as the jeep leapt into the air and overturned. Reaching with his right hand, he dislodged the foot, setting it gently on the sand.

"I gotcha, Rory, don't worry." Saunders backed out from under the vehicle, his body protesting each movement. He could feel the blood saturating his jacket and wished he had the energy to find the dressing he always carried. More aches and pains were making themselves known to him, a knee, hip, ear. He settled down near Rory's head, sighing deeply.

O'Brian was unconscious, had been from the moment Saunders freed his badly fractured ankle. His breathing had a hitch in it, almost like soft hiccups. Saunders stared at his friend, wondering for about half a minute what he should be doing to help him. At the end of those thirty seconds, Saunders blacked out himself, unaware of the distant buzz of jeeps drawing closer.



"I'm good, Chip, almost as good as new." Rory looked away, then back to his friend and onetime squadmate, green eyes revealing nothing. "'s been good seein' you, ole buddy. Wish I was headed back with ya," he added, a faint Irish accent flavoring his words. He met Saunders' stare with an unflinching gaze, memories of the months in North Africa ghosting behind his eyes.

Saunders shook his head and stubbed out his cigarette on the stone steps of the ruined building. "No you don't, Rory." He held up one hand as Rory started to protest. "You got a girl back home. She'd never forgive me." He straightened, tugging his jacket tighter under his webbing and punched his friend in the shoulder. "I gotta get goin'."

Rory shook his head, grinning. "Not to mention the girl in London, or that blonde over at Graves Registration, oh!" His eyes grew wide and he waved vaguely up the street in the direction of the café Saunders and most of the men of 1st Squad had frequented the night before. "Don't forget that lovely little colleen, the one with the long dark hair and even darker eyes." Rory tapped Saunders on the chest with one long finger. "She won't forget you, Chip Saunders." He laughed, shoving Saunders toward the waiting truck.

The two sergeants wandered back to the men, still bantering.



Lieutenant Gil Hanley walked briskly toward 1st Squad, expecting to see gear neatly stowed and the men ready to go. He glanced at the row of idling trucks, noting with mild displeasure the duffle bags strewn about the cobblestones, and the men making no attempt whatsoever to stow them away.

Sergeant Saunders stood next to a lanky red-headed sergeant Hanley didn't recognize. As the lieutenant drew level with the two men, Saunders laughed at something the other said, covering his

mouth hastily with one hand at Hanley's raised eyebrow. Hanley cleared his throat. "Sergeant Saunders? What's the hold up?"

Saunders glanced up, unruly blonde hair falling forward toward his eyes. He looked around at the men, and then at the other sergeant. "You're a bad influence, Rory O'Brian," he muttered, shaking his head. He dropped his cigarette to the cobblestones and ground it into flakes with one boot. "No hold up, sir, just about to get movin'."

Hanley nodded, scowling at the men, and then turned abruptly, heading back to the OP.

"Kirby!" Saunders' voice was little more than a growl.

Kirby, sprawled over the front steps of a butcher's shop displaying only the thinnest of chops and a few meager rows of sausages made from some unidentifiable meat, wobbled to his feet. A cigarette dangled from his lips and he puffed furiously, cursing himself that he'd only just lit this one and now he'd have to put it out. Carefully tamping the butt on the side of the nearest truck, he shoved it in a pocket. "Yeah, Sarge!" His voice reverberated around his own head, and Kirby massaged his temples with both hands, squeezing his eyes shut.

Saunders allowed himself a tight grin, remembering the looser atmosphere of the card game the previous night when Kirby had managed to win a large portion of 1st Squad's pay, or at least what they'd had left after three days of serious partying. They'd all been laughing then, without the wall of command. "Kirby, Littlejohn, get these duffles loaded." Turning to the others, Saunders took quick stock, gratified to see clean-shaven faces above properly turned out uniforms. He counted under his breath, noting the new replacements Hanley had assigned the squad. When he reached the end of the line, the noncom turned back, eyebrows drawn together in puzzlement.

"Where's Doc?" The question caught them all off-guard.

Caje looked up from his Garand and slid a bottle of cleaning fluid back into his pack. "Haven't seen him. Not since breakfast."

Now standing in the back of the truck, Kirby staggered backward under the weight of the duffle tossed to him, tripping and falling into the pile of canvas. "Damn it, Littlejohn, ya big lug!" He shoved the duffles to the side and stood up, kicking the bags into place. "I saw him at chow, too, Sarge, scarfin' down bacon and eggs."

The others stared up at their sergeant, concern replacing confusion on their faces. Even young Nelson frowned, the expression revealing faint lines around his eyes that hadn't been there a few scant months before. The replacements, fresh from the reple-deple, glanced at each other uneasily and then busied themselves with their equipment, hauling the gear closer to the truck and Littlejohn's long arms.

Saunders ignored them all, circling the truck and looking up and down the street. It wasn't like Doc to be late, ever. He looked at his watch. *Fifteen minutes, fifteen minutes and they'd leave without the medic.*

Rory walked over, imperceptibly favoring his right leg. "Doc wander off, Chip?" After discovering that the Arkansas native had Irish grandparents on his mother's side, he'd spent considerable time trading stories with him over the last few days. What they couldn't remember of tales told to them as children, they made up, spinning stories so wild even Kirby wouldn't believe them after awhile. Rory and Doc had become friends and worry now etched the sergeant's face.

Nelson snapped his fingers suddenly. "I'll bet he's at that church, you know, where the statues are."

Saunders shook his head in incomprehension. "What church?"

"Oh, yeah!" Kirby jumped down from the truck and stretched, arms spread wide. "He went there all three days we been here, Sarge. Said it was quiet."

Rory punched his friend's shoulder. "I know the one, Chip. Let's go round him up."

Saunders turned his wrist and checked the battered watch. He shook his head. "We better hurry. Caje?" He waited for the scout to look up from his pack. "Make sure all this stuff is loaded up, willya?"

"Yeah, Sarge."



Kirby watched the two sergeants go, hands tucked into his suspenders. Turning, he proceeded to light up another cigarette. "Wonder why he didn't ask me to be in charge?" With a grin, he dropped onto the curb and puffed away contentedly, ignoring Caje's scowl.



Rory pointed at the spire rising behind the row of buildings fronting the street. "The church is just around the corner here. Before the German occupation, the statue garden was supposed to be something. I heard the Krauts used 'em for target practice, blowing their heads and wings and stuff off."

"Is it still used?" Saunders followed his friend around the bend in the road, staring up at the grey stone building looming before them. The surrounding wall was pockmarked with bullet holes and crumbled into dust in places. As more of the edifice came into view, it was obvious that it would be unsafe to hold services there. A large section of the roof was caved in, and slate hung precariously over the opening.

Rory shook his head, pointing the way to an iron gate. "Let's go that way, Chip, see if he's in the garden."

Shadowy fingers slipped amongst the ivy climbing the wall, creating a moving mosaic that was at once both calming and disturbing. The mature trees dotted here and there in the courtyard seemed to have forgotten it was spring. Bare branches reached skyward with leafless, amputated limbs, casting no shade over the scattered stone benches and the lifeless gardens.

Saunders leaned on the gate, shoving his shoulder against the intricate ironwork until it swung slowly inward. Oddly enough, the hinges kept silent and the soldier passed through unnoticed, followed closely by O'Brian. It only took them a second to find the medic and they paused, Saunders running one hand through his hair with undisguised relief. He pulled a cigarette from his jacket pocket and slipped it between his lips, lighting it with the battered lighter that had survived every firefight and bar brawl in which the sergeant had participated since D-day.

He hadn't been sure how his squad would react to the R & R in Paris. If he was being perfectly honest, and Saunders had given up that little habit long ago, he hadn't been exactly thrilled at the prospect himself. The months of living in holes in the ground hadn't prepared him for the comparative luxury of a civilized city. Saunders wasn't sure if he wanted his first and likely only visit to the City of Light to be while taking a momentary breath between battles. A clean bed and plenty of food and drink – that's all he really needed. But Hanley had insisted, and what Hanley wanted, Hanley got. The reunion with Rory O'Brian changed everything, lightening Saunders' mental load and gifting him with something he'd long forgotten – laughter.

Saunders took another deep drag on the cigarette and approached his missing squad member, smoke trailing behind him in wispy plumes that slowly dispersed in the gentle breeze. Following the broken cobblestone walkway, Saunders avoided the larger holes, his gaze flickering between his footing and his destination. Rory took a closer look at the damaged statuary, giving his friend room to deal with his subordinate.

"Doc?"

The medic looked up, blue eyes dark as the North Sea. He frowned, shifting something in his arms as he shoved up one sleeve and stared at his bare wrist in confusion.

"Sarge! I didn't realize, I musta lost my watch, I didn't..." Doc's voice trailed off, his cheeks flushing a dull red. He climbed to his feet and turned to face Saunders, the puppy in his arms whimpering and burrowing deeper into the safety of the medic's embrace.

Saunders took a step closer, coming around the edge of a low wall and saw what he'd failed to notice initially. A row of small children, each clutching an animal of some sort, seated in a semicircle at the



medic's feet. They stared up at the blonde soldier, eyes huge in faces punctuated by smears of chocolate. Saunders grinned, imagining Doc doling out his precious stash of Hershey bars.

"What's goin' on, Doc? Storytime?" He suddenly thought of Christmas Eve when the soft-voiced medic had lulled the squad, Hanley and Saunders, too, into an all-too-short respite from the war, transporting them back in time to Bethlehem and the birth of the Christ child. Saunders wasn't sure if he was religious or not, especially with all that he'd seen in the last few years, but that night, he was a believer. He smiled again, wondering how the young man from Arkansas had been able to communicate with the bedraggled group of French kids.

Doc shook his head. Holding out the struggling puppy, he nodded at the clean white bandage wound around its paw. "Ain't been a vet through here in a long time. I was just sittin' here, kinda thinkin'? Next thing I know, the kids an' the animals, well, they jus' started showin' up."

Saunders looked around the circle, marveling at the stillness of the children and the variety of beasts held in their laps. Dogs, cats, birds, even a pig. *And was that a...? Why, yes it was.* It was a rat, its beady eyes staring furtively at him for a moment before the creature nestled under the threadbare sweater of a grimy little boy. He understood the poverty these young Parisians must have suffered before the liberation and also after. He also understood the comfort an animal could bring to an otherwise empty life.

Looking back at the stricken face of his medic, Saunders shook his head, wondering not for the first time how deep was the well of compassion from which Doc drank. All the death they'd seen. *And caused.* And yet here Doc was, spending his time away from the killing fields still dealing with the wounded. Saunders suspected it wasn't only the animals being healed.

He cleared his throat, wanting his voice to be that of a friend rather than a superior. "We gotta go, Doc. Truck's waiting to take us back." As he said the words, Saunders suddenly wished he'd chosen different ones. *Take us back. Who'd ever want to leave this peaceful courtyard and these trusting faces?*

O'Brian wandered up, curious green eyes studying the array of kids and animals. He crouched down next to a small boy, graceful fingers entwining in the absurdly long fur of the cat perched on the boy's knee.

Doc nodded, turning to place the dog in the outstretched arms of a cherubic little girl. He touched her softly on the cheek, smiling down at her, and then picked up his medical pack, shoving the contents back in with uncharacteristic careless abandon.

Saunders blinked, forcing his gaze away from his medic's discomfiture, and waved at the children. He turned back toward the heavy gate. And froze, all of his soldier's intuition dancing along his nerve endings.

Three young men stood between the GIs and the gate, dressed in the muted colors of working men, threadbare cuffs and battered shoes testament to the hard life they'd led since the German occupation. The one in the middle, taller than the other two by half a head, took a step forward. His hands remained in his pockets, and he smiled, gaze passing over the two sergeants and then the medic, who stood just behind the noncoms.

Saunders glanced over his shoulder, reassured by Doc's sturdy presence. Just beyond the low wall two other men waited, just as innocuously attired as the three in front. Something about their expression, though, triggered his battlefield reflexes, and Saunders stepped away from Doc, putting some distance between them.

Rory mirrored the movement without even looking at his friend, expression darkened with confusion. He'd been out of the war for almost a year now, but instantly recognized the tension in the air. He turned toward the men to his rear, knowing Saunders had his back. He tensed his muscles, ready for anything.

The tall Frenchman smiled wider, pulling his hands from his pockets and holding them out in a welcoming gesture. "Do not be alarmed, Sergeant. I was just looking for the children."

The kids didn't move, wide eyes flicking from the Frenchman to Saunders and then back again. The animals clutched in their arms, quiet for so long, began to protest in a growing flurry of whines and growls and squeaks. The puppy yelped in pain as his tiny owner inadvertently squeezed his injured paw and she yelped herself, a single tear tracking down her grimy cheek.

<"Ah, little one. So the medic fixed your dog. Bring him here so I can see."> The Frenchman knelt down and beckoned the child to him. Smile plastered to his face, he ignored the uneasy glances shared between the three Americans. <"Let me see.">

The girl rose unsteadily to her feet. She looked first at Doc, and then walked directly into the tall man's arms, holding the puppy to her dimpled cheek, its injured paw encircled by her chubby fingers.

"Oh, he looks much better, thank you." He addressed this last to Doc, who merely inclined his head a fraction of an inch.

Saunders felt the first ripple of fear rise in his gut, and reached for the Thompson, hoping to get the drop on the unarmed men. Slapping at his back and coming up empty, he remembered too late that the weapon was in the gun lockers sitting on the back of the truck, awaiting his return to the war. *A war that came looking for me right here in this quiet churchyard.*

"Sarge..."

The medic's voice stilled whatever further action Saunders might have considered. It held a tone he'd rarely heard from the man – raw panic. He swiveled about, coming face to face with a short, muscular man who shoved him hard, backing him up several steps. Beyond the man, Doc stood frozen, a knife at his throat, and blood trickling down his neck from a shallow laceration where the blade nicked his skin. Another of the strangers stood behind him, clutching the medic tightly and holding the knife just under Doc's chin. The stranger's eyes met Saunders', challenging him, daring him to make a move. Rory growled in frustration, his hand stilled inches away from the pistol at his waist. One of the Frenchmen walked boldly up to him, removing the weapon and pushing the American toward his countrymen.

Saunders let out his breath with a rush, his muscles trembling with excess adrenaline. He took one step toward Doc, and then stopped at the hand that materialized in front of his chest.

The tall man moved close, almost whispering in Saunders' ear. "I told you, Sergeant, do not be alarmed. We just need your help." He nodded at the man holding Doc, his voice growing softer still. "Help us and maybe I'll let your medic live."



Saunders stumbled over the uneven footing, boots slipping against a smooth surface. Blindfolded, he relied on his hearing and the tactile response the floor gave his feet in order to make sense of their destination. So far, it didn't add up at all. After binding him, and then Rory and Doc, they'd been led a short distance over the broken courtyard to a building. Saunders had felt the cool shadow of it fall across his face as he was shoved through a low door. Behind him, Doc grunted, and the sergeant could only assume his friend had struck his head on the lintel.

The air was thick and fetid, smelling of sewer water and something old and malignant. Saunders coughed and heard Doc and Rory doing the same. Rough hands shoved him ahead, faster, and then spun him around, destroying all sense of direction. Falling to his knees, he rubbed his cheek hard against his shoulder, trying to push the mask up enough to see. One of his captors must have noticed, though, yanking the cloth back down and cuffing Saunders' ear.

<"Do you think this is far enough?"> Saunders flinched at the sound of the tall man's voice, somewhere just ahead of him, as somebody stopped him with a shove. He could hear a mumbled discussion, at least three different people, maybe four. .

<"Okay, Joachim, take the private."> The tall man had returned to his captives, his footsteps so light they hadn't heard him. He gave orders to several of his men and they shoved the three Americans ahead again, but in two different directions. The medic must have sensed something and pulled up short.

"Sarge?"

Saunders stopped, too, and turned toward Doc. Boots scraped along the floor and he felt, rather than heard, something swing through the air. Whatever it was connected with a body, a sound he was intimately familiar with. He lunged toward the noise, but was immediately grabbed by several men who slammed him against the wall.

"DOC!" Saunders screamed his frustration and received another blow to the head. He struggled hard, twisting against the strong hands holding him. Beside him, someone else twisted, too, boots sliding on the stones underfoot and grunting with effort. A foreign curse echoed against the walls, neither French nor German. Saunders redoubled his efforts, recognizing Rory's Irish Gaelic words.

"Sergeant, there is no point. It is up to you if your man lives or dies. Come with us and do what we want, he lives. If you do not, he dies. Simple as that."

At least it seemed that for now, despite bumps and bruises, Doc was alive. Saunders sagged against the men holding him, letting them take his weight. He might as well save his strength for whatever lay ahead. His heart hammered in his ears, drowning out the sound of boots scuffling across the cobblestoned floor.



Kirby lit yet another cigarette, blowing a perfect smoke ring into the air. He grinned as Billy watched it rise, his young face filled with amazement.

“How do you do that?” Nelson leaned against the truck, his shoulders comfortably cushioned by a duffle bag. He crossed his arms across his chest and raised his face to the watery afternoon sun, enjoying the faint warmth on his cheeks.

Puffing out yet another ring, Kirby just smirked. “Years of practice, my boy, years of practice. Hey, Cajé.” The private glanced over at the Cajun, and waved the cigarette at him. “When you think the Sarge will be back?”

Cajé slid his bayonet over the whetstone in small circles, the blade reflecting small sparks of sunlight into unsuspecting soldiers’ faces. He allowed himself a small grin as Littlejohn suddenly blinked and rubbed his eyes. Looking up at Kirby and then at Billy, he shook his head and returned to his sharpening. “I don’t know, Kirby. Maybe when he finds Doc?”

Kirby moved to the corner of the truck and took a quick peek up the line of vehicles. “Dammit.” The first few troop carriers were warming up, dark smoke belching from their exhaust pipes. A tall figure marched their way, a look of steely determination on his face. “Oh, dammit.” Kirby ducked back behind the rear of the truck. “Here comes Hanley, and he don’t look none too happy.”

Nelson dragged himself upright and squared away his jacket. “Hey, it’s not our fault Sarge isn’t back.” He looked at each of his squad mates skeptical expressions before adding, “or Doc.”

The lieutenant appeared suddenly. “Okay, Saunders, load ‘em up. We’ve got five minutes.” He glanced around the area, expecting to see his sergeant. Confused, he glared at the men, who remained frozen in place. “Where’s Sergeant Saunders?”

Kirby looked pointedly at Cajé who carefully slid his bayonet into its scabbard and stowed the whetstone in his kit bag. Littlejohn avoided everyone’s eyes, instead studying the tops of his sizeable boots. Billy stared right back at Hanley, eyes growing wider by the minute.

“I believe I asked a question?”

Nelson cracked first. “Ah, yessir, ah, we haven’t see him since he and Sergeant O’Brian went off looking for Doc...” His voice trailed off.

“Doc?” Hanley looked from Nelson to Cajé and back again. “Where’s Doc?”

Kirby picked up another of the remaining duffles and turned his back on Hanley, industriously loading the truck. Littlejohn glared at him, snatching the bag out of the smaller man’s arms.

“I’ll ask again and this time I expect an answer.” Hanley’s voice held an edge of anger, tightly controlled, but there all the same. “Where is Doc?”

Cajé shoved the last of his cleaning supplies into his ruck and tossed it aside. “The church, just down the road, sir.” He tucked his beret under the right epaulet of his jacket. “We think.” He looked in the direction of the spire, then back down the line of idling trucks, anywhere but at Kirby’s grateful expression.

“And Saunders has gone there to retrieve him?”

The Cajun nodded. “Yessir.”

Hanley closed his eyes, mentally ripping sergeant stripes and a medic’s brassard from olive drab sleeves. With a sigh, he turned to the waiting truck driver and said, “Ah, pull out of line. We’ve got a problem to sort out first.”



Looking back at 1st squad, he shoved his helmet back and glared at each in turn. "He's got five minutes."



Helene stood in the church yard, rubbing hard at her hands with a filthy cloth. She'd accompanied Joachim with his charge to their destination, deep within the catacombs. And then she'd retraced their steps, obliterating the blood trail. At all costs, the medic couldn't be found, ever. She couldn't take the chance that the American sergeant might escape from her compatriots and go looking for his friend. So emotional, these Americans, she thought, as she scrubbed, unaware of the occasional tear that tracked across her cheek and then fell onto the stones, mixing with the blood.

Tucking the cloth in the bag she carried, the Frenchwoman hurried back toward the Allied transit point, hoping to forestall any rescue plans by the captives' squad mates. Not for the first time, she wondered if the plan would work but soon shook her head, forcing the doubt from her mind. She didn't have time for regret, no time to second guess herself. The plan was set in motion and she had her part to play. She wouldn't let her brothers down.



Doc woke up to a world filled with pain and cold, lying on his side in an inch or two of stagnant water. He blinked a few times, wondering why he couldn't see, wondering if the searing pain in the back of his head had anything to do with it. Wondered if he was blind and if so, was it permanent? He tried to sit up, crying out in agony as the blood pounded behind his eyes, and slumped back into the water. A light snapped on, doubling his pain, as rough cloth slipped from his eyes and draped itself around his neck..

<"Shut up, shut up.">

A huge man, at least double the size of Doc's Uncle Abner, appeared before him, allaying his fears that he was blind, but confusing him further. Had he fallen in the kill room at his old uncle's slaughterhouse? Or maybe slipped and cracked his head at the bus barn, where he worked washing the old Greyhounds after school? The man moved closer, and Doc shied away, but his bound hands and the swooping vertigo washing over him limited his movements. It became obvious as he struggled that his feet were tied, also. Eyes squinted into slits, Doc looked up at the man,

"Where am I?"

The bright beam of the flashlight drew closer as the other man roughly checked the cords tying Doc's ankles and his wrists. He yanked on the ends, pulling the knots tighter still. His prisoner yelped, and he grabbed the American by the front of his uniform shirt, pulling the bloodied face close to his own.

<"I am telling you for the last time. Shut up.">

Nausea roiled in Doc's belly and he swallowed hard against the metallic taste in his mouth. Beyond the big man's snarling face, he could see the walls of wherever it was he lay. But he didn't see the shining tools of the bus depot, nor the gleaming blades of Abner's trade. What he saw was a hundred times worse, a thousand times. Doc's unsteady gaze traveled over the bones, long and short, and the skulls with their huge open eye sockets staring at him.

His captor glanced behind him, following Doc's line of sight, and grinned, swinging the powerful flashlight around so that it illuminated a whole section of the wall.

The movement of the light animated the bones, and they danced, closing in on Doc, singing to him in oddly high pitched voices. He opened his mouth to scream and then passed out again, his eyes rolling up in his head.

The German looked back as Doc grew heavy in his grasp and dropped him back onto the stone floor, back into the pool of Doc's own blood. He stood up, idly turning the light here and there, catching a glimpse of a few rats and a variety of insects. From the ceiling hung a multitude of bats, their tiny eyes glittering in the unaccustomed light. He returned to his position at the mouth of the small room, where he could see down both approaches, long corridors also lined with bones. His lips twitched into an ugly semblance of a smile as he remembered the American's reaction to the bones. Years ago, he'd felt the

same, as a small boy answering a friend's dare. Now, they meant nothing, just piles of skeletons, most of them hundreds of years old. A few though, he'd put there himself, adding to the display.

He checked his weapon and settled on the floor behind an outcropping. And turned off the flashlight, returning the room to absolute darkness.



"Stop here."

The tall man shoved past the Americans, fiddling with something that eventually hissed to life and lightened the world beyond Saunders' blindfolded eyes. Someone behind him yanked the cloth from his eyes, and he stood there blinking, in what looked like a cave. Next to him, shaking his head and blinking too, stood Rory, stooped under the low ceiling. Hands on their shoulders rudely pushed them down until they sat on the cold damp floor, their arms trussed tightly behind them.

Their captors busied themselves lighting other oil lamps, hanging them on hooks in the walls. Saunders blinked and looked more closely at his surroundings, his eyes opening wide in stark amazement. The "hooks" weren't metal hardware at all, but the ends of human bones. In places they seemed to make a macabre pattern, as if someone had given more than cursory thought to the placement of each corpse.

"Where are we?" He couldn't help himself. As much as Saunders wanted to give these men nothing, his shock at their capture, the separation from Doc, and now this gruesome exhibition dragged the words from him unbidden. Rory swallowed hard, mirroring Saunders' distress.

