

R & R
By Alice A.



Prologue

Quantum physics theorizes that there are millions of worlds in thousands of alternate universes seeded throughout the cosmos like cinnamon bits in a sweet roll. These worlds may branch off from historic events such as King John refusing to sign the Magna Carta or Columbus sailing over the edge of the world or even from differences at the quantum level, such as worlds where laws of magick rather than science dictate the shape of reality. Whatever their origins, such worlds do exist and the walls between them sometimes grow thin. Especially on fields of battle, where conflict and violence unravel time and space, and individual soldiers – or even whole squads – go missing in action.

Chapter I

Pulling up the collar of his field jacket against the late autumn chill, Captain Mark Jampel struggled to open the door leading into the abandoned farmhouse that currently served as King Company's makeshift HQ. A sharp gust of wind yanked the door out of his hand and slammed it against the wall, startling his clerk and scattering the pile of paperwork accumulated on his makeshift desk like leaves in a hurricane.

Jampel wrestled the door closed as he grimaced at the young corporal trying to gather up the reports and requisitions and put them back into some sort of order.

"Never mind, Sperling. Forget the damn paperwork. I need to locate Sergeant Saunders, one of Hanley's squad leaders. From Second Platoon?"

"He's here, sir. Been waiting for you while you were up at Battalion HQ."

"Oh damn," Jampel scrubbed a hand through his thinning hair. "I forgot I told him I had an update on Hanley's condition. Well, where is he? Battalion's got a wild hair up its ass and we drew the short straw. I need to brief him . . ."

Jampel's voice trailed off at the clerk's somewhat nervous look. "Don't tell me he's been giving you a hard time?" Ever since Hanley had been sent to the rear with three broken ribs from a jeep mishap, Saunders had picked up the slack without a murmur of protest.



"No sir," the clerk mumbled. "He ducked into the kitchen to get out of the wind so he could smoke. But I heard snores a few minutes ago and checked on him. He's got that Thompson in his lap, with a finger on the trigger . . ."

Jampel laughed ironically. "And you'd hate for your parents to receive a telegram stating that you died in the line of duty, sitting behind a desk."

The Captain ducked into the ramshackle kitchen where Hanley's sleep-deprived sergeant was napping and stared down at the soldier's tired, dirty face. Even with lines of pain and exhaustion that two years of war had carved into it, the young sergeant still looked like one of the boys that Mark Jampel had scrutinized so carefully when they came to call on his

daughter Eleanor.

Still, he knew better than to startle a soldier with the battle-honed reflexes of the sergeant, and placed his hand on Saunders' shoulder, shaking gently as he spoke, "Time to get up, son. It's burnin' daylight."

Saunders shifted and muttered sleepily, obviously recalling happier times, "Jus' five more minutes, Dad. That lawn will still be there" His eyes fluttered open, his face momentarily relaxed and at ease, then reality hit and his expression closed down, eyes going distant. He looked up at the Captain, struggling to his feet as he mumbled an apology for dozing off.

Jampel kept his hand on the young noncom's shoulder, in an effort to reassure him. "Dreaming of happier times, Saunders? I don't blame you."

Coming to attention as he saluted Jampel, Saunders had his duty mask in place.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Jampel returned the salute briskly. "You can tell the rest of the platoon that Lieutenant Hanley is making a speedy recovery and should be back next week. Until then, Sergeant, you're acting platoon leader."

Saunders' face remained neutral, not protesting the increase in his responsibilities because he'd automatically assumed them as soon as Hanley was shipped to the rear. That was the one thing about Saunders that both pleased and aggravated the captain. The noncom was the kind of soldier who got the job done, no matter how boring, dangerous or difficult, but had refused a battlefield commission more times than Jampel could recall.

The last time the question arose, after blowing the bridge at Chalons, Saunders had shrugged it off with casual disregard.

"I'm good at being a sergeant, sir. Doing what I'm told and keeping my men alive. Being an officer and telling other sergeants what to do, I don't think I could hack it." He'd pushed his helmet back on his head and given Jampel an exasperating cocky grin that left the captain torn between wanting to shake him until his teeth rattled or slap him on the back and congratulate him for his common sense.

It had been a long time since he'd seen that cocky grin. Not since St. Lo, for sure.

Certainly not since the company had been pushing into a region of France plagued by a ruthless band of SS troops. Over the last two weeks, Jampel and King Company had seen more rotting corpses, brutalized women and children and burned out villages in this region than they had in the rest of France. It wasn't just the dead that bothered them, but the shocked and empty faces of the survivors.

They hadn't caught up with the raiders responsible yet, but Jampel knew it was just a matter of time. Only now someone up at Battalion had sent down orders to capture them alive so HQ could find out if this was just random outrages or a deliberate change in tactics.

That was reason he'd sent for Saunders and First Squad. He trusted Saunders to keep his men on a tight rein, even if they came across the SS unit doing their worst. They would

follow orders to the best of their ability and were smart enough not to get themselves killed in the process. Saunders had the best chance of bringing the SS troops in alive for questioning and would not give in to his impulse for revenge, no matter how much they deserved it.

He gazed into the Sergeant's face once again, seeing the strain of barely healed wounds and long-term exhaustion. But Saunders wasn't the only man in King Company driven beyond his limits, and Jampel had no choice but to send these soldiers out into the field again. This area was crucial to Allied plans and probably would be the site of the bitterest and most savage conflict of the war. The Germans were losing and they knew it, which meant that their counterattacks would be brutal, virtually suicidal.

These bloodthirsty renegades had to be stopped before the Americans crossed the German border or their actions might trigger a wholesale bloodletting among German civilians that could give the American troops a black eye they'd never recover from. It was a dangerous, difficult job. The kind of tactical special action that Saunders' squad excelled at, which was why he was sending them out. But he wanted – no *needed* – to know if the squad was up to the mission. With Saunders walking the thin edge of exhaustion, could his men still operate as effectively as they had in the past?

Grabbing his helmet, the Captain shrugged at Saunders. "It's been a while since I've seen your squad, Sergeant. Let's go give 'em the bad news."

Though the farm's outbuildings were in slightly better shape than the main house, the barn where most of Saunders' squad were catching up on their sleep wasn't exactly cozy. Doc had built a small fire just inside the doorway and was attempting to brew some coffee. Littlejohn had burrowed under a stack of loose hay with only his feet sticking out, while Billy was wrapped in his blanket, rubbing his red nose as he tried not to sneeze more than five times a minute. At the wall farthest from the door, Kirby snored, twitching nervously like a dog pestered by flies while Cajé slumped beside him, his helmet tipped over his eyes, fitfully dozing.

Doc glanced up as Jampel and Saunders approached, his gentle blue eyes taking in the CO's grim expression. "Care for a cup of coffee, Sarge? Captain? It's not good, but it's hot."

"I'll pass, Doc." Jampel gave the medic a weary smile. "Just had a cup of that paint stripper HQ calls coffee."

"Off and on," Saunders roused his squad, getting them up and moving. "Captain Jampel's got a mission for us."

"At ease." Jampel raised his hand in a casual acknowledgment of their weary salutes. "Smoke 'em if you got 'em."

As he lit one of his own cigarettes, Jampel studied the men intently through the rising smoke. They were tired, dirty, and on edge but there was more to it than that. Even at ease, there was an alertness about them, a watchful quality he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Then he recalled exactly where he had seen that vigilance before. It was in one of those nature films that Eleanor was always begging him to take her to see. A pack of wolves, well-fed and not feeling threatened; otherwise the cameraman would have been dinner. But they still remained wary and alert, watching and waiting until their leader signaled them about

danger, food, or just moving on. Saunders was that leader, no question about it. Even when he wasn't doing the briefing, they watched him, waiting to see his reaction. Needing to know what he thought about their chances for survival.

Jampel glanced over at Saunders, noting his acceptance of that responsibility, despite his exhaustion. He wore that mantle as casually as the Thompson slung over his shoulder or the easy swagger of his stride. Saunders was a natural leader, one of the brave men expended by the thousands to stop the threat of German Fascism and Japanese Imperialism.