Their captor turned, a hunk of bread in one hand. He gestured at the walls with a gleaming knife held in the other. "You don't know your history of Paris, do you, Sergeant." He chewed thoughtfully, rolling the bolus of bread from one cheek to the other before swallowing it. "These are the dead of Paris, piled here in l'Ossuaire Municipal. Old bones, for the most part." He handed the bread and knife to one of the other men and then reached up near the ceiling, pulling forth a long femur. Turning it over and over in his hands, he studied it from one end to the other and then swung it suddenly at a support beam. The bone snapped in half, the loose end clattering away into the darkness. <"Alas, poor Yorrick..."> The tall man stared at Saunders a moment longer, and then went back to his men, sorting equipment and food.

An assortment of crates seemed to hold weapons and ammunition, grenades, rations...all of it German. Saunders shifted from side to side, trying to relieve the pressure on his legs from the uneven stones. One of the men glared at him, holding the sergeant's gaze until the American looked away. A table appeared as the last box was swung away and placed in the middle of the cleared area. The tall man unfolded a large piece of thin paper on it, gesturing to his men to move the lanterns closer. Saunders sat up straighter in an attempt to see.

"Ah, you'll have your chance soon enough, my friend." The man was silent a moment, gathering his thoughts. "You can call me Josef for now. The man with your medic is Joachim, my brother. You need to know that Joachim has a temper, he has always been...a little...cruel. If you cooperate with us, no harm will be done. If you don't..." Josef let his voice trail off.

Saunders felt his mouth grow dry, fear dancing along the back of his neck. He cleared his throat. "No harm? Hasn't harm already been done to him?" He moved to get his feet under him, jostling Rory, but another of the men shoved him hard again.

Josef smiled. "Oh, do not worry, Sergeant. Nothing lasting has been done. He should be fine." He glanced at his men, all of whom looked away. "As long as you cooperate."

As the men went back to their activities, Saunders was left alone with his thoughts. He managed to scoot backwards enough to lean on one of the support posts. A wall had been closer, but he couldn't bring himself to recline on the bones of long dead Parisians. He saw enough dead bodies on the fields of battle, but it just seemed disrespectful to treat these skeletons as building materials. He looked up, blue



eyes meeting Rory's. Rory raised an eyebrow, inclining his head slightly toward their captors. Saunders glanced at the leader's back, while he flexed his hands behind him. Dismayed at the tightness of the knots, he returned Rory's gaze, shaking his head imperceptibly. His friend looked away, clearly looking for something, anything that would help them escape.

So Doc was alive. Saunders sighed in relief. Just what the price would be, however, to keep him so, might be beyond what he could pay. In fact, Saunders had heard of the catacombs beneath the streets of Paris, but had not the slightest inclination to seek them out. He'd spent his three days of R&R either sitting around the various cafes, eating and drinking and chatting up the pretty barmaids, or sleeping on clean sheets under an undamaged roof.

Saunders grimaced as his hands grew increasingly numb. He wondered just where Doc had been taken, were his hands also tied, had he been beaten further. He knew the medic had dropped to the ground and been dragged away, indicating that he was either unconscious or so badly hurt he couldn't walk. He also knew he'd do almost anything to ensure Doc's continued wellbeing. Just what might constitute anything, however, remained to be seen.



The men of 1st Squad gathered around Lieutenant Hanley, all talking at the same time. Kirby shoved his way through the crowd.

"I'll go get 'em, sir. Won't take but a minute." He hitched his pants up and fisted his hands on his hips, meeting Hanley's skeptical gaze.

Littlejohn snorted. "Isn't that what the Sarge said? He'd be right back?"

The others broke out in a chorus of "yesses" and head nods. Hanley raised one hand, shushing them instantly. "We can't wait any longer." The men immediately disagreed, pushing closer.

Nelson's cheeks grew red. "We can't leave 'em behind, you can't do that, sir!"

Hanley turned his head slowly, facing the young private directly. "We can, and we will." He held up his hand again at the loud outburst from 1st squad.

Caje stepped away from the others, staring down the street. One by one the others joined him, eyes widening in wonderment.

The woman walked briskly along the street, clearly headed straight for them. Long dark hair escaped the scarf wrapped around it, flying behind her in a tangle of curls. Her dress was dusty, in need of mending in places and badly faded while the tattered leather shoes were worn smooth in places. Eyes as faded as the rest of her, her gaze passing over the men without lighting on any of them, until she came to the lieutenant. She slowed, hesitant, one hand rising to her throat and tugging her scarf tighter.

"Messiuer?" She walked right up to Hanley. "Messiuer, your sergeant needs your help."

Hanley blinked. "What?" The message was not at all what he was expecting. "Where is he?"

The woman pointed back the way she came. "He is at a church, just up there. Another man, he is sick."

Kirby pushed closer. "Doc?"

The woman stared at him in apparent confusion. "I do not know his name. Only that the sergeant asked me to find the tall man in charge." She reached out and gently touched the single bar on Hanley's collar. "That is you, yes?"

Hanley nodded. "Yes, yes, that's me. Can you show us where they are, ma'am, uh, mademoiselle?"

She reached out, gripping his elbow tightly. "Yes, please hurry, the man is very sick."

Hanley ordered one of the replacements to wait with the truck. The rest followed him and the Frenchwoman down the street.

Kirby glanced at Caje. "This ain't the way they went. That church is back thataway." He hiked his thumb over his shoulder. "I wonder why Rory didn't come back for help?"

Caje shrugged. "Maybe Rory's the one who's sick."

"Well then, why didn't Doc help him?"

Caje started to answer, then just shut his mouth, shaking his head.

"I don't know, Kirby, I just don't know."



Four children sat in a circle in the nave of the partially demolished church. Their faces wore troubled expressions, eyes wide above hectic circles of red on their cheeks. A boy of about nine paced behind them, one arm crossed over his chest. The pointed nose of a rat peered out from the end of his ragged sleeve, its whiskers quivering.

"So, what are we going to do?" A smallish girl looked up from the smooth fur of a puppy which lay curled in her lap. Her eyes were as blue as a summer sky, and just as innocent.

An older girl stared back at her. Her long black hair hung straight down her back in an untidy braid. Her dress, once a stylish shade of green and cut for an adult much taller than the girl, hung on her thin frame like a dingy curtain. "We can't do anything, Henriette, they'll kill us, too"

The pacing boy stopped, turned to face his friends. "They aren't going to kill them. They need them for something." The rat vanished, a bulge climbing the boy's arm to his shoulder betraying its position. "If we knew what..."

"Jean-Baptiste, you are foolish, always thinking there's a plot in everything." The older girl, Matilde, swung her braid over her shoulder and grabbed it by the end, picking at it with her fingers.

Another boy stood, a cloud of dust arising with him. The particles floated in the waning afternoon light slanting through the window. "I think he's right. Mssr Josef isn't nice at all."

The girls disagreed, their high piping voices rising over the sudden yipping of the puppy. Henriette's twin, Mariette, with equally blue eyes and curly blonde hair, stood also, ignoring the dog whining at her feet. "Quiet, all. The docteur, he was very nice. We need to help him. If Mssr Josef and Joachim..."

All the children shivered at the mention of Joachim. While they'd been happy to accept food and cigarettes for bartering from the tall, handsome Josef, the shorter, thicker brother made them all nervous. Jean-Baptiste brushed the hair of his eyes impatiently.

"I think we need to rescue them."

Mariette nodded her blonde head and walked over to stand by the boy. She looked back at her twin, eyes narrowed in speculation. "I bet Henriette won't help. She's too scared."

Henriette stared back at her sister, and pulled the puppy back into her arms. She gently stroked its silky ears and dropped her gaze to the floor. "Am not." Her husky little voice was barely above a whisper but they all heard her.

"Well, that's three of us then. How about you, Claude?" Mariette turned her attention to the second boy, daring him to deny his fear.

Claude swatted more dust from his clothing. "I'm in."

They all looked at Matilde, four thin, grimy children in mismatched clothing. She stared back, her trembling lower lip caught by her crooked front teeth. She wanted to go home, but she no longer had a home. German bombers had seen to that, as well as orphaning her. These kids were the only family she had and they'd grown to depend on each other, and they all looked up to her, the eldest at fourteen.

"Ah, I'm in, too. But we need to make a plan."

Jean-Baptiste nodded and knelt on the dusty floor. He rapidly began drawing a series of interconnecting lines, explaining each one to his companions as they crowded around him.



Saunders watched the men with increasing anxiety. They all appeared to be French, their words carrying the smooth cadence that the noncom associated with his Cajun scout. The map was referred to more than once, and an argument had broken out. For the most part, the two Americans were ignored, but once or twice, Saunders caught Josef staring at Rory, dark eyes cold and appraising.

The most curious equipment was a pile of tubing about three feet long and two inches or so in diameter. They appeared to be made of thick, pressed paper, with caps made of metal. Josef studied them, holding one against the outside of his leg and then down his back. He spoke a few words to another of the men who reached into a knapsack and pulled out an American uniform. Another box contained boots, enough for all of Josef's men.

Turning a pair of pants inside out, Josef studied a series of cloth rings sewn inside. He carefully slid one of the tubes inside the rings which held it securely. <"Excellent job. We might have to walk a little more slowly than usual to accommodate them, but I think it will work.">

The other man opened a jacket to display similar rings sewn inside. <"The smaller ones will fit inside the back of the jacket. Nobody looks at someone's back, they watch the front.">

Saunders' eyebrows drew together in concentration. Obviously something was going to be placed inside the tubes and then spirited away under the stolen American uniforms. But what and from where? He looked up as Josef approached.

"I'd imagine you are wondering what part you will be playing in all this."> Josef lit a cigarette and crouched down in front of Rory, leaning against a collage of skulls. The smoke hung in the stagnant air before slowly spiraling sideways and vanishing in the stray air currents near the ceiling.

Saunders stared at his friend a moment, keeping the Frenchman in his peripheral vision. One piece of the puzzle dropped into place: it wasn't Saunders and the medic who had drawn the attention of these men. It was Rory.

Josef gestured to his men, waving them on with their work. Turning back to his captives, he dropped one knee to the floor and made himself more comfortable.

"Let me tell you a story, maybe one you know. But I am sure that you have never heard the ending..."



Littlejohn and Nelson stood at the church yard gate, noting the small statuary placed at the base of each window overlooking an unkempt graveyard. The younger man kept nudging his taller buddy, pointing out all the unusual aspects of the place.

"Isn't that the devil? I mean, it's got horns and everything! Even a pitch fork." Nelson turned his head sideways for a better look.

Great shoulders lifting and falling in a huge sigh, Littlejohn took a look, if only to appease his friend. "Billy, I think that's just his hair, he's an angel, and that's not a pitch fork, those are candles on an altar."

"Candles? You think?" Nelson walked around the corner of the church for another angle.

At the top of the steps, Cajé spoke with the monsignor in urgent French, translating for Lieutenant Hanley who kept looking at his watch. The little clergyman wore small round glasses perched on the end of his nose that kept sliding down with every wild swing of his plump arms. He shook his head violently at Cajé's repeated questioning, face growing redder and redder.

Cajé turned to Hanley. "He says he hasn't seen any American soldiers at all today. He says the church was locked earlier by accident and that it wasn't open until thirty minutes ago and he's been here the whole time."

Hanley turned slowly in place, gaze traveling over each corner of the tiny court yard. Behind him, the curate bustled back into his church, all but slamming the door as he went. The lieutenant glanced at Cajé, pointing his chin after the little man, and asked, "Do you believe him?"

Cajé looked around, too, head slowly bobbing up and down. Finally, he met the lieutenant's eyes. "I do, sir. They haven't been here."

"Dammit! Where are they?" Hanley stepped into the street, his hands fisted on each hip. The doorways were empty, no sign of anyone about.

Kirby appeared from the back of the church, his arms held in an awkward position that took Hanley a few moments to realize had to do with the missing BAR. He shook his head and joined Littlejohn and Nelson at the gate.



"No sign of 'em, Lieutenant." He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit up, sucking the smoke into his lungs in apparent frustration.

Caje removed his beret and scratched his head, ruffling his dark hair. After a moment, he looked up. "Think that woman could be lying to us, sir?"

Hanley nodded, his lips a thin line. "I think we have to consider that."

Nelson licked his lips. "Maybe she told us the exact opposite of the way she took the Sarge, maybe that's why she took off as soon as we got here."

The squad gathered around, shaking their heads in agreement. Hanley checked his watch again, knowing they were out of time. The problem was, he couldn't leave Saunders and Doc. Not if they'd been kept behind against their will.

Kirby pulled the cigarette from between his lips. Smoke punctuated his words. "I still think we should go to that first church, the one Doc was going to every day. That's the direction Sarge and Sergeant O'Brian went in the first place. Didn't make any sense for them to be here in the first place." He looked from Hanley's level stare to Caje's exasperated expression. "Well it don't."

Hanley shook his head and waved a hand in Kirby's direction. "You and Jacobson, go straight there." He looked around at the waiting faces of the rest of the men. "Spread out. We'll work our way to the other church. Move OUT!"



Jean-Baptiste skirted along the low perimeter wall, doubled almost in half to keep his head below the top course of slate. The rat rode inside his shirt, against his belly, where the creature's soft fur was comforting and familiar to the boy. When the Americans were taken, the kids had run, vanishing through gaps in the walls and between the buildings before Josef and his buddies knew they'd gone. They'd seen men taken before, men who were never seen again.

This time, though, the children felt more than a little interest. The docteur...he'd given them chocolate, but more than that, he'd treated their pets, bound their wounds and soothed the fears of animals and humans alike. The other Americans, one with unruly blond hair and the other red, had friendly smiles. Jean-Baptiste felt no secrets between the two, or from them. They were what they seemed: three weary soldiers in Paris. *And nothing else.* He'd seen the red-headed man before, wandering the cafes, had even cadged chocolate from him.

Josef...Josef scared him. He always smiled at the children, giving them food and clothing and blankets, but there was always a price. Jean-Baptiste had stolen maps and papers from Allied soldiers, trading them to Josef for enough to keep the kids alive. The twins had played in the streets many times, providing a distraction so that Josef and his men could move freely about the city.

But now...there was something about the docteur. Henriette didn't trust anyone. And yet, she'd handed her puppy over to the man without hesitation. And sat next to him while he wrapped the dog's paw. Jean-Baptiste shook his head. He'd never seen her take to a person like she did the docteur. They had to find him, and the other two.

Claude appeared ahead, waiting by the mausoleum. He'd worked his way around the opposite wall, finding nobody watching, no guards on duty. He signaled to Jean-Baptiste, and dropped low, moving along the wall like a ghost. Set into the elaborate frieze was a door to the catacombs. The boys assumed that the Americans must have been taken there. Having spent the last couple of years on their own, all the kids were very familiar with the underground tunnels. Skeletons didn't scare them. They knew very well the dead could do them no harm. It was the living who frightened the daylight out of them.

Opening a small door, Claude glanced quickly in, keeping his head low and not exposing much of himself should there be anyone inside keeping watch. He waved to Jean-Baptiste, who scampered over. They both entered l'Ossuaire and pulled the door closed behind them.



Doc slowly rose to consciousness, his head filled with fragments of dreams and memories and other images he could make no sense of whatsoever. The last thing he remembered was walking to work

after school. The road was dusty while the hot sun rose high overhead, warming the asphalt under his bare feet. No, that wasn't right, he wore boots, tightly buckled around his ankles. His friend Jack walked right behind him, complaining about his feet hurting. Doc smiled, knowing the day wasn't complete without Jack's whining. But that wasn't right either: Jack had died of meningitis the winter before.

Opening his eyes, Doc was confronted again with absolute darkness, a black so thick he imagined that he'd have to physically push his way through it. His head throbbed in time with his heart, pulsing a staccato rhythm. He tried to raise a hand to explore the wound, but found his hands bound behind him. Still bound, he remembered for about the fifth time. Doc had no idea how much time had passed, but he knew he'd fallen into oblivion and clawed his way back up more than a few times. Each episode shared the same beginning: he was back home in Arkansas, sometimes in school, but more often at his uncle's butcher shop. More troubling was that he hadn't a clue how he came to be lying in a shallow layer of bone-chilling water on a stone floor. Even his name seemed far distant to him, as though the word that defined him growing up no longer applied, that he'd become something, SOMEONE, else entirely.

Doc rolled over, and pain split through his head and crawled down his neck. He bit his lip to avoid groaning aloud, knowing without quite remembering that to do so would cause trouble. Stealthy footsteps padded toward him, pausing here and there along the journey. A faint light illuminated the wall in front of Doc, casting broad shadows that moved among the skulls and leg bones, animating them again. He forced himself to look at them. With repeated viewings, he'd admitted to himself that they looked nothing like the beef carcasses hanging on hooks in Uncle Abner's killing room. So just where was he? Was this some schoolmate's idea of a joke? No doubt a whipping was waiting for him at home, as well as a hug from his littlest sister who would have been "worried sick!"

The light floated up to the ceiling, revealing the big man carrying it. His broad face accentuated high cheekbones and clear blue eyes. A bristle of beard covered the lower half of his face, as though he'd fallen out of the habit of shaving rather than intentionally cultivating the growth. He met his prisoner's gaze with a snort, and then lowered the lantern to the floor where it spat sparks in all directions.

<"You're a lucky man, American. You get to live a few hours more."> The man hunkered down, kicking with distaste at a large spider. <"Why delay the inevitable? But Josef has other plans. We shall both know them soon enough."> He rose, taking the lantern with him, and retreated down a corridor just out of Doc's sight. There the light hissed and crackled a moment longer before extinguishing again, bringing with it a heavy blanket of darkness.

Doc sighed, no closer to figuring out what had happened to him and where he was than before. He felt something touch his knee and kicked out with both bound feet. Something scuttled away and he lay there, shivering and nauseous. Eventually, the pain rolled around again and spirited him away, leaving the bones and the man and his lantern behind.



Kirby stared up at the rugged spire of an ancient church. The building was badly damaged by German bombing earlier on in the war. It would be years before it could be restored to its original splendor, considering the huge holes in the structure, the piles of rubble, and the courtyard...oh, the courtyard was a mess. Originally it must have been magnificent, with large trees and full-size statues of saints and animals.

Stepping through the creaking gate, Kirby thought it was no wonder Doc came here, a peaceful place to pray and be alone inside one's own head. And Doc always did love animals...

"Hey!" Kirby jumped back at the quick flash of movement he caught in his peripheral vision. He reached for the BAR, which wasn't there. Slipping behind a tall monument, he looked again, but saw nothing. He dropped to his knees and waited, counting to ten. And then looked.

A small puppy limped across the yard, a bandage wrapped around one of its short front legs. Kirby grinned despite his initial fear and moved away from the cover of the stone. "Here boy, hey pup pup, here boy." He called over his shoulder. "Jacobson! Come here!"

The pup looked over at him, head cocked to one side and ears dangling. He took one faltering step and then sat down on his furry butt, tail twitching faintly.

Kirby crept closer, taking his time. Now he could see that the bandage wasn't just any piece of cloth, it was GI issue. Just like the dozens Doc carried in his ruck. The pack that Doc had draped over his shoulder this morning even though he was supposed to have left it at the transit depot.

"Here boy, come on baby, come on." The private crouched down, making his voice high and squeaky. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the first thing he put his fingers on, a half of a biscuit left over from breakfast. Tearing off a piece, he held it out to the dog, crooning softly.

Jacobson sat down on the wall, watching Kirby closely. He had no food in his pockets and, if the truth be told, no great love of animals. He had yet to notice the bandage on the wounded paw.

The puppy whined, his nose twitching and tail still flagged in not-quite-a-wag. He took one step toward Kirby and plopped to the ground again.

Behind Kirby, Jacobson let out a loud sigh. Kirby glanced over at the replacement, eyes dark with annoyance. Turning back to the dog, he rolled up a piece of the bread into a small ball and tossed it gently across the graveyard. Rolling up another piece, he tossed that one, too. Holding his position, he hummed under his breath, not realizing it was a cradle song, one he'd sung often to his little brother.

Finally hunger overrode the dog's reluctance and he gulped down the first two pieces of biscuit. Ears and tail up, he limped over to Kirby for the rest of the meal.

"Aww, poor little guy." Kirby lifted the pup into his lap and ran his fingers over the silky coat, amazed at how soft it felt even to his battle-calloused hands. He looked carefully at the bandage, confirming that it had to have come from an American medic's kit and, judging by how clean it was, fairly recently. He looked up at his new squad mate.

"Hey, Doc must have put this dressing on the little guy. Look around here and see what you can find, eh?" The BAR man chuckled as the dog scarfed up the biscuit.

Jacobson circled the perimeter of the graveyard, his gaze traveling over the pock-marked ground and the broken headstones and monuments. He tracked back and forth, keeping an eye on both the ground and the surrounding buildings, damaged though they may be.

Meanwhile, Kirby set the puppy down and clambered to his feet. The little dog capered around him, whimpering whenever it set down its injured leg. Kirby started his own search, mirroring Jacobson. The graveyard and church had obviously sustained heavy shelling during the early part of the war. The crumbled edges of masonry were worn smooth by wind and rain. The pup wandered off, its nose to the ground. Kirby had about given up on his search when the animal came back, holding something in its mouth. He reached for it, cursing when the dog pranced backward, trying to entice him into a game. Scooping up the pup, he pulled the drool-covered object out and studied it. "Jacobson?"

The replacement hurried over, glancing at his watch as he did so. "Kirby, we need to get back. It's been more than ten minutes already." He slowed, throwing his hands up to catch the object Kirby flung at him. He uncurled his fingers and stared at the cheap Timex, its crystal so scratched the hours four, five and six were obscured. Half the sweat-stained band was missing, tiny tooth marks and slobber covering the remaining leather. Turning it over, Jacobson read the initials scratched onto the back. He looked up at Kirby, meeting the soldier's dark gaze. "It's Doc's, alright."



Josef hauled O'Brian to his feet unceremoniously, almost over balancing them both as the American tried to stand on his numb feet. "I need you to take a look at this map, sergeant." He led Rory to the table and positioned the map in front of him. "See this building here?" He pointed with one grimy finger, the dirt ground into the creases of his knuckles and his bony wrists.

Rory stared straight ahead, ignoring the tall man. He swayed on his feet, as sensation returned on a wave of pain. He swallowed hard and cleared his throat.

"O'Brian, Sergeant, serial number..."

Josef cuffed him none-too-gently across the jaw. "Enough of that. I'm not in the Army, I don't abide by any conventions. Now, you either help us or your friend dies, the other one, too, it's as simple as that."

Rory flinched and chanced a glimpse of the rest of the men. They were all busily cleaning weapons and putting on their American uniforms. They were also keeping an apparent eye on him, and Saunders, too. He sighed. "What do you want me to do?" He hoped it would be something he could

justify, something that wouldn't require him sacrificing Chip and the medic. Rory was a soldier first, but still... He blinked and turned his attention to the map.

Josef tapped again on the table. "Right here, these buildings. They were badly damaged by German bombing during the first days of occupation. Condemned now." He leaned on one elbow and looked up into Rory's impassive face. "You see?"

"I see." Safe enough.

"This building over here, between the Lycee des Enfants and the Musee d'art . See?"

The sergeant flushed, seeing more than he suspected Josef knew, but not the connection. "I see the building, yes."

"D'accord. Now, I understand you are planning on blowing it up." Josef smoothed his hands over the front of his American jacket, straightening the placket and buttoning the bottom few buttons.

Rory's pulse jumped. He struggled to control his surprise, forcing himself to relax the muscles that spasmed against the bonds. He fought the desire to look at Saunders, knowing that to do so would give him away. Shaking his head, Rory lifted his gaze from the map and stared straight into Josef's eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about." His voice shook, and he clenched his teeth, biting the inside of one cheek.

Josef laughed softly, hands spread on the table. He glanced at one of his men, lifting a lazy eyebrow toward Saunders.

The man took two steps and then drove a booted foot deeply into Saunders' ribs, toppling him to the cold stone floor. Turning, the man stepped away, his face impassive.

Saunders curled into himself, struggling to breathe. He fought the bonds holding his arms behind his back, desperate for a few inches of slack as his tortured ribs refused to draw in oxygen. Face growing redder by the second, he finally coughed and began breathing again, the air whistling in and out.

Rory stared at his friend, eyes wide with tension. He started forward, stopped only by Josef's hand on his chest. He turned to the Frenchman, the muscles in his jaw jumping visibly. "Why? What do you need with that building?" Behind him, Saunders groaned, rolling on the stone floor.

"That's not your concern, Sergeant. What I need from you is safe passage into it." Josef folded the map and stuck it inside his jacket. "I know you and your men have begun to wire the building for demolition." He stared down at Saunders, shoving one booted toe under the man and turning him onto his back. "You will take us in, safely through the explosives. I need something that I left there, almost a year ago." His voice trailed off, oddly contemplative. He withdrew his foot and leaned back against the table.