Shaking his head grimly, Jampel unfolded a rough map of the area.

"I know you men have heard what's been happening to some of the villages in this area. About the SS troopers who've been sweeping in, raping, killing and burning. G-2 has reason to believe that their base camp is located in a secluded valley just beyond the ridge. It's isolated, virtually uninhabited according to the local villagers, though there are rumors the region is haunted."

"Ghosts don't bother me," Kirby muttered. "It's them live Krauts with mortars and machine gun nests that can get a fella killed."

Saunders' icy glare silenced him.

"Aerial surveillance has been impossible because of tricky air currents in the area, but the few maps the locals have show narrow winding trails only a mountain goat could climb. HQ doubts the Germans have any heavy weapons defending their camp, since they seem to be relying more on hand weapons and terror tactics."

"But their CP *could* be dug in, with much heavier defenses," Saunders pointed out.

"That's a possibility," the Captain agreed reluctantly. "But Battalion wants this group captured and brought in for questioning."

Saunders glanced at the map Jampel handed him, then folded it and stuffed it into his jacket. "Yes sir."

"Look, Saunders, this mission is HQ's bright idea. While I agree we can use any intelligence this group can give us, if it looks like you're in over your heads, just mark their position and 'get the hell out of Dodge'. You understand?"

"Yes sir." Saunders saluted.

Jampel returned the salute before turning to leave, with a final warning.

"I mean it, Saunders."

"Yes *sir*." The faintest ghost of the cocky grin was back and the captain breathed a small sigh of relief at the improvement in the odds that grin indicated.

As soon as the Captain was out of earshot, Saunders ordered, "Draw extra ammo and grenades. Then fill your canteens and grab some rations."

"But the Captain said we could bug out if things looked bad, Sarge," Kirby protested as

usual.

“This may be the last chance we get to stop this SS unit before they cross the border into Germany and I don’t intend to let them escape. Otherwise a lot more innocent people are going to wind up paying for their crimes.”

Kirby looked like he was about to protest further, but caught the sharpness in Saunders gaze and subsided. The others exchanged knowing glances before gathering their gear. Captain Jampel might have offered Sarge the option of coming back empty-handed, but they knew he had no intention of failing this mission.

For most of the war, Saunders had avoided developing a vindictive attitude toward the enemy, considering them soldiers doing their duty like himself. But the rape and slaughter committed by these so-called “soldiers” had left him determined to stop it . . . at any cost. Bringing that SS unit back for questioning would be a difficult mission, but a worthwhile one. Especially if they could learn about any change in tactics that might affect the Allied advance.

Thirty minutes later the squad was headed up the narrow defile, into the unknown. Saunders glanced around at the treacherous terrain, noting with relief that the Captain had been right that Krauts likely wouldn’t have been able to get anything bigger than a mountain goat up these winding, switchback trails. Still, he hadn’t survived this long by making easy assumptions so he signaled the squad to stay on alert.

Though it was still daylight, a thick grey mist began to float out of the woods and valleys, surrounding the squad and muffling their voices, making it virtually impossible to see more than a foot in front of them. Saunders hated to have the squad bunched up, so close that a single mortar round could take them out, but he also didn’t want anyone falling off the trail either.

Kirby sidled up behind him. “Damn, what a mess, Sarge. We didn’t have pea soup like this even back in London.”

“Fall back, Kirby,” he muttered. “Warn the others to spread out as much as they can without losing their bearings. And keep your ears open.”

The fog thickened until Saunders could barely see the narrow footpath in front of him, though he sensed the steep side of the mountain looming overhead, absorbing the noise around them. As a clammy mist oozed down his face and neck, he heard strange sounds in the distance.

Raising his hand for silence, Saunders peered into the mist, wondering at the source of those inhuman noises. Could their quarry have taken prisoners to torture and amuse themselves with on their last raid? Or were the noises just cries of wildlife native to this area? He needed to determine if their enemy was preparing for another raid or resting up from the last one.

Reluctantly he waved Caje forward to check out the situation. He didn’t like sending the scout out blindly with no hint of what he expected, but whatever was going on, Saunders didn’t intend to stumble into it like a green recruit.

The fog surged even more thickly around them, until Saunders couldn’t even see the Thompson he was carrying. The heavy mist had the uncanny effect of muffling some sounds

while magnifying others and as Saunders listened, he felt a sense of unease that left gooseflesh creeping up his arms. He'd fought in battles from Tunisia to Sicily, up the Italian boot and thru the bloody carnage of Normandy Beach, but had never encountered sounds of conflict like he was currently hearing.

If he could believe his ears, their SS renegades seemed to be currently engaged in a battle, as though one of the villages they'd attacked had resisted strongly and then followed them back to their CP. But there was something very *odd* about these sounds of battle.

There were the usual sounds of weapons' fire, small explosions, shouted orders and screams of pain. But there were other sounds too. Odd noises that didn't belong in this time and place: the clash of metal like swords against shields, along with inhuman, almost bestial howls that sounded they came from one of those Flash Gordon movie serials Chris used to love. Sounds that didn't belong in the real world but on a Saturday matinee movie screen.

Too uneasy to wait any longer for Caje's report, Saunders inched forward. Peering down into the fog-shrouded hollow where his map indicated that the German raiders had their camp, he pulled out his binoculars, determined to see just what was happening.

The fog had thinned out and as it did, the strange noises faded away as well, leaving him to wonder if he was losing his mind, creating imaginary foes rather than face a real enemy. Shaking his head to clear it, he stared down into the encampment, somewhat surprised to see everything so peaceful looking. There were several tents with sandbags piled up their sides for extra warmth and security and a dilapidated cabin which, judging by the Nazi flag hanging limply from a makeshift flagpole, was the CP and likely quarters for the group's commanding officer.

As he surveyed the relatively deserted camp, along with the bits and pieces of uniforms hanging on lines strung between the tents, it looked like their band of raiders was taking the day off. But Saunders had survived too many ambushes to be deceived by this relatively peaceful facade. He focused his binoculars on a smaller tent which appeared to have been dug out below ground level with sandbags surrounding it, deciding that must be their main ammo dump.

Catching Caje's eye, he waved the scout back and they joined the rest of the squad. As Saunders unfolded the map, he pointed various locations within the campsite that each squad member would focus their attack on.

Pointing Billy and Littlejohn to the edge of the camp, he ordered, "Take your grenades and toss them into the ammunition tent. They may have some weapons in their tents, but I'm betting most of them will make a run for the ammo dump to try to salvage whatever they can. Keep 'em pinned down.

Caje, Kirby and I will attack the CP and try to capture one of their officers or noncoms. Keep laying down heavy fire, so none of the raiders can make a break for it. We should be able to grab at least a couple of prisoners then. But if we don't make it out, do your best to blow the camp to hell. Whether HQ gets anyone to question or not . . . these raids stop *now!*"

Doc looked into the noncom's face, seeing the cold determination in his eyes that filled the rest of the squad with an equal resolve. The past months, they'd followed the sergeant from the Normandy beaches almost to the German border and would follow him into hell if he gave the order. Considering the savage conduct of the Nazi raiders they were after, Doc

thought that might be an apt description of the battle ahead of them.

Groping for the security of the rucksack under his arm, Doc hoped he would not need its critical supplies, then pulled his helmet down as he heard the first grenades explode. On the far side of the clearing as the ammunition dump went up in a sheet of flame, Sarge, Kirby and Caje scrambled down into the middle of the smoke-filled confusion in search of a prisoner.

Though briefly startled by the suddenness of the attack, the raiders quickly began to return fire, sporadically at first, then growing in frequency. Clutching his supplies, the medic gritted his teeth, knowing there was nothing he could do to help. All he could do was wait for that urgent summons that he prayed not to hear.

As the fire and smoke began to spread throughout the camp, the aid man noticed the fog that had surrounded them earlier was back, even thicker and more concealing than ever. And to his surprise the sounds coming out of that fog were strange, like nothing he'd ever heard before. Not just cries of the wounded or the angry orders of a German officer trying to rally his men, but uncanny, *inhuman* sounds, as some unknown thing wailed like a lost soul. Other strange noises filled the fog, sharp clashes of steel like bayonets in hand-to-hand combat, along with the angry shouts of more men – and even the screams of animals – that he *knew* could not be in that smoke-shrouded hollow.

After setting off the ammo, Littlejohn and Billy poured their fire down into the clearing, determined to keep the raiders pinned down, while Sarge's group went after a prisoner. Suddenly the fog that had surrounded them earlier rolled in again, with even stranger noises echoing out of it. Half-blinded, Littlejohn pushed recklessly to his feet, bent on charging down to hold off the raiders hand-to-hand if necessary. As he stood, a massive figure loomed out the fog with a savage roar and grappled with the GI. Behind him Billy froze, staring in disbelief at a lizard creature that looked like something from one of those monster movies he used to sneak out to see. Overcoming his shock, the young GI lunged forward with his bayonet, determined to do *something* before the creature ripped his buddy's face off.

But before he could reach the grappling duo, a huge shadowy figure pushed him aside, swinging an enormous ax that sent the lizard creature's head rolling down the hillside. The beast fought on for five more interminable seconds, ignoring the inconvenience of its missing brain, then toppled like a tree. Gasping for breath, Billy stared in disbelief at Littlejohn's fur-and-mail-clad rescuer with his outrageous winged helmet, who glared at the two of them with an equally suspicious expression.

"I think he's a Viking," Billy whispered. "I saw a picture like that in my history book."

"Yeah," Littlejohn panted as he clutched at the deep bloody scratches the giant lizard had raked down his upper arm. "But what's he doing *here*, in northern France?"

Though Kirby and Caje had charged down beside Saunders, the smoke and fog quickly enveloped them, leaving them firing blind, not sure where their targets were anymore. All of a sudden, Kirby heard a blood-freezing howl as a fur-covered *thing* loomed out of the mist. He fired instinctively, almost cutting the creature in half, then stared down in disbelief at its bloodstained teeth and claws, before kicking the body aside as he muttered, "Gotta be the DTs. But I ain't even *seen* a beer for the past month."

He felt the presence of another figure close beside him, but after hearing a hoarse voice muttering in French, Kirby took his finger off the trigger and called out,

“Caje, that you? What’s going on here anyway? The Krauts make a deal with the devil, ya’ think? Only way I can figger . . .”

His voice trailed off as he caught sight of Caje’s face, pale as milk underneath his swarthy tan, his eyes wide as saucers as he crossed himself with slow deliberation.

“*Le loup-garou, a werewolf,*” his voice was a ragged monotone. “But it’s not *real*. Just tales the old men told to frighten *petites*.”

Kirby stared down at the tattered carcass that had unnerved his buddy. It did look a little like a wolf; a bloody carcass covered in ragged gray brown fur. But the longer he stared at it, the more Kirby realized that the front legs were shaped wrong, more like arms than legs, though it still had savage bloodstained claws where its “hands” should be. He shuddered as he stared at its head which had human looking eyes but a wolf’s snout filled with bloody fangs.

“It may not be real, ol’ buddy, but it looks nasty enough to overlook that shortcoming.” He glanced around anxiously, suddenly aware of the increasing volume of screams and cries echoing out of the fog. “Dunno where the Sarge has gone, but we gotta stick together if we’re gonna get outta here alive. With a prisoner or not.”

Hearing screams of pain, Doc snatched up his rucksack and made sure his helmet was secure before starting down the hill. Then out of the mist loomed a man on horseback, dressed in a blue uniform and wearing a white Stetson with crossed sabers pinned to its crown, grappling with some kind of creature that looked like it was half lion, half alligator. Doc froze in disbelief, until the man slashed the creature’s throat with his saber. As it dropped to the ground gushing glowing green fluid, its blood splashed the soldier’s arm, eliciting a burst of blistering profanity as the man slumped in his saddle.

Pausing only a moment to gape at the body twitching at his feet, Doc hurried over to the side of the soldier’s mount, reaching up for the man’s wounded arm as he grabbed his canteen.

“Here, lemme see if I can rinse that off. . . .”

The soldier hissed in relief as the water flushed away the bubbling ichor and Doc stared at the ragged fabric and reddened flesh beneath it. Reaching for a sulfa packet, he glanced up at the soldier’s face, noting the startled blue eyes above an impressive blonde handlebar mustache. “Umm, you’re not allergic, are you?” he asked tentatively.

“Hell no,” the young man hawked a gob of dark brown chewing tobacco at Doc’s feet. “I’m a good Methodist, not one of them heathen religions. Pardon me askin’, but what the blazes are *you* doing here? Where’s *our* healer?”

Finishing his rough bandaging of the cavalry officer’s burned arm, Doc looked around with equal bewilderment, trying to locate the squad.

No longer surrounded by burning tents, he was standing in a small clearing, hemmed in by huge dark trees looming so tall that they almost hid the sky overhead. He looked around urgently for any familiar faces and breathed a sigh of relief as he spotted Littlejohn and Billy crouched together. He felt a sinking feeling as he saw the Viking warrior, complete with chain mail over a fur tunic and winged helmet, who stood over them, holding a battle axe. Billy’s eyes were wide with shock and disbelief but that didn’t stop him from gamely struggling to

wrap a bandage around Littlejohn's wounded arm.

Hurrying away from the cavalry officer he'd just treated, Doc tried to push past the hulking warrior and surprised himself with the steady note in his voice, "Put that axe down, fellah, and let me do my job."

The Viking looked up at the horseman who'd trotted up behind Doc and rumbled something that sounded like a question, and the cavalry officer grunted a noncommittal, "Damned if I know. They look like lost souls who just stumbled through a time breach. I'll tell the Warder."

As he started to sheath his saber, the young cavalryman peered along its edge and gave a disgruntled snort, "Well, the damn blade's notched for sure this time. Hope the smith's at the fort when we get back and not making rounds of the villages."

Billy's eyes were so wide that his eyebrows had almost disappeared under his helmet, "Doc, What, what happened to the Nazis? Who are these guys? And where are Caje, Kirby and the Sarge?"

"One question at a time, Billy. And to tell you the honest truth, I don't even know the answer to the first one."

Littlejohn gazed around at many of the bodies scattered around them, most of them not even human, then said in a hoarse whisper, "I can tell you one thing, Billy. 'Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore'."

Swallowing hard as he took in their increasingly strange surroundings, Doc had to agree.

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Saunders scrubbed vainly at his watering eyes, trying to pierce the thick smoke from the burning ammo that had combined with the returning fog. He couldn't see six inches in front of his face but he knew the Kraut's HQ was just ahead. All he had to do was kick down the door and go in firing low to blast the legs out from under their enemies. Hearing the staccato rumble of the BAR and Caje's steady firing right behind him, Saunders hoped they were choosing their targets carefully and not firing blind.

Charging forward, he slammed through the door and fired a long sweeping burst from the SMG. To his surprise, no one returned fire. He moved further inside, nerves taut, squinting into the shadows and trying to locate an officer or NCO who might have led this murderous band. Spotting three bodies sprawled on the floor, Saunders started to prod them with his boot, when someone lunged out of the shadows with a long knife gleaming in one hand as he tried to slash Saunders' throat. The sergeant fell backwards firing but his aim was high and the next moment the Thompson went flying from a well-aimed kick.

Rolling to his feet, he lunged at the gray-clad SS officer, and as they struggled for control of the German's knife, Saunders stared into that arrogant young face. The officer snarled through gritted teeth, "*Verdammt Amerikaner*. We will not allow your troops to enter the Fatherland. . . if we must shed a river of blood to stop you."