Rory snorted. "That building was bombed by the Germans. Anything there is long gone."

Josef's eyes darkened a shade as he lifted his chin, gaze coming to rest directly on Rory's pale face. "That remains to be seen, Sergeant." He turned away, signaling to his men. "You'd best pray you're wrong."



Helene hurried down the side street, watching behind her for any signs of pursuit. She knew that the Americans wouldn't be fooled for long and would be looking for their missing soldiers and also for her. On each side of her, the buildings rose up three and four stories. This was a residential area, once a nice place to live with shopping only a few blocks away, and now more like a tenement. These roofs were intact as the bombing had somehow missed them, while destroying entire neighborhoods only a half mile away. Families had all moved in together here, with ten to twelve people sharing the space of six. But they rejoiced, now that Paris had been liberated, and the Americans had come to town.

She paused in a doorway, looking up and down the street for watching eyes, and then lightly ran down a short staircase to a small door that looked no different from any other basement or storeroom entrance. Pulling a key from her pocket, she unlocked and opened the door and slipped through, pulling it firmly shut behind her.



Caje ran his fingers down the cold stone of a mausoleum, making sure that an uneven crack running from top to bottom was the result of shrapnel and not a hidden door. Behind him, Littlejohn and

Nelson searched the parched earth for any other evidence of Doc or Saunders' presence. Wilson wandered out of the badly damaged church, holding something limp in his hands.

Hanley looked up. "What do you have there, Wilson?"

The replacement held out a rag doll, the threads outlining its face unraveling and most of its stuffing completely missing. "Looks like some kids been in there. A few old toys, a row of brass casings on the window sill..." He pointed at the puppy sniffing around Hanley's boots. "An old blanket on the floor and a bowl with scraps of bread in it."

Kirby cuffed at his nose with the back of his wrist. "Wonder where them kids are now?"

The lieutenant palmed the watch he'd been carrying around since Jacobson had handed it to him twenty minutes ago, slipping it into his pocket. "I wonder if those kids know where Saunders and Doc are." He glanced down at the dog, now chewing on the toe of his boot. "They knew where Doc was at some point, that's for certain."

Caje joined Hanley and Kirby, dusting his hands off on the rear of his pants. "We gonna get some help?"

Hanley sighed, knowing the answer to the question wasn't what the scout wanted to hear. Wasn't what any of them wanted to hear. "We're all going back to the truck. I'll report them missing and let the MPs know what we know." He held up both hands as all the men pressed in on him, their words tumbling over each other. "And then we'll report back to duty."

"But Lieutenant..." Nelson's voice trailed off as Hanley's gaze settled on him, weighing him down effortlessly.

"We will report back for duty...as ordered."



Mariette held tightly to her twin's hand, her knees shoved against the back of a headless gargoyle. Henriette stretched flat along the edge of the church's battered roof, eyes following every movement of her puppy, sixty feet below her in the courtyard. They'd been there, along with Matilde, who'd found sanctuary inside the remains of a chimney, ever since the pup had slipped away and been discovered by the wiry American soldier. Their biggest worry at the moment, other than discovery, was that the boys would emerge from the catacombs and give them all away.

The men gathered below them, all standing around a tall soldier. Mariette strained to listen as the Americans all broke out in loud words, despite the raised hands of the tall man. He seemed to be in charge and after talking to the others, they all left, leaving the puppy whimpering amongst the graves.

The twins remained where they were for further ten minutes, neither moving nor talking. In her chimney, Matilde sat silent as a corpse. Finally, Mariette scooted out on to the roof, dropping her sister's hand to pat the girl gently on the back and then teetered her way over to the chimney.

"They've gone. We need to get Pruet before he follows them or gets lost."

Matilde unfolded herself from her hiding place. "Do you think they'll come back?"

Mariette nodded, her blonde curls bouncing on her shoulders. "They will. They found something. Pruet found it, gave it to the soldier."

"He didn't mean to find it." Henriette found her voice and stood up for her beloved dog. "He thought it was something to eat." She watched where she placed her feet, scrambling to the hole in the roof where the three climbed down to the ancient choir loft.

"It doesn't matter, Henri." Mariette leaned against the inner wall as she descended the staircase, well aware of the missing steps and those that were held up by faith. "They'll be back to find the docteur and the other one."

Matilde brought up the rear. "Jean-Baptiste and Claude will find them before then." Her voice wasn't as confident as her words. Not paying attention, she placed a foot on an unsupported stair and cried out as it bowed out from under her. Throwing herself backward, she narrowly averted following the plank all the way to the alter floor.

The twins watched with empty eyes. They'd already lost friends to accidents in the bombed out city. Matilde, though, she was like a mother to them despite the less than three year difference in their ages. They trusted her. She fussed over them. Still, if she fell they weren't following her.

Once on the ground floor, Henriette ran ahead, calling to Pruet, who came as quickly as he could on three legs. He held the injured leg out to the side, whimpering when it touched the ground. The girl scooped him up in her arms, crooning softly to him.

Mariette slid into the one remaining intact pew and looked up at Matilde. "So now we wait for the boys?"

Matilde nodded. "Yes, we wait."



The warm afternoon sun did nothing to displace the chill Saunders felt as he walked down a winding cobble-stoned Parisian lane, surrounded by several of Josef's men, all of them attired in American uniforms. Rory and Josef strode ahead by a few yards, appearing to be in deep conversation, although Saunders could tell by the tense set of Rory's shoulders that he was merely replying to Josef's unceasing questions. Just yesterday, he'd wandered this very street with his old friend, talking about life after the war. Or rather, listening to Rory's grandiose plans to marry his girlfriend back home and open his own restaurant serving haggis and shepherd's pie. Saunders preferred not to consider a future beyond the next day, afraid of losing the focus that kept him and his men alive.

Rory glanced over his shoulder, catching Saunders' gaze and surprising him with a wink. "Doing okay back there, Chip, ole son?"

Just ahead, a crowd of loud soldiers crowded into a sidewalk café, sitting shoulder to shoulder around tiny tables and spilling into the street, hands filled with glasses of wine and chunks of bread and cheese. Voices rose and fell and the bright ring of laughter punctuated every other sentence. Saunders glanced at them, then back at Rory, who turned forward again as Josef edged closer.

"Don't even think about it. My men will kill your friend and keep on walking. Nobody will notice until it's too late." Josef turned his arm toward Rory, displaying the knife palmed up his sleeve, and gripped the sergeant's elbow with his other hand. "And don't forget the medic, waiting so patiently with my brother Joachim." The Frenchman grinned, smiling widely as if he was telling Rory a joke. "They'll NEVER find him!"

Rory yanked his arm from the Frenchman's grasp. "I'll take you to the building." He nodded to a waitress in the café as they passed. "But you WILL release the medic unharmed, and the sergeant, too."

Josef smiled broadly again, turning his face to the sun. "But of course, you have my word."

Saunders shook his head, aware of the men on either side closing in slightly. He wasn't sure what was going on, but of one thing he was certain: Josef couldn't be trusted.



Claude tip-toed down the corridor, his fingertips brushing over the tips of femurs and the smooth tops of skulls. Behind him, Jean-Baptiste followed closely, bumping into his companion from time to time. He carried a small stub of candle and a few battered matches, but for now, the two boys relied on their intimate knowledge of the catacombs for navigation. Jean-Baptiste knew Josef had a hiding place down here beneath the streets of Paris, a place he'd never taken the boys and the location of which he guarded. For the most part, the children didn't care. They had their own secrets, of course. Now, though, Jean-Baptiste feared for the safety of the American soldiers.

Pausing at an intersection, Claude waited for Jean-Baptiste to catch up to him. "<"I'm going toward the library, maybe they have taken them there."> The kids had named all the major areas of the catacombs, making it easier for them to refer to them in conversation. The library was a large room with orderly patterns of bones on the walls, resembling books. It was fairly central to all the long pathways of the labyrinth, and it made sense for them to start there. Jean-Baptiste patted Claude gently on the back, and the two set off again into the darkness.

Water ran freely down the center of the floor. During the spring, when the rains came, it was dangerous to come down into the tunnels. One never knew when a sprinkle could turn into a storm and flood the place. The boys ignored it now, knowing the sun shone outside and that this runoff was standard practice. They made sure to keep to the sides, though, so as not to splash and give themselves away.

As they entered the Library, the darkness seemed to grow even blacker, weighing heavily on their thin shoulders. Jean-Baptiste reached out and grabbed the back of Claude's shirt, not wanting to get separated. Together, they inched to the center of the area and stood still a moment, listening. After several minutes, Jean-Baptiste turned his head to the left, straining hard to differentiate between the normal sounds of the catacombs, the splashing of water, the scrabbling of claws on the stone floor, the whisper of bat wings, and those sounds that were man made. He tapped Claude and leaned in closely. <"That way, I can hear something clinking.">

The other boy nodded and they set off again, moving even more slowly in the oppressive darkness.



The night sky remained starless, a smooth, featureless black. Doc couldn't recall the last time the clouds had so occluded the cosmos. He remembered watching a comet blaze over the high school athletic field, as he put in extra miles during track season, his feet, clad in hand-me-down sneakers, kicking up the dust as he chased the celestial phenomenon. The constellations were old friends, a constant he could count on during a childhood full of loss. First, his long-awaited baby brother, a crib death, leaving him the only son in a house full of sisters. And then his father, collapsing at work one afternoon and dead before he could be taken to the hospital. The man of the family from the age of ten, responsibility shaped Doc into the man he would one day become. After school jobs at Uncle Abner's butcher and delivering the paper in the early hours before school gave him the opportunity to help support the family, something his mother appreciated and treasured beyond measure. Despite the losses, Doc always knew what he had and never complained.

This sky, though, he didn't recognize. It was quiet, too, no breeze ruffling his hair, or cars driving by, or tinny radios playing in the kitchen, his sisters arguing over which singer they'd be marrying when they grew up. He blinked, surprised by the tiny click his own eyelids made. Doc tried to sit up, wondering if he was lying under a blanket, but soon realized that he was bound hand and foot. Rolling to one side, he managed to get his knees under him and, through a huge effort, pulled himself upright. And immediately wished he hadn't. A wave of nausea crashed over him, his head swelling until surely it would explode. He bit down hard on his lip, feeling the tender skin split beneath his teeth and the coppery taste of blood in his mouth. The pain served to overcome the roiling in his belly and he was able to focus better on his surroundings. He now remembered the huge man with the lantern and the two by four, the man responsible for his headache in the first place. Doc didn't want that man coming to investigate, not by any means.

Leaning backward, sitting on his feet, he pressed numb fingers over the heavy twine binding his ankles, searching for the knot. As quietly as he could, his ears straining for any sound signaling the man's return, Doc worked on the knots, while staring into the black void.



Helene felt her way across the dim crawlspace, almost bent double in places. On the far wall, a stack of empty boxes shared space with dozens of bottles of wine lying on their sides. Most of the corks were gone, and the glass broken, the victims of German bombing. An overly sweet odor arose from the dirt floor, where the wine had spilled over the years. Helene breathed through her mouth, ignoring the intoxicating smells. Sliding a large crate to one side, she pushed against the stone wall beyond, creating an opening just large enough to admit her. She passed through and then turned, pulling the crate back into place, before replacing the stone, too.

A spirit lamp hung on the wall, looped over a convenient bone. She lit it and adjusted the wick, looking about her. She stood at the end of a corridor in a small circular room. Whoever had laid the bones here had taken their time, making patterns from the different sized and shaped bones. An array of children's skulls formed a mosaic, across from an eerie portrait created by an assortment of bones. Helene took only enough time to ensure that there were no new footprints in the dust on the stone floor.

The lamp cast a weak glow ahead of her as she hurried along. She'd spent so much time below the streets that it no longer horrified her. In the beginning, she couldn't stop thinking of the bones as

people, living, breathing people walking about and spending their days as everyone else did. She saw movement everywhere, shadows stretching to pull her into the darkness and melt her flesh. She had nightmares of becoming a part of the macabre designs, a finger bone here, a hip bone there. Eventually though, she'd become immune to it, much as she'd grown immune to the things she did to keep her freedom.

The German invasion had taken all of Paris by surprise. For Helene and her brothers, however, it was a huge opportunity. Food and drink were to be found if one just knew the right people. Helene, with her long dark hair and beautiful eyes, discovered that many a German officer, away from home for so long, was willing to take her to bed and reward her afterward. As her popularity rose, she was able to introduce her brothers and "jobs" were found for them, too, although not anything anyone would consider respectable in a non-wartime world. Helene didn't care. Her family was taken care of. Her family would survive.

She continued on through the tunnels, heading for Joachim's lair.



Kirby followed closely on Littlejohn and Nelson's heels, muttering to them. "We CAN'T leave them, I'll, I'll go AWOL first." He stared at the back of Hanley's head, then grabbed their jackets. "Come with me."

Littlejohn shook off the soldier as effortlessly as a dog shaking water out of his coat. "Leave me alone, Kirby. You know we can't. For one thing, the Lieutenant is right there."

"And can hear you," Hanley said, glancing over his shoulder directly at his rascalion of a private. He looked at all of 1st squad, gifting each with a stern glare.

Kirby ducked his head down, shoulders rounded and hands shoved into his pockets. "Nuts", he muttered, ignoring the 'told you so' looks both Nelson and Littlejohn were shooting his way. He felt Caje's dark presence before he saw him.

"We'll find a way, just wait." The scout's voice was pitched too low for even Hanley's acute hearing. As Kirby looked back at him, Caje hitched an eyebrow, then looked away. "Just wait."

Nelson lengthened his stride, almost running as he finally pulled abreast of Lieutenant Hanley. "Sir?" He tripped over a cobblestone and windmilled his arms to regain his balance. "Sir?"

Hanley kept walking. "Nelson?" He almost wished the young man had fallen. It would have given him something else to do other than answer Billy's inevitable question. And he had heard Caje's words to Kirby. He just didn't quite know how they were going to get away with it. Hadn't he just spent the last half hour pondering that very problem?

Nelson swallowed hard, looking down at his feet. "Sir, we aren't going to just leave Doc and the Sarge, are we?" He looked over at Hanley, cheeks glowing hotly, eyes wide and earnest. Behind him Littlejohn lurked, trying very obviously not to look at Hanley.

Dammit! Hanley stopped short, not even reacting when Kirby ran right into him from behind. He stared straight ahead for a moment, then turned to the puzzled men. "No, we aren't." He fell silent as the squad erupted in excited shouts. "But we're doing this by the book. We have to inform Jampel where we are."

Kirby blew out his cheeks explosively. "That old fart. He won't let us go." He looked up to find everyone staring at him. "He won't!"

"Listen, there's protocols for everything. Unless you want to spend the next few days in the stockade, or get courts martialled, AGAIN..." Hanley glared at Kirby who ducked away sheepishly. "...you'll do it my way." The tall lieutenant abruptly began walking again, leaving the squad standing there flat-footed. "Coming?"



They all looked at each other in amazement. A chorus of "Yes, sir"s floated up to the windows of the buildings lining the street.



Matilde shoved the twins behind her as she ducked behind a pile of rubble at the side of the street. Ahead of them, the group of soldiers they'd seen at the church had stopped, too, apparently having some sort of discussion in the middle of the road. Henriette pulled Matilde's hand from her mouth and took a deep breath. Mariette pinched her sister, frowning fiercely. She mouthed at her, <"Keep quiet!">

Henriette rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to the soldiers. They'd been following them ever since they'd left the churchyard. Matilde had the thought they might be able to help them find the other two American soldiers, the docteur and his friend. Mariette was concerned that they might be getting the two into deeper trouble, but the other girls overruled her. Whatever trouble they might suffer from their own couldn't be half as bad as that dished up by Josef and Joachim.

The men moved off again, hurrying away down the lane. Matilde waited a moment, then signaled to the others. They all jumped to their feet and followed, moving from doorway to doorway, finding cover wherever they could, just in case the soldiers looked back.

Henriette caught up with the bigger girl. "What are we going to do?"

Matilde shrugged, not slowing down a bit. On her other side, Mariette panted as she trotted along. "We will have to see where they go. If they get into trucks, well, that's that. But if they get more soldiers, we should ask them for help."

Mariette thought more soldiers would bring more trouble. She'd wanted to wait for Claude and Jean-Baptiste to return from the catacombs and see what they had to say. They all knew Josef had secrets he hid in the tunnels, people who met him there and that his knowledge of the ins and outs of the place was far more extensive than their own. But still, the boys should be able to ferret him out and find the docteur. And the other soldier. For some reason, she could only picture the docteur in her mind, his gentle hands wrapping up Henriette's puppy's wound and cradling Jean-Baptiste's ugly rat. She couldn't remember her own father, but wondered if he had been like the kind American.

"Pst!"

Mariette whipped around, not realizing she'd kept walking while the other two girls ducked behind a stone lion outside the old library. She froze out in the middle of the street, blue eyes appealing desperately to Matilde who glared at her with undisguised disappointment. Behind the older girl, Henriette stared, her face filled with fear.

The soldiers ahead were gathered around a truck, pulling duffle bags and weapons from the back and buckling on belts filled with ammo pouches and hooks and rings that jingled like the coins the twins' father used to carry in his pockets. Mariette thought for only a moment and then walked briskly down to them, her brightest smile firmly in place across her face.



"Bonjour!" A small girl walked straight up to 1st squad, pausing long enough to take them all in and then parking herself in front of Kirby. "Chocolat?"

Kirby finished buckling his suspenders before taking notice of the blonde-headed cherub smiling up at him. "Boy, these moochers are getting smaller all the time!" He patted his pockets. "Sorry, kid, ain't got any chocolate for ya."

The dark scout elbowed his squad mate aside. <"Don't mind him, here's some chocolat for you."> He knelt in the street to bring himself eye-level with the girl. <"Where's your mama, eh?"> Cajé broke off a corner of the candy and stuck it in his mouth, then handed the rest to the girl.

She grabbed it, and then stopped, her cheeks flushing madly. She looked back over her shoulder, up the street.

All the men followed her line of sight. Cajé prompted her again. <"Who's here with you, your mama?"> He smiled, dimples creasing his cheeks.

The girl shook her head, and took a huge bite of the chocolate, leaving smears across her face.

Caje laughed and pulled a hankie from his pack, brandishing it like a magician as he cleaned the kid's hands and face. "I think she's an orphan."

Littlejohn broke open a box of rations, removing the can of cheese. "I wonder if she'd like this?" He took off the lid and held it out to her, laughing as she wrinkled her nose in distaste.

Caje laughed, too. "What did you think? She's French, after all! That's American cheese."

They all laughed, and were still trying to find something the child would eat other than candy when Hanley reappeared. The men pulled themselves to attention while the girl hid behind Caje, her chubby arms wrapped around his thigh.

"We've got four hours. After that it will be turned over to the MPs." Hanley noticed the weapons and gear strewn about the cobblestones. "Oh, and Caje? You're gonna have to lose your date." He smiled at the girl who stared solemnly up at him.

Caje knelt again. <"Little one, we have work to do. You need to go home."> He caressed her hair, brushing it back from her troubled face. <"Go on.">

"Non, non!" Her high-pitched voice caught everyone's attention, even Hanley's. Shaking off Caje's hand, the girl walked right up to the lieutenant, and crossed her arms over her chest. <"Tell him I know where the doctor is."> She looked back at Caje and waved him forward. <"Tell him!">

Caje's dark eyes grew wide. "She says she knows where the doctor is."

Kirby's jaw hit the pavement. He grabbed the little girl, spinning her around to face him. "You know where Doc is?"

She backed away from the wild look in the soldier's eyes. Caje stepped between them, glaring at Kirby. <"Where is he?">

They all waited, holding their breath.

<"I can show you.">



The building rose steeply from the street, five stories of pock-marked sandstone surrounding glassless windows. The roof slanted alarmingly, and the remnants of shattered slates covered the street. On either side, similar structures slumped against it, two old soldiers supporting a wounded comrade. A row of sawhorses directed passers-by away from the site, patrolled by slack-faced MPs. A team of young soldiers swarmed over the structure, their pockets filled with spools of wire, and wire cutters sticking out of holsters. Across the narrow road sat a makeshift control room, its plywood walls reinforced with several layers of sandbags. A sturdy barricade stood between the doomed building and the men who would bring about its demise.

Rory and the Frenchman stood just inside the barricade, deep in conversation with one of Rory's men. The corporal ran his hand over his chin for the third time in as many minutes.

"Sarge, I just don't think it's a good idea to have men who aren't part of the crew inside while we're setting explosives. We never-

Rory cut him off, resting one long arm across the shorter man's narrow shoulders. "I know, I know, but this is a golden opportunity for them to see how it's done." He glanced at Josef, then forced his gaze back to the agitated GI. "You know there's a buncha buildings all over this God-forsaken country needin' demolishin'. Sergeant..." Rory paused at the sudden realization that he had no idea what name Josef was using and whether or not the Frenchman's stolen uniform had any ID whatsoever sewn on it. The young corporal frowned in confusion. "The sergeant and his men need to see the procedure for bringing down these old wrecks without a lot of collateral damage."

Twenty feet away, Saunders shifted from one foot to the other. On either side, Josef's men pressed closely, near enough to slide a shiv between his ribs. Squinting tired eyes against the early afternoon sun, he studied the building's façade, appreciating the old stonework. *There was nothing like*

this back home. Not for the first time, the American sergeant wondered just what they were trying to accomplish with this war. If these Frenchmen were in any way indicative of the general population's feelings in the matter, the Allie's efforts were in vain. He swallowed hard, remembering more than a few natives who'd appreciated them. *Bijou, Annette, Jacqueline... Claudine...*

He didn't hear Rory's voice at first, and the swarthy thug to his left sucker-punched him in the kidney, yanking him out of his reverie.

"Saunders? Abernathy? Hollingsworth?" O'Brian spoke to the entire group, assigning names to Josef's dour henchmen after ascertaining their jackets held no name tapes. He cocked an eyebrow at Saunders, daring him to acknowledge the use of two names from their lost squadron in North Africa, two young men who died far too young.

Josef glowered at the red-headed American, and inclined his head toward the building. He muttered to Rory, leaning in so only the American could hear. "After you, my friend, and don't forget who's in charge here." He grinned, exposing a row of yellowed, wolf-like teeth.

The men grouped together and followed the corporal into the building, past the curious demolitions workers and the vacant gazes from the bored guards.



Helene stood in a niche, her back pressed against a thousand tightly packed bones. Her heart hammered in her throat, and she fought to control her breathing. She'd been in the catacombs hundreds of times and never failed to be unnerved by the place. Usually, she was able to keep her fear at a manageable level: today she found herself jumping at shadows.

Those boys, they weren't shadows at all. Lucky for her, one of them had kicked something, probably a stone, which had ricocheted down the tunnel, bouncing off the walls. Helene had just enough time to blow out her lamp and duck into the slight depression in the bone patterns.

<"I smell something, Claude."> Jean-Baptiste slowed his pace, turning slowly in a full circle.

<"What?" > Claude stood still in the darkness, one hand in contact with the wall.

<"Smells like hot alcohol."> Jean-Baptiste sniffed loudly, holding the breath in his sinuses for a moment. <"Like a lamp.">

Claude shook his head. <"There's always someone down here, maybe it was Josef."> He tugged at his friend's sleeve.

<"No, not Josef. He has an oil lamp."> Jean-Baptiste resisted Claude's efforts to move him on, thinking hard.

<"Come on, we have to find them."> Claude yanked harder this time.

"D'accord."

The boys continued on past the niche, having never lit their candle and relying only on their knowledge of the catacombs and Claude's sensitive fingertips.

She waited until she could no longer hear their stealthy footsteps. How they managed to navigate without a light, she'd never know and would never try. With trembling fingers, she managed to relight her lamp and hurried in the opposite direction. They must be headed toward Josef's store room, where he kept his cache of weapons. Helene shivered, wondering what would happen when the boys ran into her brother's men, waiting in the darkness? She could only hope that they would be smart enough to hide.

Joachim would be waiting for her in the chamber they called the dungeon. He considered it his own property, taking his women there, and also those who crossed him. She hoped she wasn't too late. Joachim had the habit of being a little impulsive. Normally, Josef could control him, but Josef was off on his own little adventure now. They each had a part to play and each was crucial. If Joachim killed the medic too early, they may lose their bargaining chip with the sergeants.

The war had hardened Helene's heart, rendering her incapable of the most simple of human emotions. Everything she'd loved had been taken from her, brutally. Hate was an emotion with which she was more familiar. The day she'd watched her parents beaten and then hung from the rafters in their own house was the day she buried all emotion. The German lieutenant who'd ordered the torture of her family became her lover and benefactor. He'd saved her brothers from certain death only at her request. She'd paid dearly for that, the scars on her back and across her soul always hidden.