Saunders gripped the officer's wrist to keep the blade away from his throat and

struggled to knock it out of his grip. Hooking his leg behind the German's knee, Saunders dragged the two of them down where they continued to grapple together on the hard-dirt floor. As smoke rolled through the door, burning their eyes and setting both to coughing, Saunders kned the German in the crotch and managed to break away. He staggered to his feet and groped around for his Thompson, but could only find the German's Mauser.

He straightened up, aiming at the German, only to discover the clip was empty. Hesitating only a moment, Saunders hurled it at the knife still clutched in the officer's hand, hoping to disarm him, and then tackled the German, using every trick of dirty fighting that he'd ever picked up in a half-dozen years of back-alley barroom brawls. But the German had also learned a few dirty tricks that he used to his advantage, along with a longer reach and the fact he outweighed Saunders by a good twenty-five pounds of solid muscle.

The smoke surrounding them grew thicker, almost blinding the two combatants as the sounds of firing and exploding ammo faded away. Caught up in his life-or-death struggle with his German foe, Saunders was startled as he realized that the normal sounds of battle had *changed*. Replaced by odd noises, roars, howls and screams that couldn't have come from a human throat.

Even his German foe noticed the difference and panted as he grappled with Saunders, "What are you doing to my men, you savage!"

Ignoring the distraction, Saunders smashed the German's hand against the ground, hoping to force him to drop the knife. But he momentarily lost his grip and the German raked the blade down Saunders side, leaving a long bloody scratch across his ribs. The sudden pain galvanized him to shove the blade away, but the German managed to hold on to it as they rolled over again. This time the German came up on top, giving him the leverage to force the blade of the knife closer and closer to Saunders' throat.

As the German officer was about to plunge it down, he jerked upright with an astonished look on his face, then blood gushed out of his mouth as he collapsed, pinning Saunders to the ground.

Saunders' whole body was shaking in exhaustion, but he managed to push the body away and climb unsteadily to his feet. He glanced toward the door, expecting to see Caje or Kirby as his savior. Instead, he confronted a tall, gaunt man backlit in the entrance, wearing a mail shirt and coif over tattered leather. As the sergeant struggled to regain his breath, his rescuer pulled his sword out of the German's back then ripped a strip of fabric from the German's coat and wiped down his blade.

"Who. . .who. . .the hell are you?" Saunders gasped, still trying to catch his breath.

The mail-clad man froze, his face turned away as he started to sheathe his weapon.

"Saunders ?" The voice was hoarse and much harsher than he remembered and Saunders felt his head swimming as his vision went dark around the edges.

This couldn't be true, it *couldn't* be the man who the voice sounded like. He stared desperately into the weather-beaten face with its angular features and determined jaw. The lines were carved much deeper around his mouth and his penetrating eyes were marked by a webbing of wrinkles, though they were the same forest green.

“Lieutenant. . .Hanley?” Saunders managed to croak from his raw throat.

The figure before him pushed back the mail coif, showing hair more silver than dark as he gave Saunders a very enigmatic look, “Actually, it’s major, Sergeant. Or at least it was before I took a wrong turn on a dark Ge – dark street – and wound up here.”

As the sergeant stared at him in disbelief, Hanley gusted out a deep breath, giving Saunders a warm smile as he gripped the sergeant’s shoulder, “But we’ll discuss that later. How the devil did you wind up here, and who’s with you? The whole squad? Or Cajé? Or, God forbid, just Kirby?”

There was a desperate eagerness to the voice that set alarms ringing in Saunders head. This man might look like the lieutenant, even sound like him, but how could he be *here*, older? And dressed like something out of a “Prince Valiant” comic strip?

Hanley gripped Saunders’ elbow, intending to lead him away from the bodies inside the ramshackle cottage, but Saunders resisted, “No, I gotta check and see if any of ‘em are still alive. I promised Captain Jampel I’d bring a prisoner back, for questioning.”

“Captain. . .Jampel?”

There was that same hesitation that had put him on guard earlier, as though his rescuer was not really certain about who they were. He didn’t think he could be fooled by an imposter, at least not where Hanley was concerned, but he gazed at the other man with his own uncertain expression.

Seeing that wary, watchful look on Saunders’ face, Hanley gave a rueful grin. He should have remembered. Saunders was not one to give his trust easily, not even to a familiar face, at least not without some kind of reasonable explanation.

Hanley knelt beside the bodies, checking for a pulse. “There are a couple who are still breathing. Though whether they’ll make it back to the Stronghold, I can’t be sure.”

“Doc’s here,” Saunders said in a flatly pragmatic tone.

“We’re traveling with a healer, too,” Hanley muttered as he prodded the German officer Saunders had been fighting when he’d intervened. “*He’s* still alive, but with that chest wound I don’t think he’ll last much longer.”

Saunders glanced around, watching in disbelief as the walls of the hut where they were standing began to shimmer like a desert mirage. As they abruptly dissolved, Saunders and Hanley were left standing beside the bodies. Smoke and flames from the explosions were also fading, as the German CP they had just attacked vanished into the morning mist. He and Hanley stood in a shadowy clearing, studying the aftermath of battle surrounding them under the dark, overhanging trees.

As he bent down to pick up his Thompson, Saunders winced and made a quick inspection of the deep scratch along his ribs. Groping for sulfa and a dressing, he sprinkled the powder on the wound, pressed the gauze into place, then tucked in his shirt, knowing Doc could do a better job later. Right now he just wanted to find out what had happened to the rest of the squad. Then maybe someone could make sense of their current situation.

Off to one side, he spotted Cajé and Kirby, sitting glumly with their hands on top of their heads, surrounded by a group of armored and leather-kilted legionaries bristling with swords, spears, maces and other lethal hand-to-hand weaponry. They didn't seem to be injured, for which he was grateful. The officer in charge, judging by the horsehair crest on his helmet, had a smooth, unmarked face that hardly seemed old enough to command his scarred and weathered troops, though he was inspecting Cajé and Kirby's confiscated weapons with avid curiosity. As Hanley and Saunders approached, the officer gave a Roman salute – arm across the chest, then raised -- which Hanley reluctantly returned.

Seeing the similarity to the Nazi *Sieg Heil*, Kirby snarled, "See, I told you they was Krauts. Even if they are wearing *skirts*. It's gotta be some kinda weird Nazi plot."

"Shut up, Kirby," Hanley said reflexively and both soldiers stared at their sergeant and the stranger accompanying him.

"Lieutenant. . . Hanley?" Cajé's dark eyes widened as he took in the tall, silver-haired, oddly dressed man at Saunders' side. His gaze flickered from the Roman legion to Hanley's medieval armor to the inhuman bodies scattered across the shadowed clearing and shook his head in disbelief.

"We're all dead, aren't we. . .and this is Hell."

#

Sometime later, after the rest of the squad had been located, Hanley listened as Saunders sketched out their mission. "Company was in reserve when G-2 learned about a band of German marauders in the area, murdering, raping, burning villages." Saunders normally kept his emotions on a tight rein, but Hanley could see the mission had been one he'd taken personally. "HQ wanted prisoners for questioning, so Captain Jampel sent us out. We were ordered to get a prisoner if we could, but *stop* the raids."

Shaking out a cigarette, he lit it very deliberately as he described what happened after they'd found the raiders' base camp. "After setting off their ammo as a diversion, Cajé, Kirby and I hit their CP, looking for a prisoner. Someone responsible for giving orders." Saunders' hooded gaze studied Hanley and the very odd group he seemed to be leading as he took another deep drag, then carefully pinched out his cigarette and dropped it in his pocket. "The rest you know. A thick mist rolled in where we couldn't see anything." He looked up at the lieutenant, "I was grappling with the Kraut, when suddenly he was skewered like a stuck pig. . .by a man who's supposed to be in a field hospital with three broken ribs."