Still, she wished no harm to the gentle medic who had been so kind to the children despite having left him with Joachim. The corridor ahead of her curved to both left and right. Helene paused a moment, so lost in her thoughts that she'd momentarily forgotten the way. With a shake of her head, she chose the left fork and plunged into the darkness, the spirit lamp only illuminating a few feet ahead of her.



Joachim lay flat on the damp stone floor of the cavern, facing the sounds he first detected a few moments before. The lamp sat behind him, safely out of the way. Even further behind him, the anteroom where the medic lay captive was silent. He eased the Walther PPK from the small of his back, thumbing off the safety, and pointed it at the sound, cradling it in both hands.

A faint light appeared around a corner, sparks flying off in all directions in the darkness. The figure behind it was slight, moving tentatively. Joachim remained motionless and held his breath. A shadow stretched back down the tunnel, growing longer and longer. The figure stopped, lifting the light higher.

"Joachim?" A woman's voice, high and frightened, echoed off the bones.

He said nothing, waiting for her to draw closer. He squinted, looking behind her for anyone following.

"Joachim?" This time with less conviction and more fear. She moved a little closer, very slowly.

Laying the gun down, Joachim rolled to his side, and out of the puddle of light spilling from the tiny lamp. He let her pass him and silently stood up, following her into the room.

"Joachim?"

"Yes?"

Helene screamed and dropped her lamp, flailing in the dark. Arms windmilling for balance, she tripped over a small lip of stone surrounding a pit, and fell into it. She landed heavily on her back, on something that gave beneath her and that moaned, squirming away. She screamed and screamed, scrabbling away from whatever it was she had landed on.

"Helene, you fool, shut up." Joachim lit the oil lamp and then dropped into the pit, hauling his sister up by the armpits. He held her tightly until the trembling subsided and her legs were able to support her. She stared at him, panting, her eyes wide with terror.

"You son of a..." She swung wildly at him, but he dodged her easily, catching her fist with a hand easily twice the size of her own. Yelping, she pulled away from him and stumbled again over whatever it was on the floor. It took her a few moments, but rational thought finally returned and she realized it was the medic lying there in the dark. She extended her hand again to her brother but this time to ask for the lamp. He handed it to her without a word and she knelt down in the few inches of water sloshing over the stones.

The medic lay curled on his side, his hands bound behind his back and his legs at the ankles. One eye was swollen and purple, and a deep laceration beneath it left a jagged trail of blood. The red-stained water lapped to and fro, splashing on his face as she moved closer.

He coughed and struggled away from her, his eyes opening wide and then closing against the intrusion of the light.

"Joachim, what have you done to him?"

The big man shrugged, hoisting himself out of the pit to sit on the edge, legs dangling. "What does it matter? He will die soon enough." He reached over for the pistol and examined it, wiping at the barrel with the tail of his shirt. Tucking it away again, he looked back at his sister.

"What are you doing here?"

Helene backed away from the American, but couldn't seem to keep her gaze from him. "The soldiers are looking for him. They could organize a search party, you know." She looked finally at Joachim.

Joachim scratched his head, ruffling his hair. "They won't look here." He paused, leaning back on his hands. "And if they do, it will be too late. Josef will have already used the sergeant. And the man here..." A malignant smile spread across the Frenchman's face.

"The two boys, Claude and Jean-Baptiste, I saw them. They are in the catacombs and they are looking for Josef." She glanced at the medic who was watching them, his blue eyes blank and unfocused. "The children, they liked the Americans. I think they are afraid for them."

Joachim snorted. "As well they should be, Helene, we're going to kill them." He climbed to his feet, staring down at his sister and the medic. "I'd better go see if I can catch those kids. You stay here and keep an eye on him." He took a step away and then turned back. "And he'd better be alive when I get back, dear sister, Josef promised him to me."



Doc blinked hard in the sputtering light from the oil lamp. The odor was foul, making him cough and gag. A woman knelt before him, her auburn hair swept back and hidden by a scarf. She looked familiar, but considering he had no idea where he was, when it was, or quite possibly, even WHO he was, he didn't trust the feeling. Waves of nausea swept over him, blurring his vision and his thoughts.

He'd been dreaming of his eldest sister, Margaret. She came with him to Uncle Abner's most afternoons, working behind the counter and wrapping up cuts of meat for the customers. Although there was only four years between them, Margaret had taken over as his second mother after their dad passed away. Doc and his other sisters, Jane and Betty, always found their clothing freshly washed and pressed, despite their mom working long hours at the commercial laundry. Margaret scrubbed behind their ears before they were allowed out of the house, and made sure their shoes were shined on Sunday mornings, so nobody could pity them. She took great pride in her younger siblings, helping them with their homework and making sure they each got a nickel for the Saturday afternoon matinee, even if she had to put in extra hours at the butcher's, sluicing the blood from the floor of the killing room.

Doc wondered for a moment if that's where he was, if he'd slipped and hit his head while helping his uncle. The coppery smell of blood was strong in his nostrils. He winced, forcing himself to open his eyes again.

"Margaret?"

The woman said nothing, stretching out one hand to caress his cheek. Tears came unbidden to his eyes, remembering the day his beloved collie, Flash, died of distemper. He'd arrived home from school to find Margaret sitting on the porch, waiting for him. She handed him first a cold glass of lemonade, a rare treat. After he'd swigged it down, delighted at his good fortune, she'd handed him the dog's collar, and swept him into her arms.

Pain arrived with the memory, obliterating Doc's conscious thoughts, and then his consciousness altogether. His head slumped back into the filthy water and he knew no more.



Kirby stood on the pavement, nervous energy emanating from every surface of his body. He was afraid if he had to stand there waiting any longer he'd burst into flames. Caje stood with arms crossed, leaning on a staircase railing behind the BAR man. The other members of 1st squad arrayed themselves around Hanley, as the lieutenant filled in the men assigned to assist in the search.

"So that's Saunders, Sergeant, and Carter, Private. Carter's a medic." Hanley hated having to take the time to fill in these strangers, keeping his own men from beginning the search. HQ had other ideas, however, assigning several earnest young lieutenants and a gaggle of office workers to the detail. "We know where they were last seen and it is thought that they have been taken captive and into the Catacombs." The tall lieutenant paused while the crowd around him all started talking at once. He brandished a large, folded paper and spread it over the hood of a convenient jeep.

Kirby rolled his eyes. "Oh great, we've got a map. Let's spend another hour going over it."



Littlejohn glared at him, shoving him slightly as they joined the others gathered around Hanley. Cajé jostled him, but nodded when Kirby met his dark eyes.

Hanley pointed to the map. "Here's the entrance to the catacombs that we believe is where they were taken in. This map shows the main corridors and tunnels and the entrances from the street level. Be advised that there are many side tunnels not mapped. It will be very easy to get lost." Turning to look each man in the eye, Hanley pushed his point home. "We've already lost two, I'm not losing anymore." He waved the two young lieutenants assigned to him closer.

"Jones, take sector G, here by the cathedral. The entrance is here, a small door behind a statue. Smith? Sector R, near the university. That door is apparently harder to find, there will be a local standing by to assist." He folded the map and shoved it into his jacket.

The men moved out, following one of the officers. Nelson strode between Littlejohn and Cajé, working hard to keep up. His face turned red before they'd gone four blocks.

"Hey! What if..."

Kirby interrupted the kid, BAR thudding between his shoulder blades. "What if, what if." He glared at the street in front of his boots. "I don't want to hear 'what if', I want to hear when."

"No, that's not what I meant." Nelson ran a few steps to catch up. "I meant, what if they went down one entrance, and came up another and aren't even down in the catacombs anymore?" He suddenly found himself ahead of all the others who had stopped short at this bombshell. He turned around to face them.

Kirby looked to Cajé, who stared at the kid. Together, they started following Hanley again, although in a much more subdued manner. Nelson joined them again, his face even redder than before.

"Sorry." His voice was almost inaudible.

Kirby shrugged. "It's okay, kid, you're just saying what we all were thinking." He walked a few steps. "It's just you're the only one who said it out loud."



The debris pile rose from the center of the once opulent lobby and reached to the third floor of the dangling staircase. The sunlight pouring through the gaping hole in the roof dappled the interior with shimmering rainbows of light. Scaffolding provided secure footing for the men laying the explosives, and they descended slowly from top to bottom, attaching wires to bundles and marking everything with small orange flags. An odor of mold permeated the place, eliciting sneezes from Josef's men. The Frenchman glared at them, while cuffing his own nose with his sleeve. Rory and the corporal walked on, oblivious to the men's discomfort.

Saunders deliberately lagged behind, pretending to trip over small pieces of masonry. With all these witnesses, the men Josef assigned to flank him had no choice but to slow down, leaning in when they could to growl French threats into his ears. He kept a close watch on Rory, trying to read the man's body language. A year ago, he'd been able to anticipate the man's actions as accurately as he knew his own. Neither took a breath without the other's awareness. Now, though, Saunders looked at a stranger in a familiar body.

The grand staircase hung in the middle of the debris, dangling almost two stories before truncating abruptly. Above it, chunks of floor and furniture hung precariously, like laundry on a still day. Still more orange flags dotted the floor and walls, tracing the path of the wires unspooled by Rory's men.

The corporal stopped at a wide marble counter, its dusty surface doing little to hide its past opulence. The GI swiped at the dust with one sleeve, and then spread the blue-print-like diagram over the flat surface. He glanced up as a man high above the ground on the scaffolding cried out, just before a pair of wire cutters hit the floor not ten feet away.

"Look out!"

Rory stared up at the man, green eyes dark with barely controlled anger. "Watch what you're doing, Koslowski. You could have bent important Army property." He reached for the tool, his fingers brushing the cold metal.

Josef grabbed his wrist, picking up the cutters himself. He arched an eyebrow at Rory's expression, then looked up at the abashed private, still clinging to his perch on the scaffolding. "Bent the pliers or broken a skull." He set the tool on the corner of the diagram, pinning it to the counter, ignoring both Saunders and Rory's astonished faces at his completely unaccented words.

"Well, anyway, Sarge..." the corporal shook himself, running his fingers through unruly dark hair and showering tiny pieces of brick and plaster over the drawing. "Here's the main trunk line. The sequence of explosions are controlled by the main switchboard outside in the street. They're numbered in order, just like you wanted. The center of the building will collapse first, bringing down what's left of the roof and the floors directly above us." He glanced up, and every pair of eyes followed his gaze, each man imagining the imminent destruction and the consequences of being in the middle of it when the plungers were depressed.

The Frenchman leaned in and spread his hands across the diagram. "How much longer until it is ready to blow?" When only silence answered him, Josef looked up, catching the puzzled look on the corporal's face. "I just want to know how long we have to look around, that's all."

"Well, it's essentially rigged. Sarge?" The young corporal blinked and pulled his attention to Rory.

The red-head turned his wrist and shoved back his sleeve, revealing a battered watch. "Time of explosion is scheduled for sixteen hundred. We clear the building at fifteen-thirty for final setup." Rory lifted his gaze and stared directly at Saunders, as if drawing courage from those blue eyes.

Josef pushed between them, placing one hand on Saunders' chest and shoving him back a step. The men on either side gripped the American by the elbows, keeping him from moving further in either direction. "Sergeant O'Brian, why don't you show me how the perimeter walls are rigged?" With a final glare in Saunders' direction, Josef turned his back on him, and crossed his arms over his chest. He nodded at the far wall, which abutted the building on the west.

The corporal spluttered, yanking the diagram off the counter and sending the errant wire cutters flying into a pile of debris. "Just a minute! That's totally unsafe! You can't..."

Holding up one hand, Rory silenced the man. "We can, son. You just go back to finishing up the rigging. I'll show these men what they need to see." He took a deep breath while the young GI considered pushing further. "Go on, I'll have them out by fifteen fifteen at the latest."

"Yessum, Sergeant." The corporal walked off, back rigid with disapproval.

Josef and Rory stared at one another a long moment, neither willing to concede command. At long last, Rory sighed, knowing the Frenchman held the medic. More than that, Rory still didn't know what game was afoot and his Irish curiosity was growing by the minute. He grinned suddenly, the one broken incisor enhancing rather than marring his obvious charm. Inclining his head toward the glowering Frenchman, Rory flourished one arm across his body, inviting Josef to lead on.



Jean-Baptiste slowed to a stop, Claude bumping gently against his back. Ahead of them, and around a sharp corner, light spilled across the floor. Shadows criss-crossed each other, figures carrying boxes and weapons. Low voices could be heard but Jean-Baptiste could not isolate out any individual words, nor could he recognize any particular voice. He reached behind him, placing one hand in the center of Claude's chest and pushed gently. Dropping to his knees, he then crawled toward the corner. Claude stayed where he was, completely hidden in the inky blackness of the catacombs.

Four men stacked crates against one wall of a small anteroom. Jean-Baptiste flattened himself against the floor, his head behind a row of skulls that jutted from the macabre mosaic of the wall. He recognized ammunition cans, their painted metal sides proclaiming the size of the particular shells contained within. Longer, flatter wooden boxes must surely contain the weapons which fired the shells. Propped against a table in the center of the room were four rifles, obviously ready for use. Jean-Baptiste craned his head sideways, looking for Josef or Joachim. He knew these four men, but they weren't the ring leaders. Not as dangerous as either brother.

<"I need a smoke, break time."> One of the men, short and squat with a neck as thick as a bull's, placed his burden on top of the stack and then dropped into a rickety folding chair next to the table. He patted down his pockets and removed a battered pack of pilfered Luckies. Striking a match on the edge of the table, he lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, his eyes closing in bliss.

Another of the men shook his head and continued working. <"You'd better hope Josef doesn't arrive."> He palmed sweat from his forehead and stretched briefly.

<"Hah! He'd better hope Joachim doesn't arrive!">, said a third man. They all laughed.

The first man blew perfect smoke rings toward the low ceiling. <"Josef is too busy with his Americans. And Joachim..."> He shrugged and sat up a little straighter, his features suddenly somber. <"Joachim is busy with his own American.">

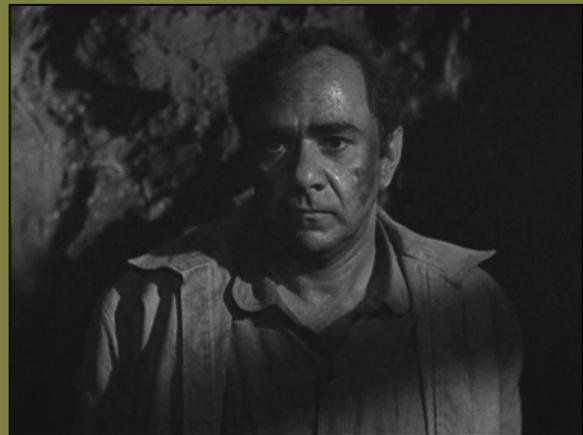
The four Frenchman all paused a moment, staring at one another. Just outside the circle of their oil lamp, Jean-Baptiste stared, too, knowing exactly what they meant. He shivered and began backing away. The stone floor abraded his knees through the worn fabric of his pants. He winced, freezing in place as the material parted, ripping loudly.

<"What's that?"> The men immediately turned to the darkness, one of them grabbing the lantern and rushing forward. <"It's one of those kids!">

Jean-Baptiste jumped to his feet, turning to flee but the men were too quick. Rough hands grabbed him by the arms and hauled him into the anteroom and shoved him down on a box. He watched the fourth man investigate the corridor, his hazel eyes wide with panic. When the man returned, shrugging to his companions, Jean-Baptiste slumped in relief, resting his elbows on his knees, his head down. When the men forced him to look up, they assumed the tears on his face were born of fear. The boy knew the truth, that Claude was somewhere in the catacombs, free and going for help. Jean-Baptiste hadn't betrayed his friend. In his first test of battle, he'd passed with flying colors.



Joachim trudged along the lengthy tunnel, the longest in the entire labyrinth at almost two miles in length. Unlike his cohorts, he wasn't concerned about noise or running into trouble. In his own mind, he was the biggest trouble lurking in the underground and woe to anyone who got in his way. At the front of the list for woe, in fact, was Joachim's elder brother Josef for making him keep the medic alive. They'd never planned to use a hostage as the impetus for forcing cooperation out of an American soldier. That was serendipitous. Not that Joachim minded, of course. A long childhood full of abuse, first at the hands of a schoolmaster and then a parish priest, followed by the cruelty of the Germans occupying the city had crushed any seed of humanity that might have yet been salvaged in the young man. Now he seized any opportunity to return the horrors he'd suffered, as if by brutalizing another he shed an incident visited on himself.



Helene's spirit lamp sputtered as he swung his massive arm, almost flipping the glass over from time to time. His boots rang on the stone, revealing hollow areas underneath in some places. Joachim wondered about them, wishing he had the time to dig them up and see what may be buried there. The men he'd killed since the time of the occupation were here, too, although their bodies were hidden until they became skeletons. He smiled grimly, picturing in his mind the shock of some innocent visitor to the catacombs, finding a body instead of a pile of bones.

The sound of running feet echoed ahead of him, and Joachim immediately doused the light, stepping into a side tunnel where he waited in the dark. A knife slid into his hand from a harness strapped to his forearm. He felt the sharp blade against his palm and then the solid handle, which he gripped tightly. The runner neared and then slowed, as if deciding which way to go. <"This way, come this way to Joachim, I'm waiting for you."> A warmth filled his belly, spreading through his body and his limbs. His breathing slowed despite the rush of adrenaline racing through his veins. <"Come to me..."> Joachim tensed his muscles, ready for anything.

A figure rounded the corner and crashed into him in the darkness. Joachim swung his knife hand, connecting with nothing. He swung again and the knife struck the wall, the force of the blow turning the blade in his hand. His fingers opened involuntarily, Joachim's arm numb from the elbow on down. He grunted as the runner bumped into him again and swung a rock solid left fist, connecting with something.

A cry echoed in the close space. A child's cry. Joachim paused, remembering Helene's warning. *The boys...* Sweeping his hands over the floor, he found the small body, curled up and shuddering with

sobs. He grabbed it by an arm and reached into his own pocket with his other hand, finding the torch he rarely used, choosing to save the batteries. Switching it on, he shone it in the face of the child, recognizing the boy as Claude.

<"Claude! What are you doing here?"> Joachim located his knife and returned it to its harness before the boy looked up.

The child hid his face in his arms, peeking between his fingers at Joachim. The tears ran freely down his cheeks as did a trickle of blood from his right ear canal. The ear itself was already swollen and red, the bruising spreading rapidly. He scooted backward until his back hit the wall, cowering away from the man.

Joachim relit the spirit lamp and returned his torch to his pocket, all the while keeping a close eye on the boy. He'd seen both Claude and Jean-Baptiste running out in the streets and knew it would be a race should the boy get away from him.

<"Come along, Josef is looking for you."> He dragged the boy up by the collar of his ragged jacket, ignoring the kick that narrowly missed his knee. <"I think that you may regret that, Claude. You need to learn to respect your elders."> He continued on down the tunnel, one hand lifting the lamp that lit the way and the other clamped firmly around the bicep of the young boy. Behind them danced their shadows, stretching off into the distance.



Hanley smoothed out the map again, his calloused finger tracing over a hand drawn line that looped its way across the city. He took a deep breath and looked down at the tiny girl standing next to him, her wide blue eyes threatening tears, arms tightly wrapped around the puppy in her arms.

"Lieutenant, she's doing the best she can." Cajé put an arm around the girl and hugged her, dark eyes rebuking Hanley in a way he wasn't allowed to in words. "I don't think she's ever seen a map before."

Hanley sighed. "I know, Cajé, it's just, it's just all we have." He knelt on the ground, ignoring the stabs of broken marble and masonry that covered the graveyard. "Tell her, this is the church." He pointed at the map.

Cajé sighed, too. <"Let's try again, Henriette. I know it's hard. That little box on the paper, that's the church."> He gestured at the crumbling walls rising behind them and then at the map in Hanley's hands.

Henriette swallowed hard, and then nodded.

Hanley went on. "The entrance to the catacombs are here." He slid his finger a fraction to the left.

Cajé translated for the girl, then pointed at the men preparing to enter the tunnels, checking their gear and flashlights. She nodded again, more confidently this time.

"Okay, so far so good. Now ask her where she thinks Saunders and Doc are being held." Hanley removed his hands from the map and looked hard at Cajé, trying to avoid making any eye contact with the girl at all.

<"Where is the doctor? And his friend?"> Cajé kept his voice low and neutral, forcing himself not to betray the agitation Hanley couldn't hide, but which he felt also. The girl had so far told them that she had seen the medic and another soldier taken captive. She knew they went into the catacombs. And she knew their captors. So far, any attempt to make her understand that the map showed the winding paths of the tunnels had been futile.

Again, the girl shook her dark curls, eyes downcast and troubled. Hanley stood, snapping the map out and refolding it as the rest of 1st squad gathered around. He refused to look at Cajé, knowing the scout was just as frustrated but better able to handle it. "Okay, we'll have to go in and just start looking." He held up a hand to silence Kirby's immediate retort. "We have no choice."



Matilde and Mariette looked down from their usual perch on top of the church. At Matilde's urging, they hadn't revealed themselves to the men back at the transit area. Instead, realizing Henriette's intent, they'd hustled back to the church and taken up a lookout.

"That tall man is making Henriette cry." Mariette looked over at the older girl, wondering if she would now intervene on the little girl's behalf.

Matilde shrugged. "She cries all the time. He's not hurting her." She scooted over to the mutilated gargoyle and sat up behind it, making sure her legs were hidden from view in case any of the soldiers should happen to look skyward." The boys have been underground a long time. I hope they didn't run into Joachim."

"I thought they were looking for Joachim." The twin frowned, trying to figure out the twisted logic Jean-Baptiste and Matilde had worked out concerning their rescue plan. She didn't understand then and she certainly didn't now. At the age of eight, Mariette knew a lot of things beyond her years, but her basic trust of adults was still firmly in place. Although, watching Henriette's discomfort at the tall man's questioning, even that was eroding.

Matilde shivered, despite the warmth of the roof in the late afternoon sun." They are looking for Joachim, but I hope he doesn't find them first."



Helene turned down the wick of Joachim's oil lamp, conserving the dwindling fuel supply, but still giving her some illumination. She wanted to get the medic out of the pit, out of the filthy water, but knew the feat was beyond her strength. She also knew how angry Joachim would be if she moved his captive without his permission.

While her command of the English language enabled her to speak with the soldiers around the city, so much still eluded her. She found it a disorderly language, unlike her own native French, and discordant in her ears. The muttered words from the American lying in the cold, stone pit were completely incomprehensible to her. Helene thought that he must have confused her with someone else. His unfocused eyes had stared at her for a few moments, before clearing in apparent recognition. He'd called her a name she didn't know and then lapsed back into unconsciousness.

Unwrapping her scarf, Helene proceeded to rip it into long strips. She climbed into the pit again, grimacing with distaste as another rat scuttled away, scaling the bone-lined wall of the well with ease and disappearing down the tunnel. In the flickering light, she examined the back of the medic's head, gasping at the sight of the long, deep laceration. It was no longer bleeding, but judging by the amount of blood swirling in the water on the floor, he'd lost a substantial amount. She bandaged the wound, first folding one strip of scarf into a pad, and then binding it in place with the remaining lengths of silk. Finished, Helene sat back on her heels and studied her handiwork.

In the lamplight, she could convince herself that the American was merely sleeping. She brushed his hair back from the bandage, and pulled his jacket closer around his neck. When she laid her hand over the red cross on his bicep, she felt him shivering, but there was nothing more she could do. She had only her thin jacket and what the medic really needed was to get dry. She had to wait for Joachim's return and then enlist him to help her.

She shook her head at her own folly. Joachim had his own plans for the medic, and she knew that keeping him alive wasn't one of them. She'd have to come up with her own plan. Climbing out of the pit, Helene began exploring the adjacent corridors. Anxiety fueled her frantic search to find something useful. As the lantern sputtered on the last of the oil, she returned to the anteroom where the medic lay, and sat down, the last of the matches in her hand. She watched the American for a moment, the steady rise and fall of his breathing and the rapid beat of the pulse in his neck. Slowly, carefully, she blew out the lantern and sat perfectly still as the darkness drew around her, soft and warm and deadly.



Jean-Baptiste sat on the one rickety chair, his feet and hands securely bound. He hadn't said a word since he'd stumbled on Josef's men, realizing that he had no idea what they were up to, but by the looks of the weapons strewn about, it couldn't be anything good. After their initial surprise, the men had

gone back to their smoke break, swigging from a shared, dusty bottle, and wiping their mouths with the backs of their hands.