Deliberately squaring his shoulders, Hanley gazed at the squad, taking in those once familiar faces and wondering how much he dared tell them. "I'll give you a bare bones explanation, but save your questions for later. This is dangerous territory and we need to get moving before we're attacked again. You've seen what we're up against." He nodded at the inhuman bodies, some of which were dissolving into foul-smelling vapors. "They aren't the worst of it. As soon as the wounded are loaded onto the wagons, we'll head for the Stronghold."

As the squad exchanged questioning glances, Saunders got a stubborn look on his face. "Now look, lieut. . . sir, my orders from Captain Jampel were to deliver our prisoner back to HQ. We don't have time to follow you to your . . . base."

Hanley's expression was rueful, but determined, "Take a good look around, sergeant. If you think that even Caje can find his way back to King Company, you're free to leave. But take my word for it, you're a long way from home and I don't know if we can find the pathway that opened and left you here anytime soon."

"Pathway? What kind of 'path' do ya mean?" Doc spoke up this time, with a baffled look.

"Ever hear about people walking down a road, turning a corner and then vanishing into thin air? Or instances where people appeared out of nowhere, wearing strange clothes and speaking unknown languages. Usually they're locked away in insane asylums, but occasionally people listen to the stories they tell of other places, other times. That's what happened to me. I was running down a dark street after midnight, trying to get away from a gang of . . . cutthroats. As I ducked into an alleyway, I tripped over some loose bricks and fell through a solid wall. . . into daylight, into Avalon. To make a long story short, I eventually learned that I was in another place, another *world*, where nature – and history – are very different."

He took a deep shuddering breath, staring at his onetime squad, "There's no time for me to go into much more detail, but I eventually discovered that there were paths between this world and others, including ours. They seem to bridge time as well, which is why our troops include Roman legionaries, members of a 7th Cavalry column, and survivors off a wrecked Viking longboat."

Hanley watched for Saunders for long moments, hoping that he'd been able to convince the sergeant he was telling the truth. But Saunders still had that stubborn look he recognized only too well. Shrugging in resignation, he continued, "Look, Saunders, my troops are escorting four wagons full of supplies that are desperately needed by people I have a responsibility to. I can't order you and your squad to come with us, but the Stronghold is the only place where you *might* be able to find a way back to your own world and time."

"A way back, how?" Saunders asked.

"There are people at the Stronghold with unusual powers; adepts, healers, and even seers who can locate the pathways where worlds intersect. It's possible they might be able to find a way back for you and the rest of the squad and your prisoners."

"But no guarantees," Kirby spoke up, surprisingly serious.

"I'm afraid not," Hanley shrugged, leaving the squad to consult while he ordered his troops to start shifting supplies among the wagons, in order to make room to carry the wounded.

A slender figure wearing a gray cloak with a hood pulled up so far that her face was in shadow approached him and asked tentatively,

"What should we do about the wounded who came through the breach with the other soldiers, Warder? Are they enemies? After we treat their wounds, what are we to do with them?"

"I'm not sure, Rhiannon." Hanley's dark brows drew down in a frown. "If Saunders and his men decide to go with us, we'll see what he wants to do."

Raising his voice he called out to the cavalry captain Doc had treated earlier, "How many riderless horses have we got, Jackson? Enough to provide mounts for the sergeant and his squad?"

"Looks like maybe ten all told. Though that big fella," he nodded in Littlejohn's direction, " might have to ride in one of the wagons."

"Just do the best you can."

As Captain Jackson wheeled his mount away, Hanley turned a questioning glance toward Saunders. "Well, are you with us or not?"

After the sergeant gave a reluctant nod of assent, Hanley said, "We're going to have to move quickly if we don't want to have another run-in with Kronus' forces."

"Kronus? He's in charge of these. . . creatures?"

"I'll try to explain later, Sergeant. Right now we're getting mounts for you and the rest of the squad. One of the supply wagons is being converted into an ambulance, so what do you want to do about your prisoners?"

"We can't leave them behind. But I hate to put them in with your wounded."

"You think they're dangerous?"

"They're still breathing, aren't they?"

"All right, we'll put them in a second wagon, but it'll be a tight squeeze"

Saunders nodded in agreement.

While Hanley continued readying his troops to move out, Doc came over and asked, " I heard that the lieutenant has a healer who's in charge of the wounded. I'd like to help, if it's all right with you, Sarge."

"Good idea, Doc," Saunders nodded absently, his attention on the cavalryman Hanley had ordered to select mounts for his men. The captain returned leading the horses, along with several troopers willing to instruct his infantry squad in the basic "dos and don'ts" of horsemanship. As they did so, Saunders noted uneasily that his well-trained and tightly knit squad was rapidly being dispersed among Hanley's troops. Considering their lack of knowledge about the terrain and the current enemy, he reluctantly approved of Hanley's tactics, though he wondered what would happen to his men if they *were* attacked again. And he wasn't all that sure about his squad being able to keep up with Hanley's people on horseback.

He wasn't the only one.

Kirby was standing off to one side, his BAR slung across his waist, staring with considerable alarm at the large four-legged steed that someone had led up to him.

"Now just a minute here, I ain't no Lone Ranger and this weapon don't shoot silver bullets. You put me on the back of that there animal and there's liable to be a painful parting

of the ways somewhere down the line.”

“Oh, stop complaining, Kirby,” Littlejohn rumbled. “ Captain Jackson says that these animals are well-trained and almost never throw their riders.”

“It’s that *almost* that worries me.”

“At least we don’t have to hike wherever we’re going.”

“Where’s the clutch on this thing?” Kirby muttered after clambering aboard, shifting the BAR under one arm, while he watched suspiciously as one of Jackson’s troops showed him how to hold the reins.

The Viking warrior Littlejohn had first encountered led over a sturdy mount with broad feet and feathery fetlocks. The soldier eyed the animal appreciatively before gripping its mane and swinging into the saddle. He fumbled with the reins for a moment, nodding slowly as Leif showed him how to guide his mount one-handed, leaving the other hand free to use his weapon.

Billy stared eagerly at the horses, grinning like a kid at Christmas, while Caje studied his mount with a resigned look, before swinging onto the saddle without touching the stirrups.

“Oh wow,” Billy said, awestruck “I always wanted a pony.”

But Caje must have had enough prior experience to be aware of the downside to becoming a cavalry unit. “Just remember that eight or ten hours from now when your butt’s raw from bouncing up and down for the next thirty miles,” he warned darkly.

More worried about Billy’s enthusiasm than Caje’s caution, Saunders made a quick decision before turning to the young GI. “Nelson, Doc’s riding in the wagons to help with the wounded, but I want you there too, guarding our prisoners.”

There was a momentary disappointed look on Nelson’s face, then he nodded and shouldered his rifle.

Given his own reservations, Saunders stared dubiously at the mount one of the cavalry troopers had just led over. He’d ridden once or twice when he was a teenager, visiting his grandparents’ farm. But those had been sway-backed old plow horses, not the high-spirited animals Hanley’s troops were riding. Hitching the Thompson over his shoulder, Saunders put his left foot in the stirrup and swung into the saddle. The young cavalry officer showed him how to manage the reins, which luckily only required his left hand, making it possible to swing his weapon into action if they were attacked again.

He glanced over at Jackson, who sat his horse with an ease that the sergeant envied, and asked bluntly, “If we’re attacked, are my men gonna be able to manage these animals?”

“Well, they’ve been trained as war horses not to shy at loud noises. Also to stay in one place if you drop the reins, and some of them will defend a downed rider.”

Watching off to one side, Hanley was not surprised at Saunders’ misgivings although he was much more confident in the squad’s ability to adapt to their current situation. Saunders and his men had been together since Normandy, surviving hedgerows, Panzer attacks,

Gestapo prison camps, and the sheer bloody insanity of war. Hanley knew that they were tough and level-headed and now he had to wonder if their sudden appearance wasn't the answer to an unspoken prayer. If he could just persuade the Sergeant and his men to stay, making this world's battle their own.

But there was still a long dangerous road to travel before they reached the safety of the Stronghold

Raising his arm, Hanley ordered Jackson's cavalry troop to take the lead, then waved for Saunders' men to fall in beside the supply wagons. He brought up the rear, pushing the group to as fast a pace as possible given the condition of the animals and their inexperienced riders.

Over the next couple of hours, Saunders discovered his beast had four speeds, one slow, one fast and two medium. Of the medium speeds which kept him abreast of the wagons, one was smooth as silk, while the other threatened to jar his backbone loose. The animal he was riding had the uncommon knack of sensing when he was getting adjusted to their progress and then lapsing into that bone-jarring gait, causing Saunders to jolt along, swearing, until he was able to kick the horse back into the smoother gait for another few minutes.

After three hours riding in the direction of their refuge, Hanley called for a brief halt to rest the horses and consult his maps. One of Jackson's lieutenants, who was riding his animal with confidence but not like he'd been born in the saddle, cantered over and introduced himself.

"I'm Sam Andrews, 'galvanized Yankee' and kinda new to the cavalry myself. Saw you talkin' with the captain earlier. He means well, but has been a pony soldier since he was knee high to a grasshopper and kinda forgotten the basics. This jug-headed hayburner looks like he's givin' you a hard time?"

Saunders nodded irritably, wondering if he couldn't abandon this four-legged torture machine and try to keep up on foot .

"Guess I'm infantry, not cavalry."

"So was I, before tanglin' with the damnyankees at Gettysburg. But these slab-sided mustangs can be useful, if you show 'em who's boss." Noting Saunders' disbelieving expression Andrews continued, "Aw, it's not that hard. Just hang onto the reins, and give him a boot in the ribs any time he drops to a trot, then he'll stay on pace and you won't havta eat dinner standin'."

Saunders nodded, staring at the other man somewhat uncertainly, until Andrews stood up in his stirrups, "Ahh, hell, one of the drivers' is signalin' the Warder. Gotta be trouble with the wagons. Just remember, a firm grip on the reins and a boot to the ribs."

"Just like handling raw recruits," Saunders muttered to himself as the cavalry trooper cantered away.

Whatever the problem was, it seemed to require more than a five minute break, so Saunders rode over and took a hard look at his squad, trying to see how they were adjusting. Kirby had slid off his beast, limping around, exaggerating his bow legs, grouching as usual. Littlejohn appeared to be completely at ease, sprawled beside his grazing mount with the reins wrapped around his hand and long legs crossed, seemingly without a care in the world. Caje had dismounted and was sitting on fallen log, smoking as he warily regarded the approach of one their newfound allies.

It was the young Roman officer. *Marcus*, Saunders thought he'd heard someone call him. He had a gleaming metallic bundle draped across the front of his saddle and a determined look on his face.

"Sergeant, since you and your men will be riding with us, you'll need to have them put on these mail shirts. . . in case we are attacked again."

Even though he'd agreed to go along with Hanley's troops, temporarily, Saunders balked at taking this junior officer's orders. Especially since he still wasn't even sure exactly where Hanley's current loyalties lay, or what sacrifices he might be willing to make to protect this Stronghold where he was supposed to be leading them.

And there were other considerations as well.

Saunders lifted the mail shirt with the tip of his Thompson, taking in its silvery sheen and light weight. It hardly seemed heavy enough to resist a small caliber round, much less stand up against the teeth and claws of the creatures they'd battled earlier. Besides, its metallic gleam would make his squad stand out like they had targets painted on their chests, especially against the wooded countryside they were traveling through. Though Hanley and others in the troop wore the same mail, it was battered and stained, blending into the background. He glanced over at Littlejohn, who'd sat up at Marcus's approach and was watching the exchange with a somber look on his face.

And. . . the shirts were all average in size, which meant that none of them would fit Littlejohn.

Saunders shook his head, "I don't think so, Marcus. We're used to takin' cover when we run into trouble. . . and I don't want 'em forgettin' how to duck."

"Ah, come on, Sarge," Kirby's distinctive voice could be heard all the way back to the wagons. "Let's give 'em a try. We could be like Superman, with bullets bouncin' off our chests."

"And what happens if whoever's firing raises their sights, Kirby?" Saunders gave his usual harsh rebuttal, brought out when someone didn't think things through. "You planning on catching bullets in your teeth?"

He turned back to Marcus, "Like I said earlier, we'll pass."

"As you wish," the young man shrugged. "The Warder wished to do you a kindness."

"Yeah, Sarge," Kirby blustered on, never knowing when to shut up. "Why not let him 'do

us a kindness’?” He limped over to where Marcus had dropped the shirts and began sifting through the glittering mail, holding one up to his chest, “Look at me, Caje. I’m Sir Lunalot, a reg’lar ‘knight in shining armor’.”

Glaring at his BAR man, Saunders replied through gritted teeth, “There’s not enough for the whole squad.”

Ignoring the signs of Saunders’ impending blow-up, Kirby sifted through the mail shirts, doing a quick count, then glanced over at Littlejohn and *finally* realized the problem. By this time Saunders’ gaze was smoldering, and having felt the full force of that volcanic rage once himself, Caje stubbed out his cigarette and turned his attention to his mount, leaving Kirby alone in the threatening silence.



Until Littlejohn stood up beside his horse and came over to Kirby’s side, in silent support. “It’s all right, Sarge. I don’t mind. Heck, I’d sooner see you guys wearing these shirts than feel guilty cause you’re going without for my sake.”

“Just shut *up*, Littlejohn,” Saunders ordered. “We’re not wearin’ those shirts, for the very reason Kirby gave. You guys start thinking you’re Superman and you’re dead! You need to stay alert, keep your eyes and ears open, if you’re going to survive this war. Not start to depend on some so-called ‘protection’ that may not even work. This squad lives together, fights together, and if it has to, *dies* together. You got that, *Superman*?”

“Got it, Sarge,” Kirby stepped away from the shimmering mail like it was kryptonite and clambered back on his horse.

Jerking the reins of his own beast, Saunders cantered away, struggling to get his fury at Kirby under control. The BAR man was a good soldier when he didn’t let his mouth run ahead of his brains, but in a strange situation like this, he was vulnerable. They all were, even if Hanley was on the level.

He doubted the lieutenant was deliberately trying to undermine his command of the squad. On the other hand, he didn’t know if he could trust this man the same way he’d trusted and obeyed Hanley since landing at Normandy. Obviously older and warier, the Warder (as his troops called him) seemed to have different loyalties, different priorities than the man Saunders had fought beside for the past six months. Then Hanley had understood the discipline that was necessary for the squad to survive, but now, Saunders shook his head, trying to banish his growing doubts.

Pausing just beyond the wagons, Saunders pulled up his mount and let the animal’s head drop so it could graze. Propping one knee over the front of his saddle, he fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes, then stared bleakly at the half-empty pack, craving a smoke, but wondering if there might not come a time when he’d need it even more. Remembering the half-smoked one he’d pinched out earlier, he reached into his pocket and retrieved it.

From his position at the rear of the column, Hanley had seen the incident between Marcus and Saunders and wondered if he should talk to the sergeant and try to explain a little more about this world and its people. Maybe then Saunders would understand why he was so

determined to protect them.

He sniffed at the smoke wafting his way, then jerked the reins of his horse to join the sergeant. Taking in Saunders' brooding look, he remarked casually, "That's what I missed the most my first month here. Not the cigarettes so much, as the chance to take a break and gather my thoughts . . . or just wind down a bit before rolling in my blankets."

He gave a rueful chuckle, "Of course, I was smoking East German fags at the time . . . more floor sweepings than tobacco. I didn't miss 'em much."

Saunders didn't bat an eye at Hanley's revelation, keeping his own thoughts hidden as he blew out a long stream of smoke, "Gotta been better than those black Turkish butts that were all you could get in North Africa. Killed my sense of taste for almost six months."

He glanced sidelong at Hanley, "Not necessarily a bad thing . . . given our rations."

Stubbing out the cigarette on the sole of his boot, Saunders quickly field-stripped it and let the tiny flakes of tobacco and ash drift away as he placed the crumpled paper in his pocket.