"This boy, he's from Josef's family, yes?"

"I don't know if they are related..."

"Of course, they are! Doesn't Josef always give him and his friends food?"

"In exchange for information or a little spying, yes. That doesn't make him family."

"Well, in any case, I don't think we should harm him. Not until Josef gets back."

"D'accord."

Jean-Baptiste slumped, almost dumping himself from the chair. The heavysset man stepped in front of him, a whetstone in one hand and a large, wicked-looking knife in the other. He circled the knife on the stone as he stared at the boy, and Jean-Baptiste's eyes followed the progress of the blade as though hypnotized.

"Hey, kid."

Jean-Baptiste dragged his gaze upward to the piggy eyes of the man, heart thudding painfully in his chest. Fear flooded his blood vessels, making his limbs tremble and his head throb. He didn't know these men at all, having only seen them at a distance with Josef or Joachim, but their presence here, with all this equipment didn't bode well for somebody. He swallowed hard and forced himself to maintain eye contact with the man.

The others resumed moving things around, stacking crates along one wall of the room. They pointedly ignored Jean-Baptiste and the man standing in front of him.

"Hey, kid, I'm talking to you." Dropping the knife and whetstone on the table, he thumped Jean-Baptiste lightly on the top of the head. "Why are you here, eh? What business do you have with Josef?"

Jean-Baptiste winced, dropping his gaze to the floor. The scuffed boots of the man moved closer and the boy held his breath, bracing himself for another blow.

"Cat got your tongue?" The man picked up his knife again and waggled it beneath Jean-Baptiste's chin, a sly smile growing on his face. "I can make you talk, you know." He leaned closer.

"Stop." A new voice, deeper and full of menace, boomed down the tunnel.

Jean-Baptiste looked up, hope rising in his chest and making him lightheaded. The men all stopped what they were doing and grabbed pistols, rifles, whatever was closest to hand.

A huge figure stepped into the circle of light cast by the lamp – Joachim, holding a struggling Claude beneath one muscular arm. His gaze swept the room, taking in the men working, the heavy one with the knife in his hand and Jean-Baptiste, bound to the chair.

"Ah, I see you have the other one." He dumped Claude on the floor. "Now we have a matched set." He picked up the hank of twine lying on the table and tossed it to the heavy man. "Secure him, please."

Joachim set the little spirit lamp on the table and picked up the bottle, sloshing it gently to ascertain the quantity. Apparently satisfied, he hefted it to his lips and drank deeply. "Ah, that's good." He leaned on the support column and regarded the men who had all stopped working and were staring back at him.

"Josef's not here."

Joachim snorted, and reached for the bottle again. "Tell me something I don't know. He's off with the Americans, yes?"

The men nodded, shifting from one foot to the other uneasily and glancing at one another.

"So the plan is in motion, that's good." He tipped the bottle up, draining it in one long swallow.

"That means my own plans are not far off."

The heavysset man swiped one sleeve over his sweatsoaked forehead. He deliberately didn't look at the others, not wanting to see the fear he felt flooding through him reflected in their eyes. Joachim with Josef around was one thing: on his own, Joachim was frightening in the extreme. "Should we continue with our preparations, Mssr Joachim?" He shut his eyes briefly at the sound of his own voice, shaking and stammering.

Joachim nodded, not seeming to notice the man's reaction to his presence. With a sharp look at the boys, he turned and left without another word.

Jean-Baptiste tried to smile at his friend, tried to give him some hope in this terrible situation, but Claude refused to look up. Finally, Jean-Baptiste gave up and settled for the tops of his own tattered shoes.



Kirby ducked under the low lintel and followed Cajé into the catacombs. They clicked on their flashlights and gazed around them in wonder. The walls were entirely made of stacked bones, some arranged to create a pattern, while others had apparently been crammed in with no thought to design.

"Cajé." Kirby found himself whispering without planning to. "How long these bones been here?"

The scout moved further along the tunnel, staring at the walls. "Since the late 1700's, according to the barmaid at that place last night." He reached out one hand toward a pyramid of skulls, then thought better and stepped away.

Kirby snickered, following his squad mate closely. "You mean to tell me you had a woman to talk to and you talked about this creepy place?" The beam of his flashlight picked up traces of fresh loam on the floor, leading away from them. "See that? Somebody from the graveyard up there," he glanced at the ceiling, "must have walked through here not too long ago."

Cajé agreed. "We'll use one flashlight only. Gotta save the batteries, but also not have a spotlight trained on us."

Kirby clicked his light off reluctantly, shoving it into his jacket pocket.

Cajé moved ahead, his footsteps on the stone floor as soft as if he was walking in the woods. An intersection appeared, and he signaled Kirby to wait while he checked it out. He dropped to his knees and glanced quickly around the corner, and then back the other direction. "Nothing." Lowering the flashlight to the floor, he searched for more of the thick, black earth from the graveyard. With one finger, he pointed the way.



Kirby kept close to his squad mate. Out in the forests of France, or the open fields, along the hedgerows, he knew the value of not bunching up. Here in a tunnel of skeletons, Kirby wasn't taking any chances he'd lose his friend. As they inched along, he stared at the macabre tableau created by the walls. In some areas, small plaques were centered, in others, just bone after bone after bone. Kirby shivered and decided against asking Cajé for a translation, thinking there was no way the words would offer any comfort in this place.



Cajé knelt on the rough stone floor, the flashlight in hand. The trail of black dirt from the graveyard ended here, and just ahead the corridor divided. He stared at the dust, trying to force order into the seemingly random patterns lying in thick layers over the ancient slate. *Was that a footprint, or that?* He shook his head and looked back at Kirby, who stood in the exact center of the tunnel, equidistant from the bones on either side.

"The trail ends here." He let out the deep sigh he'd been holding in.

"So which way do we go?" Kirby's voice cracked on the last word. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked up at the arched ceiling, clearly spooked.

Pulling the hastily-drawn map from his jacket, Cajé quickly oriented himself and traced the routes of the two opportunities before them. "I think we should go to the left. The other one leads to a dead end."

Kirby winced, uncrossing his arms and sticking his hands into his pockets. "Nice choice of words, Cajé, nice." He walked to the intersection and carefully stuck his head around each corner, staring into the darkness. "I think they're all dead ends."

Cajé joined him and aimed the beam of the flashlight down the tunnel he'd chosen. "You'd better hope they're not, Kirby." He set off, not looking at his squad mate. "Not for Doc's sake, and the Sarges"

"Ah, you know what I mean."

The two men moved off into the black, the light of the torch illuminating only a few feet in front of them. Behind, the perpetual night of the catacombs closed in again, swallowing up all traces of their passing.



Dust billowed around Josef's feet as he prowled along the western wall, bending to inspect bundles of explosives marked by the small orange flags, but also pausing to reach out and shove against the bare bricks of the foundation. Rory followed, peering over the man's shoulder and then glancing back at Saunders, eyebrows arched in bafflement.

Aching with impotence, Saunders shoved his hands into his pockets, finding his lighter in the left one. He cupped it in his palm, finding a focus in its familiar weight. So far, he hadn't seen anything of value to the Frenchmen in the condemned building, nothing that would warrant the rough treatment accorded the Americans, especially Doc. He winced, remembering the thick sounds of fists striking a body and the medic's groans. Around him, the demolitions men scurried about, completing their tasks and exiting the building. Shortly, Rory, Saunders and the Frenchmen would be the only ones remaining.

Josef suddenly crouched, roughly knocking aside a pile of broken bricks and masonry. "Qui est la!" He flinched, looking back at the GIs wrapping up their tasks, but none appeared to have heard his outburst, let alone recognized the foreign words. Grinning, Josef stood and gestured the other men closer.

"There's a door here, we must get through it. Sergeants?" Stepping back, Josef allowed his men to shepherd Saunders and Rory forward.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Rory's hands curled into fists, his chin rising defiantly. Beside him, Saunders laid a hand on his friend's shoulder, although Rory wasn't sure if it was encouragement or warning.

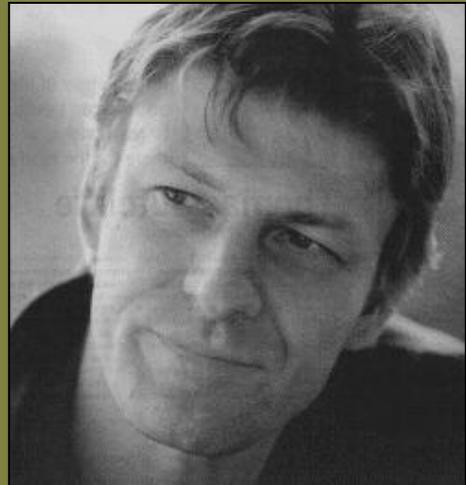
Josef threw himself forward and grabbed double fistfuls of Rory's lapels. He leaned in close, spitting in the American's face as he spoke. "We are running out of time. Your MEDIC is running out of time. Behind that door is something I need and we are going to get it now." He shoved Rory hard, throwing him against Saunders. "I have been waiting too long for this opportunity. You," Josef's eyes blazed at the two sergeants, "are going to get it for me."

Saunders moved past Rory, jostling the man slightly. "Come on, Ror, the sooner we get this done, the sooner we're outta here and back to Doc." He dropped to his knees and reached over the gleaming firing wire. "I'm not in the mood to be blown up today." A few bricks landed behind him, as Saunders tossed them over his shoulder.

Rory swore under his breath in Gaelic and climbed in beside his friend. "So, will you be more in the mood tomorrow?" He managed a wry grin, although his eyes remained somber and confused.

"I never make promises, Rory, you of all people should know that." Saunders stood and leaned against the wall, kicking aside a large chunk of concrete.

"Sure you do, Chip, you just never make any that you don't intend to keep."



Hanley leaned over the map, crossing off Sector G. The men who had searched it reported that while they were able to enter the catacombs, they'd only been able to go approximately one hundred yards before encountering a cave in. They'd looked carefully, but couldn't find any way to get around it and there were no intersecting tunnels in the area. Hanley immediately reassigned them to another sector, directing them over the Seine and to yet another old church yard. The elderly Frenchman guiding them puffed as he strained to keep up.

"Lieutenant?" Billy Nelson limped up, his uniform and face streaked with dirt.

Hanley stared at him. "What happened to you? Where's Littlejohn?" He grabbed the young private's elbow, helping him to sit on the curb.

Nelson massaged his ankle as he gingerly stretched out his left leg. "He's okay, sir, we just found a place in our sector where a flood washed out part of the floor. Didn't see it until we fell down it." He looked up at the lieutenant. "He's not much of a swimmer, sir."

"Were you able to clear your sector?" Hanley picked up the map again, running his index finger over the area assigned to Littlejohn and Nelson and nodding over the proximity of a large canal.

Nelson took a long swallow from his canteen. "Oh, yes sir. Once we got out of the sink hole, we continued down to the entrance at Rue Mignon. There's a lot of people in the tunnels down there, looking at the bones, looking at each other..." Nelson's voice trailed off as his cheeks burned red. "We asked around, nobody's seen nothing."

Littlejohn trudged across the street, looking as though he'd been swimming in a pig pen. Mud covered him from head to toe, dripping out from under his jacket and squelching out of his boots with each step. He pulled an equally muddy flashlight from his pocket and set it down on the low wall serving as Hanley's desk.

"Nelson tell ya? There's no way anyone could do anything in secret in that part of the catacombs. Half the soldiers on R&R are down there with all the off-duty barmaids." A touch of wistful regret edged Littlejohn's words. He sighed heavily and joined Billy on the curb. A long moment passed before he realized both Hanley and Nelson were staring at him. "What?"

Nelson smirked while Hanley shook his head.

"I need to send you back in, going in through the door beneath the high school on Rue Auguste Comte. The Germans used that area as a CP. Apparently they used the catacombs to come and go."

Littlejohn glanced out the corner of his eye at his smaller friend. Flipping some mud off his sleeve, he acknowledged the order with a nod. "Just as long as we don't run into any now, sir." He clambered to his feet and then pulled Nelson to a standing position, too. They both checked the map and then headed out, leaving wet boot prints in their wake.



Henriette hugged her little puppy close to her chest. She'd been so afraid answering the tall soldier's questions. She didn't understand the map and had it not been for the dark man who spoke French, she would have cried, even though she knew her sister and Matilde were somewhere out there watching. After the men dispersed in all directions, Henriette managed to slip away, hiding behind debris from a damaged wall. It didn't take but a minute for Mariette to appear, taking her hand and leading her away and back to the sanctuary of the church.

The pup whimpered, not wanting to be held so tightly. The little girl kissed his fuzzy head and set him on the ground. "What do we do now?"

Matilde held out a crust of bread, and took a large bite of the piece she held in the other hand. "I don't know. Jean- Baptiste and Claude still haven't come back. The two soldiers who went inside l'Ossuaire Municipal, they are still gone. Josef and Joachim..." She shrugged and looked over at Mariette, who stood watch in the window.

The little girl propped her chin on the window sill and fought down a mounting fatigue. How long had it been since the boys left? An hour, two? Mariette had never owned a watch and hadn't had her parents long enough to learn the intricacies of reading a clock's face. Still, it had been morning when the docteur showed up in the churchyard. Now the sun was slanting toward the horizon and the day was creeping on toward night. "I think we need to go find the docteur ourselves." Mariette turned away from the window, and crossed her arms resolutely over her chest.

"What? Go down in l'Ossuaire Municipal? By ourselves?" Matilde shook her head, her long hair swinging limply over her shoulders. "Besides, what good can we do if Jean- Baptiste and Claude are already down there?" She stared defiantly at little Mariette, fear dancing behind the bluster in her eyes.

"No, we'll leave the boys to find the docteur. But I know where Josef is going." Mariette looked one more time out the window, and then joined her sister and the older girl. "Jean-Baptiste and I were exploring, down, down in the tunnels at night. Josef and Joachim have a store of guns down there." She laid one hand on her twin's arm, shushing her before Henriette could interrupt. "But that's not what he

wants. Josef has something hidden in a building. He was upset when the shelling came and the Germans left.”

Matilde shrugged, not understanding where Mariette was going with her story. Mariette went on. “Josef needed the other American to get in the building. Needed him to get whatever it was he hid there.”

Henriette pulled away from her sister. “I know what it is.” She grinned, and shoved her tongue through the space where her two upper teeth were missing. “I heard him talking to Mme Helene once.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Paintings. And statues. He said the Germans stole it from the French Museum of Art. He stole it back.” Henriette hugged her arms, and spun around in place, clearly pleased to have information neither the other two girls possessed. “He and Mssr Joachim and Mme Helene are going to get the paintings from the building and then run away.”

Matilde rolled her eyes. “Run away? Run away where?”

“I don’t know.”

Mariette pulled on her jacket. “It doesn’t matter. I know which building it is. We should go there.”

Henriette nodded in agreement and looked at Matilde, who scowled at both the little girls.

“All right, all right.”

They carefully closed the puppy in, leaving him the remains of the bread, and set out for the American HQ.



Doc surfaced again, finding himself still in absolute darkness. He wasn’t however, alone. While he couldn’t see anything, he sensed a change in the density of the surrounding black fog. A warmth that pulled him like his mother’s hand-knitted sweaters. Someone was sitting there, watching over him. Or perhaps just watching him, he wasn’t sure there was a difference.

“Hello?” His voice sounded rusty to his muffled ears, as though the absence of light had inhibited sounds as well. He shifted his bound hands and forced his numb fingers to bend. The pain was agonizing, shooting up his wrists and into his arms. He groaned and rolled to one side before realizing that whoever it was in the darkness had moved and was now right next to him. He flinched and swallowed hard, marshalling his courage.

“Are you awake, Mssr?”

The heavily accented words yanked him out of the twilight. He remembered everything, seeking out a final few minutes of peace in the churchyard, the stealthy arrival of the kids, doctoring the animals, Sarge’s appearance and then the later appearance of the Frenchman. He remembered entering the catacombs through the little door at the churchyard, and even striking his head on its low lintel. It was only after that moment that he was, once again, literally and figuratively, in the dark. Doc wasn’t sure if the woman was someone to fear. He rolled the dice.

“Yeahhhhh.” The pain in his head came crashing back with a vengeance. Doc assumed that someone must have hit him and hit him hard. That little bump from the lintel wouldn’t have been enough to cause this much pain. Nausea rose in his gut, and he gulped air, hoping to quell the overwhelming urge to vomit.

“Here, let me get the light.” A match popped into existence, its small flame flickering as it was applied to the wick of a lantern.

“Is that better? Let me look at your head.” The woman knelt on the floor of the pit, her skirt trailing in the dirty water.

Doc closed his eyes as her gentle fingers pressed lightly on his head, setting off explosions of epic proportions. He felt himself blacking out again and summoned all he had to resist it. “Ma’am? That hurts.” The medic groaned, twisting his head away.

“I’m sorry, Docteur, truly.” She stood, setting the lantern on the edge of the pit where it hissed and spat like an angry kitten.

“Where are we? I don’t, I don’t remember everything.” Doc suddenly sat up despite his bounds and the hammering in his ears. “Where’s Sergeant Saunders?”

The woman looked away, smoothing her hands down the front of her clothing. An odd emotion flickered across her face, regret? Sorrow? “The American sergeant? I don’t know where he is. Josef has taken him and the other one.”

Doc leaned on the smooth wall of the pit, leaning his throbbing head against its cold surface. "Who's Josef?" "?" Anger replaced nausea in his gut, shoving the pain away from his conscious awareness. He looked up at the woman, blue eyes blazing. "Who is Josef and where has he taken Sergeant Saunders?"



Caje dropped to his knee, holding one fist aloft as a signal to Kirby behind him. He leaned into the intersection, staring into the darkness.

Kirby studied the walls, noting that the design had changed yet again. Two turns back, skulls rested on the bottom, followed by larger leg bones and the smaller arms atop those. Here, alternating stripes of skulls, leg bones and arm bones, filled the entire space. He sighed, waiting for Caje's decision. No longer overwhelmed by the dead, he'd found himself wondering if the owners of these skeletons were more at peace than those lying out on the battlefields. Maybe this was nicer, he mused, wondering idly if relatives came to visit their ancestors.

"Kirby." Caje's voice carried easily even though he was whispering.

The wiry private moved up next to the scout and squinted into the darkness. "What's up?"

Caje pointed off to the right, where the faint glow of a lamp danced across the floor. He leaned into Kirby, speaking directly into his ear. "I heard some voices, too."

"Great, now you're hearing voices..." Kirby slapped Caje on the back and slipped across the tunnel, boots silent on the slick stones. He edged toward the light spill, then signalled the scout ahead of him. The two squad mates moved with practiced precision, leapfrogging down the corridor. As they drew closer, Kirby lay on the floor, stretching himself as flat as possible. He peered around the opening in the wall and then jerked back as a shadow passed in front of the light source. Caje gripped his ankle, causing him to look back.



Features invisible in the darkness, Caje used his hands to indicate his intentions. As Kirby nodded, Caje melted away to the other side, using several artistic piles of bones as cover. After several agonizingly long moments, he materialized on the other side of the opening, Garand at the ready.

Kirby took a deep breath and held up three fingers. As he counted down, he thumbed the safety off on the BAR, and tensed his muscles. Three, two, one...

The two Americans swung into the makeshift room, weapons at the ready. Simultaneously, they both shouted at the men sitting there, mouths hanging open in astonishment.

"Hande Hoche!"

"Mettez vos mains en l'air!"

Kirby moved into the room, clearing the little table of bottles and the debris of a meal with the barrel of the BAR. The men raised their hands a little higher, eyes widening. "What's that you said, Caje?"

Caje shook off Kirby's question as he found the boys, trussed and gagged behind a stack of wooden crates. "Something fishy going on here, Kirby." He returned to the men and made quick work of tying them up, gagging them with the same oily cloths they'd apparently been cleaning rifles with.

Kirby relaxed his hold on the BAR when Caje finished, stepping back to the tunnel and making sure they were still alone. "What's fishy, Caje?"

The Cajun pulled his bayonet from its scabbard and vanished for a moment, reappearing seconds later with two boys in tow. He pointed at them with the knife, and then put it away. "This is fishy."

The boys huddled together, staring at the Americans and their rifles held at the ready. They backed away from Caje as he approached, scooting over the rough stones until they bumped against the crates.

<"It's okay, we're Americans."> The scout slung his rifle on his back and knelt in front of them, holding out his empty hands. <"How did you end up here? Who are these men?">

The two looked at each other, then back at the dark-eyed soldier, who was smiling at them.

Kirby sniffed at a bottle he found, pulling the cork with his teeth and inhaling energetically. "Caje, what are we gonna do with these guys? We can't just leave them here all trussed up with this." He poked one of the men with the BAR, studying his rough clothing. "I don't think they're Germans. We ain't supposed to be capturing the French, are we?"

Caje pulled a chocolate bar from his pocket, snapped it in half and held it out to the boys. "Whoever they are, why would they have these two boys tied up?" He smiled as the kids finally succumbed to the growling of their stomachs. They each examined their candy, sniffing it and then scarfing it down immediately.

Kirby shifted from foot to foot. "I agree, but we need to get Sarge..." His voice trailed off when he realized what he'd said. "Hanley, we need Hanley to take charge of these guys."

<"Have you seen any Americans down here in the tunnels?"> Caje ignored Kirby and his ponderings.

The taller boy looked at his friend and then back to Caje. He swallowed the last of his chocolate and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then licked his hand, too. <"Do you mean the docteur?">

Caje almost fell on his backside in surprise. He looked up at his friend. "He wants to know if we mean Doc." Turning back to the kid, he nodded, hoping not to press so hard as to make the boy clam up, but finding it hard to control his eagerness.

<"Yes, the doctor. And an American sergeant, too. He came to find the doctor.">

The smaller boy popped his chocolate-covered thumb into his mouth and popped it back out again. His face was liberally smeared with the stuff, although it was hard to tell what was candy and what was ground-in dirt. <"Josef and Joachim have them. They brought them underground.">

<"But we haven't seen them since. And not Josef, either.">

Caje held out one hand to slow the boys down. It seemed that now they had decided to talk, their words tumbled over each other. <"Who are Josef and Joachim?">

Both boys shuddered, faces turning pale under the dirt. <"Bad men, mssr. Bad men.">

<"And they have the Americans? The doctor and the sergeants."> Caje shushed Kirby, who was anxious to know what the boys were saying.

<"I don't know, mssr. I just don't know.">



Joachim crouched in the darkness, surrounded by bones. Eyes closed, he breathed deeply, letting his other senses expand. He could feel the damp air pressing on his skin, soaking into his pores. He heard a mouse step hesitantly along the gutter, its tiny paws touching first dry stone and then skirt the edge of the water puddling there. It paused, sending out its own feelers into the black, wondering what sort of creature waited there. Joachim watched it in his mind's eye, saw himself pouncing out of nowhere and striking with one hand.

The mouse squeaked and scurried away as fast as its tiny legs would allow.

Motionless still, relaxed and calm, Joachim listened even harder, separating out the noise of air flowing over the bones and the drip of sewage runoff, seeping from the ceiling. These he discarded, seeking further. His muscles began to cramp, sending dull aches into his ankles and knees. Opening his eyes to the dark, he considered moving along, returning to Helene and his captive, and beginning the game he'd been longing to play. Before he moved, though, he heard a sound that didn't fit. He stood and stepped into the middle of the corridor, slowly turning in place.

A metallic clink and the soft tread of a leather-shod foot made their way to Joachim's ready ear. He turned toward the sound and moved over to the wall, his knife slipping into his hand.



Josef paced in the scant space along the wall, stepping over the growing piles of brick and mortar. Ten minutes had passed since Saunders and Rory began digging in earnest, since the last of

Rory's demolitions men had left the building, leaving the two Americans alone with their French escort. The afternoon sun slanted across the floor, leaving the west side in gloomy darkness while illuminating the eastern half of the building in glittering splendor as the firing wires picked up the fiery rays.

"What's taking so long?" Josef leaned into the hole where the two sergeants stood shoulder to shoulder.

Rory looked up as he wiped a thick layer of dirt from around his eyes. Blood from badly abraded fingers streaked across his cheekbones. "Well, we gotta make a big enough hole to swing the door open." He glanced at Saunders who continued kicking at a stubborn brick at the base of the frame. "Not to mention avoid those wires so we don't blow ourselves sky high."

The Frenchman snarled and dropped to his knees. "Idiot! The door opens the other way. Kick it in!" Curling his fingers around the shiny wire, he strummed it like a guitarist, lip curling at the discordant twang. "You need a detonator to make this useful, even a poor Frenchman like myself knows that."

Rory shrugged and braced his back against the side of the hole, side by side with Saunders. He looked up, just as they prepared to kick in the door. "Well, I'm guessing that the other end is hooked to one by now. You be careful now." He glanced at his friend. "You ready, Chip?"

"Yeah, ready when you are." Saunders blinked sweat from his eyes and brought his hands up in front of his face, knowing as he did that whatever scant protection they'd bring would never be enough.



Caje crept along the tunnel, his right shoulder brushing along the rounded heads of femurs protruding from the wall. He forced himself to heed all the instincts he'd learned creeping about the French countryside. Unfortunately, not much of it applied here. The oppressive corridors of the catacombs and the rotten odors served to heighten the tension. He kept finding himself pushing ahead too quickly, and was hard-put to rein himself in.

The boys had suggested several areas in the l'Ossuaire Municipal where Doc and Sarge could be held hostage. Their fear of the man named Joachim was more than obvious. The taller boy, Claude, had burst into tears as he described his own interaction with the big man. Neither boy had seen the Americans since Josef and Joachim had unceremoniously led them into the catacombs. They didn't know Josef's plan, although by the looks of the crates of weapons and the desperate air of the men Caje and Kirby had trussed up, they assumed it would involve some aspect of danger.

Caje had agreed. He'd sent the boys to find Hanley, bearing a written message outlining all that the boys had said and where to find the bound men. Kirby remained with the men, keeping them from starting any trouble and anyone else from freeing them. There was always the chance, too, that Josef could return, hopefully accompanied by Doc or Sarge.

He knelt on the floor, listening hard. He could hear his pulse in his ears, pounding away far faster than he was used to. He laid the Garand on the floor, wiping his sweat-slicked fingers along the sides of his pants, and then picked up the weapon again, reluctant to have it out of his hands for long. The corridor stretched out into the darkness before him, further than the beam of his flashlight could reach. Jean-Baptiste, the smaller of the two boys, had studied Caje's hand drawn map of the catacombs, crossing out areas that were unlikely routes for Josef to be traveling. He pointed out one area where an exit had been blocked due to the building above being shelled. Both boys agreed that Josef had frequented that exit more than any other apart from the churchyard until the shelling. Neither boy knew why.

Climbing to his feet again, Caje moved on down the tunnel, flicking the light from side to side, from one horror-filled tableau to another. He'd never been one for having nightmares, or really dreams very much at all. Now, staring at the obviously tiny bones of a thousand infants, he wondered if he'd just not had sufficient material before.

Ahead, the way opened up considerably, with niches set into the wall on both sides, as if to hold a statue or important work of art. Caje was fairly sure the things displayed here would never be considered art. He stopped suddenly, all his senses jangling. Something was wrong, although he wasn't sure exactly what. Holding the flashlight out from his side, he aimed it down the walls. His left hand reached for his bayonet, as though of its own accord.

Holding the blade at the ready, Caje moved ahead.



Matilde stood on the cobblestones, her eyes wide with surprise. On either side, the twins held her hands and stared with her at the fence across the road. Topped with barbed wire, it effectively sealed off the heavily damaged building. Men carrying tools and wire mingled with armed guards who shepherded pedestrians away from the area and down sidestreets.

"Josef's door is in that building down there, the one collapsed against the white one." Mariette lifted her arm to point but Matilde swiftly yanked on the hand she held and pulled both girls to the wide steps leading to one of the few remaining undamaged hotels in the neighborhood. They moved to one side and all sat down on the bottom stair.

"How can he get there, Matilde?" Henriette stuck one thumb in her mouth, a habit she'd not been able to leave behind in her not so long ago babyhood. She caught Mariette's glare and reluctantly removed the digit.

The older girl stared at the myriad soldiers passing by. "He needed the American to get in there. That's why he took them." Matilde spoke her thoughts out loud for the benefit of the little girls.

Mariette frowned. "Why did he need three of them?" She wrapped her arms around her thin knees and rested her chin on top. "Le Docteur was helping the animals."

Henriette looked at her sister. "Maybe that was the problem. He was helping us and Josef needed someone to help him."

"Well, then, why did they take him, too? They had two men."

Matilde laid a gentle hand on Mariette's head, effectively shushing her without it seeming like a rebuke. She didn't understand what was going on. She wanted desperately to help the American docteur, but without knowing where Josef and Joachim had taken them, how could she possibly?

"I wonder if Jean-Baptiste and Claude found them?" Henriette whispered the words, her tiny voice almost inaudible.

Matilde sighed, knowing that for the moment there was nothing they could do. She put an arm around each twin and hugged lightly. "I don't know, little ones, I just don't know."



Jean-Baptiste shoved through the access door into the alleyway behind the butcher's. After the Americans had freed him, he and Claude had headed for the nearest entry to the outside, terrified of running into Joachim while still underground. Slamming the door behind them, they ran to the street where passers-by looked at them with mild curiosity.

"We need to find this Lieutenant Hanley." Claude bent forward at the waist, panting with the exertion of their escape. He leaned on his knees, eyes closed.

Jean-Baptiste ran his fingers through his dark hair, causing it to stand straight up. He looked up and down the avenue and then back at his friend. "YOU need to find Lieutenant Hanley." He pulled the paper Caje had given him from a pocket and handed it to Claude. "I'll find the girls and we'll look for the docteur."

Claude tried to give the paper back to Jean-Baptiste, who kept stepping backward away from him. "I thought we were both supposed to go to the Americans?"

Jean-Baptiste shook his head. "Get that Lieutenant and give him the paper." He stepped off the curb into the street and turned away. He glanced once more over his shoulder. "Go, Claude. I'll see you later!"



Claude stood staring after Jean-Baptiste, watching him grow smaller until he vanished around a corner. The late afternoon exodus from the street had begun as the citizens of Paris made their way home before the curfew. The butcher flipped his sign from Open to Closed and pulled down the tattered shades in his windows. Claude moved closer to the building, allowing the foot traffic to continue by without flowing around him like a barge parting a river. He never had been the natural leader that Jean-

Baptiste was, despite being older, and it bothered him at times. Still, he had a job to do, one given him by a grown-up.

Clutching the paper in his fist, Claude ran for the café where the French-speaking American had told him he would find the lieutenant. He dodged in and out of the pedestrians, preferring the smooth sidewalks to the cobblestones of the street.

Finally, he saw the thrown together command post where the hood of a jeep served as both a desk and a bulletin board. A map of Paris spread over most of the hood, although as Claude approached, the tall man studying it folded it until he was holding a section approx 2 feet on a side. Hesitantly, Claude walked up, his cap in hand and the paper in the other.



"Well, what have we here?" Hanley caught sight of the street urchin out of the corner of his eye. He turned to the boy, and was quite surprised when he was handed a grimy scrap of paper. Turning it over, Hanley recognized Caje's characteristic spiky handwriting. He looked at the boy, eyebrows drawn together and eyes darkening.

<"Read it! Read it!"> The boy continued to point at the paper, anxiety robbing him of his youthful grace. <"Read it!">

Hanley smoothed the paper out on the jeep's hood and began to read.

Lieutenant Hanley

Kirby and I found these 2 boys held by 4 Frenchmen in the tunnels. We cut them loose and took the men captive. Kirby is holding them, the kids can tell you where. I'm going looking for Sarge and Doc. The kids say 2 men named Josef and Joachim have them.

Caje

Hanley reread the short message several times. Kids, plural? He looked at the trembling boy. "Are you alone?" He rolled his eyes as the kid stared back at him blankly. "You don't speak English, do you?"

The boy shook his head, apparently recognizing the word "English". He stepped up to the jeep and tapped the note with one grimy finger. <"I can take you to your men."> He took a step backward, beckoning to Hanley.

The tall lieutenant handed the note to Jacobson, who had been leaning on the jeep. "I'm going with the kid. You coordinate from here."

Jacobson stood bolt upright. "Sir?" He glanced at the kid and back to Hanley. "Do you want me to go and you, um, coordinate?"

Hanley picked up his carbine and shook his head. "Not this time, Private."



Joachim launched himself from behind the column of bones, landing squarely on the prone figure creeping down the tunnel. The man beneath him twisted, latching onto his knife hand by pure luck. Joachim changed tactics and rolled, pulling the man with him and hooking his free hand around his neck. Clamping down hard, he felt the immediate tensing of all his opponent's muscles, straining against him.

A sudden searing pain coursed from his wrist to his shoulder as Joachim realized the man had his own knife, slicing deeply into Joachim's arm. He felt his fingers loosen their hold despite his efforts to hold on. Doubling up his knees, the Frenchman kicked hard, catching the man in the belly. Joachim scrambled away, clutching his wounded arm to his chest and panting hard. Blood fell in great pulsing gout, leaving the stone floor slick and black in the faint light from the flashlight. Blinking hard to clear his vision, Joachim squinted in the dimness for a good view of his enemy. The man was nowhere, no shadow on the wall, no crouched figure against a wall. Joachim cursed and fought his way to his feet, swaying as dizziness swept over him.

There! A shadow melted into a man, running right at him. Joachim held his knife in front of him, ready to defend if not attack. He blinked and the shadow veered away. He turned with it, wondering

what the man's game was, but as it passed him, the shadow split apart, darkness upon more darkness. He swung back, but not fast enough.

The enemy's fist caught Joachim square in the face, and he went down, boots sliding in his own blood. His knife went flying with the next blow, a hard paralyzing strike across his wrist. He doubled up, trying to protect his neck and chest, but the stranger stepped back, waiting in the darkness. Joachim struggled onto his knees, blood pouring from both his nose and his arm. His vision wavered, and he felt dizzy, nausea blooming in his belly. He gagged, still struggling to stand. The man stepped forward again and shoved him hard, and Joachim went down on the stones.

"Where are the Americans?"

The stranger now had a rifle pointed directly at Joachim's belly and a flashlight tucked in one hand. The beam dipped up and caught him right in the eyes, blinding him. All Joachim could see was the the blood slicked stones surrounding him. *His blood.* He moaned, gripping his wounded arm with the other hand. He spat on the floor, and a tooth skittered across the floor into the darkness.

"What Americans?" He didn't see the next blow either and toppled over from the boot to his abdomen, retching helplessly.

The flashlight beam dropped mercifully lower, and the other man knelt, weapon still trained on Joachim. He stayed just outside Joachim's reach, watchful and wary. "The American sergeants and the medic."

Joachim shook his head and immediately regretted doing so. His vision swam and he slewed sideways, falling against the stacks of skulls in the wall. "I haven't seen anybody else." He flinched away as the barrel of the rifle appeared under his throat, shoving against his windpipe. "I swear it."

"I don't think so, Joachim."

The Frenchman's body jerked in surprise, and his eyes grew wide. "Who are you?"

"Take off your belt, Joachim." The voice, amplified in the tunnel, appeared to come from the disembodied skulls surrounding Joachim.

Struggling with one hand, the Frenchman managed to remove his worn leather belt, holding it out to the stranger.

"Loop it around your ankles and cinch it tight."

"But mssr..."

"Tighter."

Joachim complied, clumsily attaching his ankles together.

"Now, we're going to take a little walk, my friend. You will lead me to the Americans." The man backed off a little and waved the rifle.

"But I can't walk like this."

The man shrugged. "I think you can walk enough." He prodded Joachim to his feet.

They set off through the tunnel, Joachim shuffling along with the stranger behind him, rifle at the ready.



Helene shivered in the cold damp of the catacombs. She was normally quite good at judging the passage of time, but with no sun to guide her, she could only guess how long it had been since Joachim left. The American had remained unconscious in the pit, unmoving. She reached for the lamp, holding it up to her ear and rocking it gently. The remaining fluid barely covered the floor of the lamp. Helene sighed and set it down again, within reach but at a safe distance.

Just as she was dozing, a small rock bounced down the corridor, entering the anteroom and rolling to a stop. Helene froze, listening intently. She stood and flattened herself against the wall, forcing herself to ignore her revulsion at the close proximity of the bones. Holding her breath and closing her eyes, she tried to feel who was there the way Joachim could.

"Mlle Helene?"

The soft, boyish voice caught her off guard and she immediately answered. "Jean-Baptiste?"

The boy must have entered the room, as his next words came from just the other side of the pit. "Yes, Mlle, it is Jean-Baptiste." He clicked on a flashlight, casting its beam directly at her.

She ducked away, shading her eyes with one hand. "Where did you come from? Where are the other children?" She avoided looking into the pit, hoping that the boy would somehow not see the American lying there.

The light dropped, following the contours of the soldier's body, from boots trussed together to hands bound behind his back, to the bloodied bandage around his head. When he next spoke, Jean-Baptiste's voice shook a little, although he tried to control it. "Joachim sent me. He said he needs you."

Helene rose to her feet immediately, pulse racing. She stared across the pit at the young boy, wondering just how much he knew. "Joachim?" Her voice broke over the name, her throat dry with anxiety. "Where did you see Joachim. What did he say?"

Jean-Baptiste crouched on the lip of the pit, staring down at the American. He waited until he saw the steady rise and fall of the man's chest before he answered. "He's with the others. He just said to tell you to come. Told me to stay here." He kept his eyes downcast, refusing to allow the woman to see his uncertainty.

"Is Josef back?" Helene took a step around the pit toward the boy, still unsure whether to trust him or not. "Did he, did he find it?" Another step.

The boy matched her step for step, circling the pit. He kept the flashlight low, hoping to keep his face in the dark. He glanced down at the man and almost dropped the torch in surprise. The American stared back at him, eyes steady. "Yes, ma'am, Josef just got back. He found it." Jean-Baptiste shook with the effort not to look at the American.

Helene closed her eyes and clasped her hands together across her chest. The thought that they were finally almost at the end of their long "something" was unbelievable. She looked again at the boy. "Joachim said for you to stay here?" Her voice rose in disbelief.

"Yes, ma'am, he said he'd be back later." Jean-Baptiste swallowed hard, forcing the words to sound natural. "He said this man isn't going anywhere."

Helene looked down into the pit, at the bloody bandage wound around the back of the man's head. The statement was certainly true enough. The boy seemed to know what was going on. "D'accord." She picked up the lantern from the floor and held it out for the boy. "If you keep it off most of the time, there will be enough until Joachim returns." Holding out her hand to the boy, she took the flashlight, turned and vanished into the tunnel.



The boy slid one finger over his lips warningly, as he watched the woman hurry away. He hastily lit a match as the glow from the flashlight slipped away. Lighting the lantern, he then climbed down into the pit.

Doc stared up at him, wondering if this was yet another bizarre dream or if he'd finally woken up to find himself in hell. The boy looked vaguely familiar, but the medic couldn't place him.

The lantern sputtered as it was set down on a stone in the pit. The boy looked again out into the tunnel, turning his head to listen. Apparently satisfied, he reached into a pocket and pulled out a knife, turning to face Doc.

"Oh, no, not another nightmare!" Doc moaned and closed his eyes, straining against his bonds.

The boy reached down and slit the rope binding Doc's ankles and then behind the medic to free his wrists. He then restored the knife to his coat sleeve, sliding it upward until it disappeared.

Doc toppled over on his back, unable to move his arms. He did little better with his legs, but was able to flex his ankles and knees. As sensation flooded back into his fingers, he moaned, gritting his teeth tightly together. He looked up into the boy's concerned eyes, and managed a smile although it more closely resembled a grimace.

<"We must get away from here soon, Docteur. Mmme Helene will return soon with Joachim and we had better not be here then."> The boy couldn't bring himself to use the more formal form of respect for Joachim, instead just calling him by his given name. A cold sweat rolled down the boy's back at the thought of Joachim catching them there. He grabbed Doc's jacket and pulled him into a sitting position, propping him against the wall of the pit.

"Whoaaaaa..." Doc closed his eyes against the wave of vertigo rolling over him. He swallowed hard, forcing his stomach to settle. A few moments later, he cautiously opened one blue eye, and found the boy was no longer there. "Hey, kid!" He called out as loudly as he dared.

<"Shh, Mssr Le Docteur, we must be quiet."> The boy dropped back into the pit, having made a quick reconnoiter of the tunnel outside the pit room. He held out one hand, grasping Doc's as the medic lifted a shaking arm.

It took a minute or two, but the boy got Doc on his own trembling feet. The medic wavered back and forth, pins and needles chasing along the soles of his feet and up the backs of his legs. His vision alternately blurred and cleared, and his head pounded with such force that he feared his knees would buckle and he'd tumble to the floor again. He looked down at the boy clutching his elbow, and saw that no matter how he felt, this kid was going to do everything he could to get him out safely.

"Okay, kid, let's see if I can get out of this pit." Doc rested his hands on the smooth stones of the rim and tried to hoist himself up to his elbows. The boy grabbed the back of his jacket and shoved, and then ducked down and got his hands under one of the medic's knees. Bending his own knees, the boy pushed upward hard, allowing Doc to get enough leverage to roll one leg and then the other up onto the floor, out of the pit. He lay there panting, while Jean-Baptiste checked the corridor once again.

<"There is no one there, Mssr. We must go."> Jean-Baptiste picked up the lantern and turned the wick down even further, until the light was only a faint glow. He hung it on the wall outside the room, and then returned for Doc.

"Okay, kid, here we go." Doc pulled his legs up under him and managed to straighten his arms, balancing on hands and knees. The nausea rose again in his throat and once again he managed to swallow it back down. The pain in his head swelled, pounding in his ears and behind his eyes. He felt the boy take his arm and leaned on him, slowly standing up.

The first few steps to the doorway were slow, with the two slewing first one way then another. Finally Doc got his balance going and the boy was able to lead rather than carry. Grabbing the lantern with one hand, Jean-Baptiste pointed to the right.

<"That way, Mssr Le Docteur. We must get out now.">

Doc smiled, hope bubbling in his chest along with a new influx of fear. He wondered where Saunders was, and the rest of the squad. Surely they hadn't returned from R&R without them. Wouldn't Hanley insist on a search? Wouldn't Caje? He put one foot in front of the other, barely aware of his surroundings, focus entirely on the small boy leading him home.



Kirby picked up the bottle and sniffed it, wrinkling his nose at the acrid odor. He looked at his four captives and waved the bottle at them. "You drink whatever came out of this? It's a wonder you're alive at all." Setting it down, he pawed over the crusts of bread and old curling bits of cheese. "Looks like a man won't get a decent lunch here."

He backed out into the tunnel again, looking carefully in each direction and listening hard. After satisfying himself that there was no one about, he moved over to the stacks of crates. "Ah, good ole German grenades, can't be without too many of those. Let's see, ah! Some nice M1s, still packed in their grease. I see you're equal opportunity thieves."

One of the men muttered into his gag, glaring at Kirby.

The BAR man looked back, blinking slowly. "What's that you say? You didn't mean to, and you're very, very sorry?" He reached over to the man and grabbed him by the hair, nodding his head up and down. "Yes, I thought that's what you meant." He let go, shoving the man facedown on the table.

Kirby looked back at the weapons. "This just can't be good, it just can't."



Hanley loped along the street as the street urchin raced beside him. They headed down one crooked lane after another, until the boy finally stopped in front of a worn-out butcher's shop. The sign in the window read <"Closed"> and Hanley looked at the kid in confusion.

<"No, no, come this way."> He beckoned the tall lieutenant with a wave of his hand, leading him around into the alleyway beside the store front.

Blood covered the cobblestones outside the back door where stocks stood in a small yard. Hanley stared for a moment, suddenly concerned that it was human blood before the lowing of a cow in a small shed brought the situation into focus. He turned away, following the boy up to a small door that appeared to be blocked. Before he could say anything, the kid tapped on one side and it swung open, revealing a humid darkness.

"In here?" Hanley bent to one knee and peered inside.

<"Come on, we must hurry!"> The boy pushed the officer out of the way and clambered through the opening. He reached back and grabbed Hanley's wrist, hauling him along behind him.



"NOW!"

The two men hit the door at the same time with booted feet, the force carrying them through the splintered wood and into the darkness beyond. Behind them, Josef dropped into the hole and dove in after them. For a long moment, the Americans lay panting on a cold smooth floor, while Josef fumbled in his pockets for a flashlight. The beam blinded them when he finally switched it on, and then the Frenchman cast it away from them and over objects tumbled about what seemed to be a large room.

Saunders found his feet first. "What is this stuff?" He studied a wooden crate, marked on the side in stenciled German. "What's this say?" Next to him, Rory shrugged, and they both turned to the Frenchman.

Josef stood in open-mouthed wonderment, eyes wide as a child's on Christmas morning. He swallowed hard a few times, attempted to speak and then just shook his head. Backing his way to the door, he stuck his head through and looked up at his men. <"It's here, it's all here!">

Rory took advantage of the moment and leaned in close to Saunders. "He said, 'it's here.' I don't know what IT is, but he must want it awful bad to take this chance."

"Shut up." Josef cuffed Rory hard, knocking him into a crate. "We don't have much time. I need two crates, numbered 2401 and 2950." He moved a little further into the room, reaching out with trembling fingers to caress the rough wood of the nearest crate. <"My God, I thought it was all gone.">

Saunders shook his head, judging the distance to the door, and wondering just how he and Rory would get by the armed goons standing guard. "I don't read German." He heard Rory's muffled snort behind him and forced himself not to smile.

"Idiot," Josef repeated. "The numbers are the same in German or English or French. Start looking: 2401 and 2950." He aimed the flashlight so it illuminated an entire row of boxes. "Now!"

Rory shuffled to the far end and began inspecting the markings. Saunders started with the closest and moved slowly away from Josef, mumbling the numbers to himself. Almost immediately he saw 2950 stenciled on the side of a narrow crate crammed between two large boxes. Without a pause, he moved on, still muttering under his breath.

"So, Josef." Rory stretched his back, one hand pressed into his flank, then returned to his inspection. "What's in the boxes? Gold? Munitions?" He froze for a moment, picturing in his mind the result of blowing the building right on top of an ammo dump. If these containers held explosives of any kind, the detonation could be catastrophic.

The Frenchman gestured with his flashlight for Rory to continue looking. "It's art."



Saunders looked over his shoulder, eyebrows disappearing into his hairline. "Art? We're risking our lives for art?"

Josef stepped forward, teeth clenched and light raised high. "Yes, Sergeant, for art. The Germans stole all these treasures from the national museums and galleries. My brother and I helped them, thinking we were keeping them safe from bombers and fighting. But the Germans were stealing them!" Outrage distorted his face, his features already elongated by the glow of the flashlight.

Rory shook his head. "The Germans didn't put these here. Scuttlebutt is they took off with thousands of paintings and statues and it's all in Hitler's fortress." He caught Saunders' eye, and looked quickly down at the number on a sizeable box and away again. 2401. "I'm just wondering who's stealing what from whom." He stepped in front of the box and faced Josef.

"It doesn't matter to you, Sergeant O'Brian." Josef pulled a pistol from his jacket and aimed it at Saunders' head. "If it hadn't been for your demolitions, we'd have cleared all of this out of here weeks ago."

Rory stared at the man for a moment, thinking hard. "One street over. The library that fell entirely into its basement." He grinned suddenly at Saunders. "A righteous job on that one, Chip. Hardly a brick in the street. It all came down exactly as planned."

"Yes, just as planned." Josef tucked the barrel of the pistol behind Saunders' ear and shoved him to his knees. "And took down the roof of the catacombs that led to our storeroom here." He set the flashlight on top of the nearest crate. "We dug for days, but couldn't get through. The walls kept collapsing on us. Two men died under the rubble." Josef didn't look particularly upset over the loss of his men. "So we had to find another way. This way." He curled the fingers of his left hand around his right and braced his feet apart, the pistol dead steady against Saunders' head.

Saunders tilted his head slightly, blue eyes coming to bear on Rory who stood in impotent fury. He blinked slowly, hoping to calm his friend down but well aware the hot-headed Irishman was liable to do anything. The gunsight on the pistol jammed against his ear, and he grunted in pain, throwing up his hands to forestall Rory making a move. "It's okay, it's okay."

Josef nodded in agreement. "Listen to your friend. All you have to do is what I ask and nothing more. Your friend here lives and so does the medic. Slide that crate out, Sergeant, I know it's one of mine." He released the pressure on Saunders' head, waving the barrel of the gun from side to side. "Jean! Pierre!"

The other men dropped into the hole and entered the room. One proceeded to the box behind Rory, shoving the tall American away from it. Pulling a crowbar from a long side pocket hidden in the seam of his pants, he quickly broke it open. Another of Josef's men pulled a length of rope from his pocket, snapping it tightly between his fists. At a nod from Josef, he yanked Saunders' hands behind him and tied him securely, including ankles.