"You may be in charge of these troops, *Major*." Saunders' voice held an icy suspicious note and Hanley did not miss the deliberate emphasis on his rank, or the stubborn resolve on his sergeant's face. "But we're under Captain Jampel's orders. We'll go along with you . . . and your men, until we can find a way back to our lines. Anything concerning our prisoners . . . or the squad, you ask me first. Got it?"



Hanley nodded somberly, "Look, Saunders, whether you believe it or not, I'm not trying to take over the squad. I've got more troops under my command now than I ever wanted, but the choice wasn't mine to make. After I first stumbled into Avalon nearly ten years ago, I wasn't sure whether I'd been drugged by my pursuers or actually cracked under the strain of working undercover."

"The man who was in charge when I arrived had found his way into Avalon during a gas attack in No Man's Land years before. He built forts and then gathered and trained troops to defend the local settlers from attacks by beasts, but it was difficult to provide security for the more isolated communities. After he died, I was chosen as Warder and the responsibility of protecting these people fell to me. Since then, we've fortified many of the settlements, joined forces with Cerridwen's adepts who've showed us how to defend ourselves against Kronus and his monsters and recruited and trained troops to help in that defense."

"Recruited?" Saunders eyes glittered fiercely, suddenly suspicious. "You didn't bring us here deliberately, did you?"

Hanley gave a bitter laugh, "Hell, if I could do that, Saunders, don't you think I'd have snatched the Eighth Air Force or a tank battalion, instead? Most of our troops come from men who've gone missing during a battle, been lost at sea, or in the desert. Though I'll have to admit when Marcus and the remnants of his legion stumbled through a gate not far from the

Stronghold with a horde of rampaging Picts behind, I wasn't really sure *who* to recruit. My history teacher used to say those blue-painted future Scots were the toughest fighters in the world, but since I'd studied Latin rather than Gaelic in high school, I thought I'd have a better chance of reasoning with the Romans. Once Marcus got over the initial shock that this wasn't the Elysian Fields, he's done pretty well, considering his father had bought his rank for him."

There was a long uneasy silence as Saunders brooded over this torrent of information, wondering why Hanley had decided to tell him so much now. Was it an effort to regain his trust? Or to convince them to join his forces? He would not meet the lieutenant's gaze.

Hanley sighed and then spoke again. "Once we get moving, tell your men to stay with the wagons. If we are attacked, they'll aim for the stragglers and I don't want to lose anyone. We'll try to avoid another pitched battle. A detachment of Captain Jackson's troops is bringing up the rear, with 'special weapons' that I hope will be our best chance of holding off Kronus' forces."

"What or *who* is Kronus?" Saunders arched a skeptical brow at his lieutenant.

"According to Cerridwen, our oldest adept, he's a powerful sorcerer who believes he should rule Avalon. He created those beasts we were battling earlier to attack our troops and kill anyone who stands against him. He can also conjure storms in a cloudless sky, call down lightning, even transform men into monsters, if they surrender their wills."

Saunders stared at Hanley for a long moment, wondering what sort of lunatic world they'd stumbled into. "War may be hell," he muttered to himself, echoing one of Caje's earlier statements. "Just didn't think we'd wind up facing the devil himself. All right," he gave a reluctant nod of acknowledgment. "I'll warn the rest of the squad what we're up against." He pulled up his horse's head and started to rejoin his squad, "But I want to see how Billy and Doc are doing."

Hanley nodded. "Tell the others we won't delay much longer. Rhiannon's trying to stop some heavy bleeding in one of Jackson's men." As Saunders started to rein his horse toward the ambulance wagons, Hanley put a restraining hand on his arm. "Just one more thing, Saunders. About Rhiannon, our healer. She's a bit odd. She's one of the adepts I mentioned earlier, but wasn't sent to Cerridwen for training when she came of age. Her grandmother refused to let her go, preferring to teach the girl herself. When the old woman recently died, the village they lived in sent Rhiannon away. No real reason given, just that she's . . . trouble."

"And they wanted her gone." Saunders expression was grim, remembering another girl he'd met who had been unwelcome among her so-called friends and neighbors.

"Don't worry, Sergeant. Cerridwen thinks Rhiannon can be trained, even though she's long past the time girls usually enter the Grove. But the girl is scared and maybe even a little angry, so try not to upset her when you check on the wounded."

Saunders tipped his helmet back on his head, baffled by the warning, then shrugged it off as he approached the wagon. Doc was standing beside it, with a firm grip on the shoulders of one of Jackson's riders who was tossing fitfully on the wagon bed. Beside the medic leaned a slight figure, cloaked and hooded, who had one hand resting on the chest of the rider while the other clung to Doc's shoulder. He heard a hoarse whisper, to which Doc appended a fervent "Amen" and glowing energy surged from the figure's fingers, sinking into the trooper's chest.

Their patient stopped thrashing and took a deep shuddering breath, echoing the ragged gasp given by Doc as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. "You did it, Rhiannon. You stopped the bleeding."

Beside him the healer's knees buckled and she would have fallen if Saunders had not slid off his horse and caught her. As he did so, the hood dropped away, revealing delicate features the shade of ivory and auburn hair that fell past her shoulders. His hands momentarily full, Saunders called out to his medic, "Doc, she's passed out."

Doc reached over and grabbed her wrist, checking the girl's pulse, "Fast, but regular. She just overstrained herself, Sarge. Let me get up in the wagon and you can pass her . . ."

But before the medic could follow through, the girl's eyes fluttered open and she tensed in Saunders' arms, protesting in a low, husky voice, "I'm all right. I just need a moment to catch my breath."

He glanced over at his medic, who nodded his okay and then set the girl carefully on her feet, steadying her as she swayed.

"I'll be fine. There's no need for you to stay."

Saunders nodded, then introduced himself. "I'm Sergeant Saunders. The lieutenant . . . I mean the Warder, said you were in charge of the wounded. I want to check on our prisoners. Make sure they're being kept in secure conditions"

Rhiannon studied his face for a long moment, before leading him to the second wagon.

He lifted the canvas flap and peered in, seeing Billy Nelson squatting watchfully beside six comatose enlisted men. The Gestapo officer was propped up against several bags of supplies in an effort to ease his labored breathing. But Saunders could tell by the gray tinge to his face and the blood that frothed at his lips that the man would not last much longer. In fact, all of their prisoners had wounds likely to prove fatal sooner or later. Still, he climbed into the wagon, intent on seeing whether any of his prisoners might survive the journey. The healer joined him.

Billy almost came to attention as Saunders gave him a sharp glance and asked, "How many clips have you got?"

"Three, Sarge."

Saunders looked down at his holstered sidearm then at the semiconscious prisoners, deciding Billy had enough firepower to keep the Germans subdued until they reached Hanley's stronghold

"You're in charge of security, Billy. Keep a close watch and if there are any problems, signal Doc."

"These men are *my* patients, Sergeant," the healer said, her golden eyes darkening to amber.

"And they're my prisoners, Miss . . ."

“My name is Rhiannon, Sergeant,” she gave him a tentative smile. “But the others call me Anne.”

“Anne” Saunders said, closing his eyes with momentary pain as he tried to banish the face of a delicate dark-haired girl. “Rhiannon,” he repeated carefully, resuming his stern expression. “These prisoners aren’t soldiers, miss, but butchers. Renegades hiding behind a uniform. My orders are to bring them back alive, if I can. For questioning, so we can stop other groups like them.”

Rhiannon stared at him for a long moment, before saying softly, “You sound just like him.”

“Who?” Saunders was curious.

“The Warder, the one you call Hanley. Ever since he arrived, he’s worked to unite the warring groups and bring peace to this land. He established the Stronghold to protect the farmers, has taken the healers under his shield, and even destroyed many of the unholy places. If you and your men are his followers, then you’re most welcome here. We need more warriors of his stature.”