The Frenchman turned his attention to the crates. The beam of his flashlight passed over flickers of color from the edges of the canvasses stored inside number 2401. Removing his jacket, Jean began rolling the paintings and fitting them carefully into the rings sewn inside the garment. When the jacket could hold no more, he opened his pants, and slid a few more rolled canvasses down the voluminous thighs. When he finished, he nodded at Josef and hurried back to the door, calling to another of the Frenchmen.

Rage roiled in Rory's belly, churning up his throat and threatening to explode his head. The sight of Saunders, helpless on the stone floor trussed up like an animal, Saunders who'd pulled him out of the worst jam of his life...Rory had to do something.



Inside the catacombs, the darkness was complete. Hanley stood for a moment, waiting for his eyes to accommodate before he realized they wouldn't. He could feel the kid doing something right next to him, but until the little flame flared up, he had no idea what. The boy held up a small lamp, handing it to the tall man.

Although he'd known the catacombs were lined with bones, it was still a startling sight. Hanley swallowed hard, gaze bouncing from a row of grinning skulls to a carefully balanced set of femurs holding up an entire section of ceiling. He realized suddenly that the kid was watching him, gauging his reaction. He turned to the boy and swung the light, waving him onward.



Doc stumbled to his knees, holding his head between both hands. Jean-Baptiste laid one hand anxiously across the man's shoulders, silently offering comfort but also hoping to get him moving again. Joachim was somewhere in here, and Helene, and the combination could be lethal. Afraid to backtrack to the church, Jean-Baptiste was traversing unexplored territory, tunnels he'd never set foot in. He knew what to look for as far as exits to the street were concerned, but some of the areas were downright dangerous. He shook his head at his own folly: today all the catacombs were dangerous.

Just ahead, the faint light of the late afternoon sun shone down through a few small holes in the street above. Normally, Jean-Baptiste would steer clear of such an area, concerned about a cave-in. Today, though, he hoped he would find an exit nearby. He extinguished the lamp to save what was left of the oil.

The medic groaned, lifting his head a little. He squinted at the boy, a tired smile quirking the corners of his mouth. "How much longer we got down here, son? I'm gettin' awful tired." He probed the bandage on the back of his head gently and then studied the damp blood that slicked his fingers. His vision was definitely fading now, and the boy slid in and out of focus. Pulling himself up with the boy's help, Doc leaned heavily against the nearest support beam. He found himself face to face with a row of leering skulls. Swallowing down an oath, he again addressed his companion. "Our mamas are gonna tan our hides."

Jean-Baptiste urged Doc onward, taking his elbow and steering him toward the pool of dim light on the stone floor. A narrow stream of water oozed down one side of the corridor, carrying bits of rock and dust and, oddly enough, feathers. Jean-Baptiste stayed clear of the water, keeping their footing dry and relatively stable. Arriving beneath the holes, he brought Doc to a halt and looked up, trying to decide just where they were in the city. Alas, the openings were only an inch or so in diameter, much too small to afford a view through several feet of stone and packed dirt. He couldn't see any buildings, only a faint impression of the blue sky above.

Doc slid to the ground again, his eyes rolling up in his head. Jean-Baptiste caught him as much as he could, preventing him from striking the ground too hard. The man's dead weight almost toppled him over and he landed hard as he overbalanced. He found himself nose to nose with an old-fashioned hinge. After folding Doc's own arm under his head for a cushion, he investigated the hardware. Scrabbling at the block of wood attached to the hinge, he soon uncovered all four sides of a door.

"What are ya doin'?" The medic remained on the floor, but his eyes were open, staring at Jean-Baptiste. He shivered, the tremors wracking his body.

Jean-Baptiste merely glanced over his shoulder, smiling in what he hoped was an encouraging manner. Before him, the door seemed embedded into the surrounding rocks. There was no handle, no way to get ahold of it at all. Frustrated, Jean-Baptiste kicked hard at it, but only succeeded in bruising his own foot.

Sitting there, staring at what could have been their escape hatch, Jean-Baptiste suddenly realized he could hear voices, voices that were growing steadily louder. He looked wildly around, spinning in his anxiety. In many parts of the catacombs could be found niches or tiny anterooms, like the room where Doc had been imprisoned. But not here. Jean-Baptiste turned back to the medic, but found him unconscious again. The kid couldn't carry the full-grown man, he knew. He also knew he wouldn't leave him, either. Pulling the rat from his sleeve, Jean-Baptiste stroked the sleek fur from ears to tail. Tears filled his eyes, but the boy refused to let them fall. Swiping his face with his filthy sweater, he knelt in front of the medic, draping a protective arm over him.

The voices grew nearer. Jean-Baptiste turned his head to face them, full of grim determination.



Littlejohn climbed out of the steep staircase, shoving the narrow wooden door above his head hard so that it fell against the ground outside. Nelson followed, his M1 slung over his shoulder. They both blinked against the sun, now low in the sky and directly visible over the buildings ahead of them. An

elderly Parisian couple stared at them curiously, and then continued on slowly by. Littlejohn picked up the door and slammed it shut again.

"Now what?" Nelson stretched, then shook his arms out, causing all the dried mud to flake off in a storm of dust. He coughed and then sneezed, pulling his jacket up over his face.

Littlejohn smirked, and glanced down at his own clothes. The clinging mud of an hour earlier must have added a few pounds of weight to his uniform. He shrugged, deciding against Nelson's tactic for now. He pulled the map from his pocket. "Okay, we went in here..." He held the chart in Nelson's face. "...and now we are here." He pointed again while Nelson nodded his agreement. "No Sarges, no Doc. Lots of GIs drinking. Nobody who saw nothing."

Nelson hitched up his pants. "It's like they disappeared, Littlejohn." He looked up to find the big man glaring at him, his blue eyes hot and dangerous.

"Don't ever say that, Billy. Everybody's somewhere." Angry as he was, Littlejohn didn't look like he quite believed his own words. He shrugged and then shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. His rifle swung between his shoulder blades. "Come on, let's get back to the Lieutenant, let him know this sector's clear, too."

The two soldiers looked around them once more, taking in the dirty courtyard next to a bombed out shop, the broken windows and the sadly deserted air of the place. They turned and hurried away, back to Hanley's jeep.



Jacobson sat on the hood of the jeep, kicking the bumper with his boot heels. His M1 lay behind him, atop Hanley's map.

"Hey, Jacobson!" Littlejohn's convivial baritone boomed down the street. The big man and Nelson trotted along, panting lightly. "Where's the lieutenant?"

"He went off with some French kid. Kid had a note from Cajé who had freed him from some French guys in the tunnels. Said Kirby was holding some men down there and Cajé was continuing to look for Saunders and Doc." Jacobson turned and picked up his rifle. "I'm going to catch up to him."

Littlejohn rested one large hand on the stock of Jacobson's M1. "How about you stay here and we catch him up?" He glanced at the map. "Cajé and Kirby were here?" He pointed.

Jacobson closed his mouth in mid-protest. "Yeah, the kid said here." He leaned back on the jeep, resting his hands on the top of his ammo bags. "How come I have to be the one to stay here?"

Nelson looked over at his tall friend. "'cause you're the new guy, Jacobson. The new guy always has to do the waiting around."

Jacobson shook his head, waving them off. "Right, Nelson. I came in in North Africa, how about you?"

The two 1st squad members were already well down the street and Nelson's only answer was a brief wave of his hand.



Cajé prodded his captive in the back, hoping to get the man moving a little faster. "Come on, you know where they are, let's get going." He ground his teeth as Joachim slowed further. They stopped, the Frenchman with his hands bound and his ankles tethered by the leather belt. Cajé stepped back a little, holding the Garand level and ready.



"Where do you think we are going, American?" Joachim turned to face Cajé, blood still running down from a cut over his eye. He panted lightly, a little more than could be accounted for by the speed they were walking. In the light of Cajé's flashlight, he looked pale, his eyes wild and slightly out of focus.

"You know exactly where." Cajé pointed down the tunnel, waving the man onward. "Now."

Joachim nodded, turned and then stumbled, falling to the stone floor. Blood pooled under his injured arm. He moaned, trying to stand, and then collapsed again.

Cajé looked up and down the tunnel, wondering if this was a ploy by the Frenchman, or if he had indeed lost enough blood to make him lightheaded. He drew closer, reaching out one booted foot to shove at the man's shoulder. "Up, Joachim, on your feet." When he got no response, he circled around the man, shining the light in his face.

Joachim threw his good arm over his eyes, protecting them from the light. He moaned again and shook his head mournfully. "I can tell you where they are, GI, but I can't go with you. I can't get up." He demonstrated again, rising partway and then sinking down to the stones.

The blow to Cajé's head was totally unexpected. He fell to his knees, hanging on to his Garand by pure instinct. In front of him, Joachim grimaced as he tried to gain his feet, struggling to get to the American before he threw off his stupor.

Turning, Cajé caught a glimpse of a shadow, something long in its hands as it swung again. He threw up his right arm, blocking it successfully although pain shot through to his shoulder. He grabbed at the object, his hand closing around old, smooth bone. Forcing down a shuddering revulsion, he yanked hard, pulling his assailant toward him.

The shadow let go and retreated down the tunnel, panting heavily. "Joachim!"

A woman, then, Cajé thought through the haze of pain in his head. He stepped back from Joachim and trained the rifle at the woman, keeping a wary eye on the Frenchman at the same time. "Come here." His voice was shaky, and much louder than he'd intended. He gestured with the Garand's barrel toward the man on the ground.

For a long few seconds, the woman stared back at him, and then turned and took off running down the tunnel. Cajé had no choice. He knew Joachim was hurt, hopefully incapacitated. The woman was the more direct threat now. He sprinted after her, his boots ringing loudly in the tunnel.

Just as Cajé was gaining ground, only a few strides away, the woman ducked into an alcove, whirling around to face him, her face filled with dark fury. He skidded to a stop, pointing the rifle. She stared wildly around the enclosed area, as though looking for a weapon. When she realized she was trapped, she returned her gaze to the wild-eyed American, and raised her hands in defeat. He motioned her back up the corridor toward Joachim, who was now outstretched on the floor, apparently lifeless.

The woman threw herself down next to him with a soft cry. "Joachim..." Stretching out one hand, she gently stroked the back of his head.

Cajé cleared his throat. "Take me to my sergeant and the medic." He moved into the light of the flashlight where it still lay on the tunnel floor, his face now in darkness and his shadow stretching up the corridor.

The woman shook her head, sobbing. "You killed my brother." Lifting her tear stained face, she spat on the floor at Cajé's feet. "You killed my brother!"

The Cajun stared back, trying to ascertain if the Frenchman was playing possum or if he really was dead. By the amount of blood shining black in the flashlight's glare, he really could have died. Then again... Cajé wasn't taking any chances. "Turn him over."

The woman looked up again. "What?"

"I said, turn him over." The barrel of the rifle wavered a little as a wave of dizziness swept over Cajé. "Show me he's dead."

The woman began to laugh, softly at first and then with increasing hysteria. "You want me to show you he's dead? You killed my brother and now I have to show you he's dead?" The tears lessened as her rage grew. She climbed to her feet, one hand bracing on her brother's body.

Cajé took a step back, swaying slightly. He took one hand off the Garand, rubbing the back of his head where a palpable lump was growing. "Stay there." What should have been a command came out more as a request. He blinked, forcing himself to focus.

Instead of meekly acquiescing, the woman threw herself at Cajé, a knife suddenly in her hands. She slashed hard at him, and he stumbled backward, swinging with the rifle instead of firing it. His lifelong respect of woman, carefully ingrained by his mother and sisters, betrayed him now. The knife

skated along the stock and sliced neatly through his bicep. He cried out, and swung again, connecting with her temple and the woman fell abruptly, like a marionette with its strings cut.

Caje fell to his knees, clutching his injured arm. The blood seeped between his fingers, dripping to the damp stone floor. He stared at the woman a moment longer and then crawled over to her, reaching out one shaking hand and pressing it over her carotid. After a long moment, he let his hand fall away and his head drooped again – she was dead. And Joachim...he moved slowly over to the Frenchman and repeated his careful scrutiny, but the man was dead also.

Caje slumped over, leaning against a wall of leering skulls. He fumbled his dressing from the pocket on his web belt and clumsily wrapped it around his arm, holding one end in his teeth to tighten it. He then retrieved his flashlight and shined it the way the woman had come. He had no choice but to try and backtrack her journey.

No choice at all.



Hanley crouched in the narrowed section of the tunnel, staring at the boy crawling ahead of him. He wasn't at all sure that he would fit through, although the kid seemed to think so. On hands and knees, the tall soldier began to crawl, carefully setting the lamp ahead of him with each movement forward.

After an interminable amount of time, Hanley popped out into a section of the catacombs that looked as huge as a subway tunnel. He could see people here and there in the dark shadowy recesses, people who didn't seem too thrilled to be disturbed by Claude or the American officer. Claude beckoned Hanley on, seemingly irritated by the man's lack of trust in his ability to take him to the other Americans. He weaved in and out of the darkness, picking turns that seemed random to Hanley. "Are you sure..." He let the words trail off, realizing that it didn't matter what he said, the kid didn't speak English. And he had to assume the boy knew where he was going or he wouldn't have brought Caje's note in the first place.

Ten minutes later, Hanley saw the spill of light from an isolated area of the tunnels. He turned the corner and found himself face to face with Kirby and his BAR.



"Well, it's about time! I thought I was gonna have to just shoot these guys and walk outta here all on my own!" Kirby pointed at the four men still sitting trussed up like Thanksgiving turkeys around the table. "Caje find you okay?"

Claude peeked around the doorway, grinning from ear to ear.

Kirby smiled. "Ah, the kid got you." He looked up into Hanley's somber face. "What? Caje didn't get Sarge and Doc out yet?"

Hanley shook his head, moving into the room and taking in the crates of weapons and ammo and supplies, as well as the sullen Frenchmen watching his every move. "They planning on some sort of takeover here?"

Kirby shrugged. "Hard to say. Caje asked 'em where Sarge and Doc were. They didn't know, or they ain't sayin', one or the other. Caje took off to find them himself." He looked at Claude, suddenly frowning. "Hey, where's the other kid?"

The muscles in Hanley's neck snapped audibly as he looked around at Kirby. "What other kid?"

"There was another kid with that one, these clowns were holding them hostage. Caje and me, we rescued 'em. They said Sarge was with...with this guy. They didn't know where Doc was." Kirby's agitation increased as he kept on talking, knowing he was sounding more and more insane. "Caje wrote you a note, sent the boys to deliver it. He told me to watch these guys. He went to find Doc."

Hanley studied the tops of his boots, thinking hard. "We've got to find Cajé."

Kirby threw out his arms in exasperation, the BAR bouncing off his chest as it hung from his suspenders. "Well, no kidding, begging your pardon, sir, but what are we going to do with these guys in the meantime?"



Littlejohn and Nelson entered the catacombs through the same door Claude and Jean-Baptiste had escaped through and through which had passed Hanley and Claude not fifteen minutes before.

"You know, these bones aren't as creepy as they used to be." Nelson waved his flashlight over a particularly artsy arrangement, and stopped to look more closely.

"Billy! We've kinda in a hurry here."

"I know, I know. Just wondering how these things all held together." Nelson trotted along to catch up.

"Time and pressure, just like what's holding us together." Littlejohn stopped suddenly as they rounded a corner, coming face to face with a cave-in. A round opening approx two feet across showed signs of recent access – boot prints and dragging marks. The tall private's head began to shake back and forth before his companion could even say anything.

"It's okay, Littlejohn. If the Lieutenant got through here, you can, too." Nelson bent down and looked through the hole.

Littlejohn continued shaking his head. "Lieutenant Hanley may be as tall as me, but he's not as wide." He addressed Nelson's boots as they slid into the hole. "You go ahead and I'll, I'll go back and find another way in."

The boots stopped moving forward. "Okay, I'll catch up with the lieutenant. You got your flashlight?"

LJ nodded, before realizing that Nelson couldn't see him. "Yeah, okay, see you on the other side." He turned and ran back up the tunnel.

Nelson listened hard a moment, leaning on his elbows, his M1 in his hands. He had to push it ahead of him in the narrow space, then crawl after it. The flashlight wedged between his collar and the crook of his neck reflected its beam all over the place. Nelson reached up to steady it, and saw that the narrow crawlspace ended ten feet ahead. The exit was even narrower than the entrance: Littlejohn would never have made it.

Nelson slithered over a sharp edged piece of masonry and slid down to the smooth rock of the catacomb floor. Picking up his rifle, he shined the light around, finding himself in a room large enough to hold his entire squad. Climbing to his feet, he set off down the tunnel.



Littlejohn hit the door leading to the butcher shop's courtyard hard, banging it back against its fragile frame. Breaking into a run he headed back to Jacobson and the map spread over the jeep's hood, hoping to find another way to catch up with his squad mates before they got into trouble.



Cajé knelt on the floor, his uniform pants soaking up Joachim's blood. His head reeled with the terrible reality of the situation. He had lost the only link he had to Saunders, O'Brian and Doc. And he'd also lost the woman whose link to the men was unknown to him. For a long moment he stared into the darkness, lost in his uncertainty. His flashlight flickered and snapped him out of his funk in the sudden certainty that he'd be alone in the tunnels with two dead bodies and no clue where he needed to go. He heard something move a little distance down the tunnel, something too large to be a rodent or an errant wind current. He rose to his feet, Garand ready in his hands. The flashlight steadied and his nerve steadied, too. His instincts kicked back in and he held the light out to one side, drawing any potential fire away from his body. He drew closer to a corner, heart pounding. The noise was louder now, certainly

shoe leather on the stone floor. Crouching down, Cajé slowed and stuck the barrel of the Garand around the corner, followed carefully by a quick look.

Hanley and one of the kids stood there, as close to pulling the trigger as Cajé ever wanted to see. He sagged against the wall, unmindful of the bones.

"Lieutenant." His voice was a mere whisper.

"I thought you had one of the men with you. Taking you to Saunders." Hanley moved quickly past his scout, as if he could conjure the Frenchman into existence, along with Saunders and Doc.

Claude reached out, his trembling fingers touching the blood-soaked pants. He looked up at Cajé, eyes wide. <"Whose blood, mssr?">

Cajé looked back at the boy, eyes just as wide and wondering what the answer would mean to him. <"Joachim"> He paused, unsure how honest he should be. <"And some woman.">

The color drained from Claude's face. <"Is it true?"> He grabbed the front of Cajé's jacket, forcing the American to lean down to him. <"Please, Mssr, is it true?">

Cajé nodded, all his breath gone and leaving him feeling deflated. <"Yes, it's true">

The boy stepped back and threw his hands in the air. <"Thank God, Thank God!"> He then clasped his hands in prayer and fell to his knees.

Hanley stared at the boy a moment and then turned his attention to Cajé. "So we have no idea where Saunders and Doc are?"

"No sir. Sarge and O'Brian are with Joachim's brother but I don't know where. I don't think anyone knows where Doc is." He started to spread his hands in frustration but stopped himself before he could. "We could try to back trail the woman."

Hanley stared hard at Cajé. "The woman? What woman?"

Cajé only shook his head. "I don't know who she was, but she had some connection to Joachim and his brother, the guys who took Doc and Sarge." He looked around, suddenly aware that Hanley was alone. "Where's the rest of the squad?"

"Checking out other tunnels. Kirby's still watching those men. Maybe the other Frenchman will come back with Saunders." Hanley didn't look as though he believed that. He turned to Claude, who had finally finished celebrating. "Ask him if he has any more ideas."

Cajé slowly massaged his aching arm, tugging the dressing tighter. <"WE need to find our men, it's getting late. Where do you think we should go?">

Claude thought a moment and then shrugged his shoulders. He winced at the discouragement in Hanley's eyes and glanced around the tunnel. <"This way, I think maybe this way."> He set off without looking back, hoping the soldier wouldn't see that he was lying.



Nelson tried to disentangle himself from the two women who seemed think he was their personal savior. He no sooner pulled one woman's hands from his sleeve when the other glommed on. Under other circumstance he might have enjoyed it, but not now.

"Listen, I'm looking for somebody, well, three somebodies." He winced, wondering if he sounded as moronic to people who didn't speak English as he did to himself. The women only smiled and embraced him closer.

"No no, no time for that. Stop that!" He slapped the hand of the more aggressive of the two, as she reached for his belt. "Now, look, I have to find somebody. You go back to, well, whatever you were doing." He glanced at the skinny Frenchman glowering at him from the shadows. "Or whoever you were doing." Hurrying away, he didn't look back.

The next tunnel looked a little more promising in that it was less populated. The little candles burnt to stubs that littered the first few corridors he'd searched were far fewer here. After the first ten yards or so, he saw nobody. He shined his flashlight nervously ahead, rifle up and ready to fire.

A rat scuttled across the stones in front of him and he jumped, barely stopping himself from pulling the trigger. He moved deeper into the darkness, away from the whispered declarations of love and lust. It wasn't a world he inhabited normally, but now it seemed as though he was leaving behind civilization, and he wanted nothing more than to turn around and join in the wanton and joyless passion.

It felt decidedly wrong to be working alone. He was so used to being a part of the well-oiled machinery that was 1st squad that he hardly knew how to act. He knew the job, after all, but it usually

meant depending on the actions of several other men. His friend, Littlejohn, for example, who often swept the opposite side of recons, meeting Nelson on the back side or else firing in tandem when they did find Krauts. Working solo seemed more suited to Cajé, who was God knew where in the catacombs.

Another rat strolled into view, dragging a tail cut short and wearing a fur coat worn thin by age. The creature looked up at him, eyes shining silver in the light from the flash. Billy stared back, finding a kinship in the animal's curious puzzlement. The whole damn war was a curiosity to him. Pulled from his comfortable home back in the states to the battlefields of Europe had almost broken his youthful spirit. Only the camaraderie of men like Littlejohn, and the leadership of men like Saunders had kept him from descending into the depths of depression and inertia that sank older more experienced men into the mires of battle fatigue.

Nelson stamped his foot and the rat limped away, disappearing in the darkness. The American shined his light down the path the rat took, wondering if it knew something he didn't. He glanced around, looking for some reason not to follow it. Finding none, he took off after the rat.



Cajé led Hanley further into the tunnels. Claude crept along a few feet ahead of both soldiers, ostensibly leading the way, but both the kid and Cajé knew he was just bluffing. Cajé kept his eyes on the ground and directed the kid by subtle signals the tall soldier didn't seem to catch.

Cajé buckled suddenly to the ground, his face white in the dim beam of his flashlight. Hanley quickly checked the bandage wrapped around the scout's bicep and found it soaked in fresh blood.

"You're bleeding pretty good, Cajé. I'm just going to add another dressing over the top." Hanley removed his own bandage from his field first aid kit and rapidly wound it around Cajé's arm. "You might need a tourniquet."

Cajé shook his head, desperately trying to clear the fuzziness from his thoughts. "No, no tourniquet. Don't want to risk losing my arm." He flexed his fingers, wincing at the pain shooting up to his shoulder with each movement. "Just tie it tight, Lieutenant."

Hanley pursed his lips and did as the private requested. The kid hovered over his shoulder, eyes wide with concern.

"Mssr, I...I don't know where to find your friends."> Claude dropped his gaze to the ground in embarrassment.

Cajé swallowed a mouthful of water from Hanley's proffered canteen. "I know. But you'll have to help me keep looking.">

Claude threw his arms around Cajé's neck, burying his face in the soldier's chest. The tears came, hot on Cajé's skin, as the boy trembled against him.

Hanley watched with troubled eyes. "We don't have much time, Cajé. That Josef may have returned to find his men gone. No telling what may be going on that we don't know about."

Cajé nodded, patting the boy on the back awkwardly with his good hand. "I know, Lieutenant, but these kids, this boy...they've lost far more than we can ever hope to understand. I think Saunders and Doc would forgive us this minute."

Hanley silently agreed and stood, walking to the edge of the beam of light, squinting into the darkness. Nothing moved and he sensed nothing out of the ordinary, ordinary being an arbitrary term this day. Turning back, he helped Claude to his feet and then Cajé. The Cajun leaned heavily on the tall lieutenant, and it took several moments for him to get his feet under him.

Claude looked from one man to the other, knowing that Cajé would keep his secret, but that knowledge was secondary now. He knew he couldn't help the Americans and the thought pierced him like an arrow.



Nelson crept along the tunnel, keeping his flashlight cloaked to the bare minimum. He kept his eyes on the rat, following the odd pattern the animal's tail made in the dust on the stone floor. He'd outdistanced the more public areas of the tunnels and no longer heard the voices and catcalls of the prostitutes. Now it was just him and the rat.

The creature suddenly stopped, nose twitching and whiskers vibrating. It stood up on its hind legs and then turned, running directly at Nelson. Ducking between the private's booted feet, it vanished back up the tunnel.

Nelson continued to stare forward, wondering just what had unnerved the rat. He opened up the lens of the flashlight further, casting a longer beam of light. The smell hit him a second later, the smell of pennies fresh from the bank, newly minted and laid in his hand a few at a time in exchange for chores completed.

Bile rose in Nelson's throat, threatening to burst out of his mouth. Ahead two bodies lay in the dust, unmoving. Dark blood pooled on the stones. Nelson found himself praying, his lips moving silently as he stood there, looking for signs of life, any movement that would tell him his friends weren't dead. Finally, he moved closer and realized the bodies weren't wearing the uniforms of the US Army. In fact, one of them was a woman. Both were still warm, their joints loose and pliable. He turned them over and studied their slack faces. Both were complete strangers to the young American.

Nelson cast his light around, looking for any sense in the situation. The only one he could surmise didn't make sense. Either Saunders or O'Brian, or even Doc had killed them, perhaps to escape. He didn't think so, though. Whatever had happened here, the killer had moved on and Nelson had no fear of him returning to the scene of the crime.

He moved off down the tunnel, finding a myriad of boot prints headed away from the bodies. With a quick glance back, Nelson headed further in the labyrinth with renewed determination.

The bones here were arranged in different patterns to those where he had initially entered the catacombs. He wondered if the variance was due to the age of the bones, when they had been moved to the l'Ossuaire or if different work crews had placed their own special stamp on the area on which they had worked. Some seemed more, well, artistic was an odd word to apply to the dead, but it was the only way to describe it.

He came to a cross roads, shining the light down the three options of corridors. Studying the floor, the flurry of boot prints made it obvious which way he had to turn. Nelson swallowed the lump in his throat and headed into the darkness.



Jean-Baptiste trembled, his arms wrapped tightly around the American medic and his head tucked down into the man's neck. He knew their luck had run out. Two years had passed since his father had died and not quite that long since he watched his mother being marched away by laughing German soldiers. He never did find out what happened.

Life among the street orphans had taken on an almost family-like feel. If the children didn't exactly love each other, they at least looked out for one another and made sure that even the smallest child had food to eat and a roof over his or her head at night. Claude had become his brother and the twins were in fact his cousins by blood. Matilde took over as de facto mother while he, at the tender age of ten was the father. Claude was eleven, but even after years on the street, he had less than a tenth of the survival savvy Jean-Baptiste possessed.

Now, though, none of that mattered. He remembered scrounging through German rucksacks while the men were on a smoke break, stealing anything he could carry, picking through garbage, huddling beneath bridges during the rain. The discovery of the catacombs and the sanctuary of the church had given them all a home. Now the catacombs were a tomb, as Jean-Baptiste was certain death was only seconds away.

The voices drew closer, whispering, magnified in the enclosed tunnels. Metallic clicks accompanied heavy footsteps, sounds that indicated military uniforms, or perhaps Josef returning with the

other Americans. Either would not be good. Jean-Baptiste drew his tattered coat over his head, shielding the medic.



"Come on, Cajé, just a few steps more." Hanley staggered as the Cajun tripped over the uneven floor and slumped against him. For the last twenty minutes, Cajé had been fading visibly. His footsteps were uneven and faltering, and he no longer held the Garand in front of him, ready for action. Now it hung from his hands, useless.

Claude suddenly froze, almost dropping Cajé's flashlight. He stared into the darkness, his body an inadequate shield between the injured American and whatever it was he saw in the shadows. "Qui est-la?" His voice trembled and soared into the higher registers.

Hanley halted, letting Cajé slump to the ground. He stepped up beside the boy, his carbine at the ready.

"Qui est-la?" Claude put more force into the words on the repetition, now that he had firepower at his side.

An incredulous voice answered from somewhere ahead in the tunnel and low down. "Claude?" A shadow detached itself from the others and flew toward them. "Claude?"

The two boys met, embracing as if they'd been separated for years rather than just a few hours. Jean-Baptiste ducked away from the other boy's frantic arms as he recognized the smaller of the two American soldiers. He raced to him.

<"Mssr! I have your friend, he is here. He is injured."> Jean-Baptiste danced backward in the tunnel, enticing them all to follow.

Cajé looked up at Hanley, exhaustion lining his face. "It's Doc, he says he's got Doc!" He managed to get to his feet, using the Garand as a crutch.

Hanley grabbed the scout around the shoulders and helped him forward. They followed Jean-Baptiste to the dark form lying on the cold stones, and kneeled there, almost afraid to touch the man.

"Doc?" Hanley laid a tentative hand on the medic's shoulder, gently turning him over. A dirty cloth circled Doc's head, holding a bloody pad over an area on the back. The man moaned as Hanley checked the bandage.

"Doc..." The word floated out on a sigh as Cajé fell to the floor. He took the flashlight from Claude, lifting the medic's eyelids one at a time and shining the light in them.

Hanley watched, impatience surging through him. "Well?"

Cajé shook his head, "I dunno, Lieutenant, he's completely out of it. We need to get him out of here and to the aid station." He winced as his own wound reminded him of its existence.

"You, too, Cajé." Hanley studied the boy who'd been with Doc. The kid couldn't have been much older than a first grader, he thought, his heart heavy with the weight of the orphans' plight. But he couldn't let himself be distracted by that now. "Cajé, ask him where the nearest exit out of this place is."

Cajé glanced at the boy. <"Is there a place to get out of here close by?">

Jean-Baptiste hesitated, then looked at Claude. They both took a few steps into the darkness, shining the remaining flashlight on the wall. <"I think there's one here, Mssr. I cannot be sure, but Claude and I can look.">

Cajé knew they were out of options and had to depend on the boys. <"Please, and hurry. This man is badly injured.">

Jean-Baptiste looked mildly offended. <"That's what I was doing in the first place, Mssr.">

Cajé held up a hand, showing he meant no offense. <"I know, just, please hurry."> He looked over at Hanley who had removed his own jacket and was tucking it around the medic. "They think there is and are going to look for it."

Hanley nodded. "I hope they can find it soon. I don't think either of you can wait too much longer." He waited for Cajé to disagree, but was surprised at the scout's quiet answer.

"I know, Lieutenant, I know." Cajé settled himself against Doc's legs, sharing what little body heat he had. He braced his wounded arm with the other and dropped his chin to his chest, ready to wait for whatever happened next.



Josef flipped Saunders over with one lazy kick, turning him away from Rory, and then stepped over him to investigate the treasures his men were packing.

Rory leaned on the wall, his fingers clenched in tight fists against his thighs. He stared at the back of Saunders' head while fury boiled in his belly and pounded in his ears. The Frenchman nearest him pulled open another crate, spilling small porcelain statues across the dirt, and he bent to pick one up, wondering just how the tiny ballerina could be worth more than living, breathing men. The man backhanded him across the face, sending him staggering against the remaining crates.

Josef took the figurine from the American's hand, waving the pistol under his nose. "You must be patient. Just a few more minutes." He stepped slowly backwards, splitting his attention between the tall sergeant and his men. <"Quickly! We only have a few moments.">

The men took one last look inside the crates, shaking their heads at Josef's unspoken question. They climbed quickly out through the doorway and disappeared.

"Well, Sergeant, it's time for us to get moving. You and I are going to meet your man out front. You will tell him that everyone is out. And the building will come down, yes? And if I don't join my men afterward, the medic will not see the light of day."

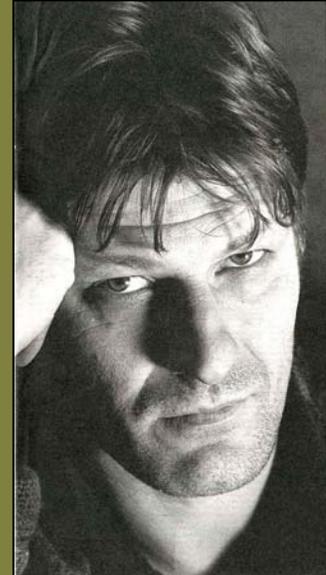
Rory shook his head, not taking his eyes off the man on the floor. "No, I'm not leaving him."

The Frenchman leaned over Saunders, the pistol in his hand once again. "I could just kill him now...?"

Saunders groaned, twisting away from the hard steel of the pistol barrel. "Just go, Rory. Whatever you do, you gotta find Doc."

"Chip!"

"NO! Just...just go."



By the time Rory and Josef stepped from the building into the waning afternoon sun, the other Frenchmen were half a block away and moving quickly. Sour acid burned Rory's throat and knotted his stomach. He glanced over his shoulder at Josef, and felt the pistol jammed in his back. The doomed building rose behind the Frenchman, its once elegant lines now cock-eyed and sagging. The scaffolding did little to disguise its decay, glinting malevolently here and there.

"Sergeant O'Brian? What's going on?" The corporal leaned in the doorway of the blast shed, the cuff on his left wrist folded back to expose his watch.

Rory swallowed hard. It was now or never. "What's going on, boyo?" He took a deep breath and tensed his muscles. "Everyone GEDDOWN!" He swung an elbow hard at Josef's head, depending entirely on the element of surprise.

The Frenchman ducked, falling backward as Rory fell over him, struggling for control of the gun. Shouts arose around them as the demolitions squad spilled out from behind the safety of the wall and maneuvered for position to help their sergeant while avoiding the threat of the pistol.

The two men rolled over and over, kicking and punching, the pistol held between them like the bizarre trophy in an obscure sport. French and Gaelic curses echoed off the buildings, rising about the cacophony.

The pistol bucked, freezing the two combatants, who both braced for the inevitable pain a gunshot produces. But it never came.

"Sergeant?" The word broke on the second syllable as Corporal Peter Hughes staggered backward, blood spilling between the fingers clenched over his chest. His eyes sought Rory's, meeting them for a brief second before the young man collapsed sideways, falling over the control board. The

main box, painted bright red to distinguish it from the others, lay directly under him, and his dying weight depressed the plunger.

The explosion followed scant seconds later, blowing the roof off the building and showering the men in the street with debris. Almost immediately the secondary charges blew, the walls folding in on themselves in a rising cloud of dust that blotted out the sun.



In the catacombs, the explosion sounded as if it was miles away. If not for the terrible groaning of the support posts, Nelson might have convinced himself that it hadn't happened at all. That and the dirt that fell from the bone covered ceiling convinced him otherwise. He started to run, only pausing every twenty feet or so to check his bearings.



The concussion knocked the boys to their knees and Hanley stumbled against a support column, where he clung while the ground shook beneath his feet. The blocked door buckled, creaking in its frame. Bones cascaded to the floor, clattering with an almost musical sound above the base note of the explosion. Cajé leaned over the medic, sheltering him from the dirt falling from the roof.

Hanley leaned over them both. "We gotta get outta here. I'm gonna find the door, you wait here!" He scrambled over to the boys where they lay sprawled on the floor. "Come on kids, let's dig!"

The three started digging with their fingers around the splintered door frame, exposing the support beams and more packed earth.

Cajé yelped as a skull bounced off his injured arm. He tucked it against his chest, pulling his knees up to make himself as small as possible. He pulled Hanley's jacket closer around Doc's shoulders and leaned over him, protecting him from the larger debris raining down.

"Lieutenant, the whole roof is coming down!"

Hanley glanced up and went right back to digging. "I know, I know!" He ducked as another rack of bones rolled loose and spun down into the tunnel like a set of bowling pins. He grabbed onto the edge of the door as Claude and Jean-Baptiste wedged a piece of wood in the other side. Together, they managed to open the wooden square, revealing open space beyond. Jean-Baptiste instantly threw himself into the void, vanishing from view. Hanley and Claude waiting a moment, ears straining and eyes wide open. Thirty seconds later, Jean-Baptiste reappeared, waving them all onward.

"Allons-y! Maintenant!"

Hanley turned back to Doc and Cajé just as the roof came down in a roar.



Littlejohn rounded the corner, forcing his legs into a shambling trot. Halfway down the block, Jacobson stood by the jeep at perfect attention, his gaze glued to the captain standing next to him. Jampel turned at the sound of Littlejohn's slapping boots and raised one hand in greeting.

The next second an explosion threw them all to the street. Littlejohn grabbed at his helmet as it rolled from his head, wrapping long arms around it and flattening himself to the cobblestones. For a few seconds, he lay there, trying to force some sort of sense into the event. He'd heard no planes in the sky: it couldn't be an air raid. The concussion had been enormous, lifting them all upwards before slamming them back down again. Raising his head, he saw Jampel and Jacobson on their knees, staring down the street in the opposite direction to the way he'd come. He climbed to his feet and staggered to the jeep, joining them.

Jampel glanced at his watch. "I didn't hear a warning horn, did you?" The tall captain looked over at Jacobson who shook his head, reaching up to cup his ringing ears.

Littlejohn stuck a finger in each ear, wriggling furiously, before answering his commanding officer. "What warning horn, sir?"

"For the building demolition, they're supposed to sound a horn." Jampel picked up the M1 from the hood of the jeep and tossed it to Jacobson. "Come on!"



Littlejohn followed the captain around the corner, almost running up the man's back when Jampel stopped abruptly. Almost half the street had caved in, leaving a pit almost thirty feet across. Inching their way closer, the three Americans peered into the hole. A small boy stared up at them, his face smudged with dirt and blood and tears.

"Mssrs! I need your help! My friends are trapped as well as the Americans!"> He pointed under a large square of concrete slanted crazily across the hole.

Jampel slid down into the pit with the boy, pulling a flashlight from his belt as he went. Switching it on, he shined it under the concrete.

"They're here! Hanley's here and some others. Littlejohn, we need men here, and shovels and lights, it's getting dark. I'll wait here, you go NOW!" Jampel's voice trailed off as he crawled forward and under the overhanging debris.



Nelson heard the screaming before he came across the collapsed section of tunnel. Narrowing the beam of his flashlight, he cautiously turned the corner, M1 up and ready for action. The scene before him almost made him drop it again. Lieutenant Hanley and a small boy were scrabbling at a large debris pile, out of which several hands were waving. He ran toward them, almost earning himself a roundhouse punch from Hanley who only stopped himself just in time.

"Nelson, where the hell did you come from?" Hanley stopped his work for a bare second, staring at the young private in open astonishment.

Billy set his rifle down and started hauling chunks of wood and masonry and bones from the pile. "I was following you, I think, sir. Who's under here?"

The kid uncovered an American soldier's back, hunkered down under the rain of bricks. The soldier shivered like a wet dog, raising a cloud of dust. He lifted his head and looked around.

"Lieutenant! We need to get Doc out of here!" He clutched his own arm, his face pale beneath the layer of grime.

From above, a voice boomed down. "Hanley! I've got ropes and shovels and men. If you could help guide them down there..."

Nelson looked up from where he was uncovering Cajé's legs. "Is that Jampel?" His blue eyes widened in incomprehension (lovely word, eh?).

Hanley nodded as he scrambled back up the pile, another kid passing him on his own way back down. "Yep, it's Jampel, alright, and Littlejohn, too."

Nelson swallowed hard against the sudden emotion flooding through him. As he'd doggedly followed the bootprints through the tunnels, he'd felt so completely alone, as though he'd never see any of his squad mates again, let alone his best friend, LJ. To have so many of them delivered back to him all at once, albeit hurt and in pain, was a gift.

The two boys uncovered Doc's boots and helped Nelson slide him out from under the worst of the bone pile. Cajé levered himself to his feet and joined them, a few feet back in the tunnel while Jampel's reinforcements cleared the way out.



Overwhelming fatigue settled over Hanley's shoulders as he stood back in the tunnel, watching the Jampel's men carefully lift the litter carrying his medic to safety. Cajé had managed to scramble out under his own power with the aid of Littlejohn and Nelson on either side. Realizing it would be a few moments before he could make his own ascent to street level, the lieutenant sank to his knees, leaning back on the old bones. He looked back down the tunnel and then turned to the pile of rubble that filled the catacomb from floor to roof.

It didn't look quite the same as it had when he and the boys had been looking for a way out. Then, it had been a solid wall of tumbled masonry, timbers and bones. Now it had spilled wider into the tunnel, leaving a space near the roof. Hanley sighed, wondering if he had the strength to investigate and even if he did, what would be the point. He glanced up as the litter rose to street level and vanished into the waiting hands of the soldiers waiting above.

Jampel's voice wafted down. "Hanley? You coming?"

"Yeah, on my way." Hanley unfolded his long frame and stood. A sound caught his attention, somewhere near the shifted rubble. He stepped closer, climbing over the debris on the tunnel floor.

Holding his hand up to the dark void, he felt air rushing past. And then he heard it again, very distinctly this time – a cough!

"Captain? We got somebody else down here!" He stepped back as men with shovels clambered back down. "In there, I heard a cough."

The men looked at each other, shrugged and began to dig.



Hanley and Nelson sat on a bench outside the main examining room of the aid hospital. They hadn't yet had a chance to clean up and their disheveled uniforms brought them many sideline glances from the nurses and corpsmen passing by. Hanley chainsmoked, lighting the next cigarette from the one before. No one stopped him. His hazel eyes were ringed with fatigue and worry and his fierce expression warned off anyone tempted to reinforce the no-smoking rule.

A tall lanky soldier paced in front of them, his uniform covered with dirt and smears of blood. He paused before turning every thirty feet, alternately staring at the door to the examination area and then the double doors leading outside.

"O'Brian."

The man kept walking.

"O'Brian." Hanley outstretched one long leg into Rory's path. "Sit down or go outside. You're wearing a hole in the floor."

Rory flung himself onto the bench, lowering his head to his hands. "I thought he was dead, the building...blew." He rubbed his forehead furiously with the palms of both hands. "How could anyone survive that?"

Hanley snorted, a ghost of a grin chasing its way across his grimy face. "You've known Saunders long enough to answer that one for yourself." He sucked in a lungful of bitter tobacco and held it there a moment. "I swear he's got nine lives."

Nelson shook his head. "A hundred and nine."

A white coated soldier shoved through the admitting door, his boots splattered with things it was better not to think about. He shoved a hand over his shaved head, perhaps in a habit learned before his military service. He glanced around and caught Hanley's eye, walking over stiffly.

"Lieutenant, about your men. The medic has a skull fracture and a serious concussion, but he has been lucid for a few minutes at a time on several occasions since we've had him here. We'll evac him but he should be back in the ranks in a couple of weeks. Same for your other soldier, LeMay. He lost a good bit of blood, but there was no major damage to the arm and it's been stitched up. A minor concussion. They should both be fine." He smiled tiredly, faint dimples appearing in the lines of his face. "It's nice to give good news."

Hanley nodded, waiting. Beside him, Rory erupted from the bench, towering over the doctor, a look of maniacal madness blazing from eyes ringed with soot.

"What about Chip?"

The doctor took a step back, his face suddenly as white as his coat. "The sergeant? Oh, he's just fine. Bumps and bruises. A lot of dust in his lungs, we'll keep him overnight for that. Otherwise, well, just fine."

Rory fell to the floor, hands covering his eyes. His shoulders shook as he fought to control his breathing. Hanley stood, suddenly aware of how long he'd sat there, hunched over, preparing to mourn not only his best squad leader, but his best friend. The emotions he'd felt at the sight of the filthy blonde hair in that tunnel had been almost overwhelming. His brother restored to him. He knew just how Rory felt.

"It's okay, Sergeant, he'll be fine."

Littlejohn and Kirby burst through the outer doors, anxiety pulling their faces into unaccustomed sober expressions at the sight of Sergeant O'Brian on the floor. "Well?"

Nelson moved to intercept them. "They're all going to be fine. Even the Sarge." He glanced at Rory, as the rangy sergeant got his feet under him and stood, swaying slightly.

"I really thought..." Rory cuffed at stray tears spilling from his eyes. Swallowing hard, he managed to get himself under control. "And Doc, too."

Hanley slid an arm around Rory's shoulder and steered him toward the hospital's inner sanctum. "Let's go check on the men, Sergeant." He looked over his shoulder at Saunders' men and flashed a smile. "Go find yourselves a beer." The door closed behind them.



The other doors swung open again, this time disgorging three grimy children into the waiting area. Jean-Baptiste's arms rested across his abdomen, above which a suspicious lump quivered under his sweater. The twins held hands, staring silently at the three soldiers. Mariette drew her other arm up and popped her thumb into her mouth.

Kirby blinked, well aware that his French would likely not be up to this. "Um, hey kids! You want some chocolate?" He patted his pockets and then turned to Nelson, who held up his empty hands and stepped back. "Aw, common, Billy, you gotta have something."

The children surprised them all by shaking their heads. Jean-Baptiste cleared his throat and adjusted the furry companion under his clothing. <"We just wanted to know how the doctor is."> He looked at each of the three men in turn, hopeful expression fading with each blank face. <"They don't know, we'll have to find out for ourselves.">

Henriette's innocent blue eyes clouded over in an instant, her features drawing up as she stepped away from the other two and toward the information desk. After two deep breaths, she commenced to cry, great heaving sobs that shook her small frame.

The men of first squad responded instantly, gathering around the little girl, patting her back and stroking her long blonde curls. Littlejohn crouched down and smiled at her, but she just closed her eyes and continued bawling.

Behind them the door to the wards swung open and then shut again.



Hanley walked away from Caje's bedside, smiling at the petite nurse whose arrival heralded the scout's pain medicine. She grinned perfunctorily at the lieutenant, but her attention slid immediately to her patient. She addressed him in French, and Hanley retreated, shaking his head.

Doc's cot was the last in a row that was largely unoccupied. He was nearest the nurses' station where they could keep a close eye on him, reassuring him during the increasing times he was lucid.

With the advantage of his height, Hanley could see what the nurses could not. A small boy sitting on the floor, one arm resting on the bed. As Hanley drew closer, he realized the boy was talking to Doc in a hoarse whisper.

<"Please, mssr Le Docteur, you must get better. The twins want to thank you, even Matilde. And your friends, they came and rescued us from the catacombs. Please wake up."> He picked up the medic's limp hand and laid it next to the rat, the animal's sleek fur brushing against Doc's fingers and its inquisitive whiskers tickling his palm.

“Wahhhh?” Doc twitched, blue eyes snapping open and coming to bear on Jean-Baptiste. The boy stared back unflinchingly, narrow shoulders squared.

“Well, hey there.” Doc closed his fingers on the small creature, scooping it up onto his chest where it sat, surveying the world from this new vantage point.

The boy laughed, then slapped a hand over his mouth, muffling his mirth.

Hanley joined them, blocking the nurse’s view of the scene with his broad back. “Doc, seems like you’ve made a few friends.” He reached down and scratched the top of the rat’s head.

Doc stared up with bleary eyes. “Hey Lieutenant. This here’s Jean-Baptiste. He saved my life.”

“Sounds like quite a rat!” Hanley smiled as Doc’s eyebrows knitted in obvious confusion. He went on. “Oh, you mean the boy? I remember, from the tunnels.” He patted Jean-Baptiste’s shoulder, and then pulled up a chair next to the cot. “So, Doc, I hope you’ve got a good explanation for me as to why you didn’t show up for the convoy.”

The medic started to nod his head, then thought better of it. “Oh, it’s a good story, alright, sir. Problem is, I was asleep through most of it!”



Rory stretched his long legs and settled dusty boots on the end of Saunders’ cot. “I tell ya, Chip, I always wondered if I’d be any good out in the field anymore.” He scooted his rump to the edge of the seat and leaned back precariously. “I missed North Africa, if you can believe it. Missed racing over the dunes and shooting at Germans.” He chuckled. “Didn’t miss being shot AT, though.”

Stifling a cough against his fist, Saunders swallowed hard. He opened his mouth, about to speak.

“But you know,” Rory went on. “It wasn’t what we were doing I missed. I missed you. And the other guys.”

Saunders raised an eyebrow in agreement. “Well...”

“Exactly!” Rory sat up abruptly, the chair legs thumping to the floor. “You hear about Doc, and your French-speaking scout?”

Crossing his arms across his chest, Saunders waited for the red-headed sergeant to go on.

“Yeah, they’re gonna be okay. Few days hanging around here...” Rory smiled at the ceiling. “I’ll see if I can get back by in a few hours.” He stood and gathered his jacket from the back of the chair. “See ya!”

Saunders leaned on one elbow, watching his friend go. He struggled not to laugh as Rory swung a nurse around in a do-see-do, and punched a corpsman in the shoulder. Sighing, he reclined against the pillows and felt the dead weight of fatigue fill his bones. As sleep overtook him, Saunders hoped he’d never have to go on R&R again.



The End