Saunders turned away from her avid declaration, not really sure he wanted to hear what she was telling him. Hanley was a good officer and Saunders was well aware of his leadership skills, but judging by the ardent look on the girl’s face, Hanley was considered a savior, a messiah. That kind of adulation troubled him. He wasn’t sure he could trust the lieutenant any longer, not if his loyalties to these people went so deep that he’d actually forgotten the country he swore to protect and defend.

With a last warning to Billy to keep a close eye on the prisoners, Saunders jumped down from the wagon. As he reached for his horse, the motion pulled at the wound along his ribs and it began to bleed again. Grimacing, he pressed a hand against his bandage and winced as he felt the blood soaking through.

“What’s wrong, Sergeant?” Rhiannon asked.

“It’s nothing.” He grabbed the reins of his horse and started to mount. “I have to get back to the squad.”

But before he could pull himself into the saddle, Doc was beside him, poking at the dried, dirty bandage as he grumbled, “Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner, Sarge?”

Saunders tried to fend off the medic’s attentions, but was unable to avoid flinching at the deft, careful touch as the medic lifted his shirt and pulled away the bloodstained dressing. “Looks like you need some stitches, Sarge, or this wound’s going to take a long time healin’.”

“No time,” Saunders grimaced as Doc continued his gentle but thorough examination. “Just bandage it tight and I’ll manage.”

“You will *not*,” Rhiannon interrupted. “The wound has already begun to fester.”

She pointed to the reddened edges and Doc nodded in reluctant agreement, “She’s right. It needs a good coating of sulfa, and you oughta stay off your feet so it gets a chance to close properly.”

“Can’t do that,” Saunders shook his head wearily. “According to Hanley, we’ve got to keep moving or we risk being trapped here. Kronus’ troops are still following us.” He glanced up at the increasingly dark sky and lengthening shadows, “Don’t how much farther we’ve got to go, but I have to get back to the squad.”



“Wait, sergeant,” Rhiannon glanced up into his eyes, then turned away blushing. Hastily she reached into the bag slung over her shoulder and pulled out a small phial. “Just let me apply this, and then your medic can put on a clean dressing.”

Saunders nearly refused, until a raw ache from his side reminded him of the wound’s presence. Shifting the SMG to his other shoulder, he unbuttoned his torn shirt, exposing his entire bruised, bloody side. As Rhiannon smoothed the pale yellow cream along the length of the slash, Saunders shivered, trying to ignore the sensations those delicate fingers were sending along his spine. The coolness he felt as the remedy was applied quickly became a soothing warmth that relaxed the tense muscles.

Doc hastily tied on another gauze dressing as smoothly as possible, before turning his usual worried expression to the sergeant. “How’s it feel?”

“Better.” Saunders hastily buttoned his shirt and tucked it over the bandage.

Littlejohn rode over, with a somber expression on his face as he gestured toward the threatening skies. “If we were home, I’d say we were looking at cyclone weather.”

Grabbing the reins of his own mount, Saunders scrambled onto the saddle, grateful that his side no longer ached. Taking note of Littlejohn’s warning, he glanced up at the increasingly dark clouds and the brazen hue filling the sky. Every combat survivor developed an instinct for spotting approaching trouble and Saunders’ was a little bit sharper than most.

Kicking his horse into a lope, Saunders headed toward the front of the column, with Littlejohn riding beside him. The GI’s long face was grim and getting grimmer.

“According to Leif’s steersman, those things we battled earlier have called for reinforcements. What do you want us to do, Sarge?”

Saunders sketched out the lieutenant’s plans. “Tell the rest of the squad to get mounted and stay close to the wagons. Hanley wants to avoid another battle and keep everything moving, even if we’re attacked. I want to check on Captain Jackson. His troops are supposed to be bringing up the rear.”

“Right, Sarge.”

Littlejohn urged his horse over to where Cajé and Kirby were starting to notice the rising wind and uncertain sky.

“Get mounted” he shouted against sound of the rising wind. “Sarge says those *things* we fought earlier are coming back for another round.”

Kirby was dashing around, the BAR banging against his hip, hunting for his helmet and glowering at the darkening skies, “No rest in this man’s army, no matter whether you’re fightin’ Krauts or ‘ghosts and devils’. I swear the next war I fight in is gonna have regular hours and guaranteed coffee breaks.”

By the time the rest of the squad was mounted, Saunders cantered up, “Hanley’s trying to get his people and supplies back to the Stronghold before those creatures we fought earlier catch up and attack again.”

“Sounds like he needs a diversion,” Cajé spoke in a darkly grim tone.

“It won’t be us this time, Cajé. According to Hanley, Jackson’s cavalry troopers have that assignment. We’re just supposed to stay close to the wagons and make sure they don’t fall behind.”

“Whattaya know,” Kirby grinned ruefully. “Somebody else got the dirtiest job for once.” He hefted the BAR so he could swing it around instantly, “Still, ridin’ flank ain’t gonna be no picnic either, Sarge.”

“Just shut up for once, Kirby, and do like you’re told.” Saunders’ expression was grim.

Gesturing for Kirby, Littlejohn and Cajé to take their position beside the wagons, Saunders ordered, “Keep up with the lead column and make sure the wagons stay together. Jackson’s men are riding rearguard, to hold off our pursuers and keep them from attacking the wagons.”

“What about you, Sarge?” Cajé interrupted. “Where are you going?”

“I’ve still got a few grenades, Cajé,” Saunders gestured to the explosives hanging on his belt. “Maybe I can help Jackson slow down whatever’s following us.”

After checking to be sure he had a fresh clip in the Thompson and two tucked inside his jacket, Saunders rode over to join Captain Jackson’s detail. Hanley had said they were his “special weapons” squad and Saunders was curious about what that meant in dealing with the inhuman creatures they were up against.

Making sure the SMG’s strap was snug on his shoulder, he drew up his reins and warily greeted the young cavalry captain who’d helped get his squad mounted.

“Hanley said you were covering the rear, so I thought I’d see if you wanted any extra help? He also said something about ‘special’ weapons and I was curious.”

Jackson gave a reckless grin as he signaled his troops to fall in behind the wagons, “You lookin’ to see what kind of ‘hoodoo’, the Warder uses against Kronus’ beasts. Myrrdin may not be a match for Kronus face to face – yet, but he’s showed us a trick or two.”

“Who’s Myrrdin?”



“He’s a seer and adept, though he hasn’t come into his full power yet. He’s best at letting us know when folks from elsewhere get shifted through to our territory. He’s also alerted us to Cranes attacks once or twice, though he doesn’t have the power to cripple the adept or destroy him. But he’s still young.”

“Do you need any help, holding off this Kronus?”

“Since we’re sorely lacking in numbers facin’ his creatures, I’ll take any help I can get. Even that pea-shooter of yours.”

“What sort of weapons are you using?” Saunders was somewhat surprised at Jackson’s scorn for his Thompson.

“If rapid-fire was all we needed, I’d have Leif back here on one of the wagons, mannin’ the Gatling gun that we were deliverin’ to Fort Laramie before we wound up here. But it takes real stopping power to bring down Kronus’ creatures. My men used to carry Winchesters, until we got hold of some of the old buffalo guns. Now, there’s a gun to write home about, with a bullet that’ll put a hole in man or beast you can toss a rutabaga through. Some of my troopers carry matchlocks or flintlocks, even a few cap and ball Navy Colts. Having’ to reload, makes a man *think* about where he puts his bullet, plus it’s easier to pour shot and mix powder for those single bores.”

Still irritated at Jackson’s attitude, Saunders replied, “So you’re saying the Tommy gun won’t be much use against the enemy we’ll be facing.”

“Oh, I never spit on a helpin’ hand when it’s offered. But you’ll likely find those explosives of yours much more useful.”

This time Jackson stared avidly at the grenades on Saunders’ belt, leaving the sergeant to ponder the captain’s words. That was the crux of the matter. Hanley was eager to keep the squad here, even with the minimum of ammo and grenades they’d brought, but his men weren’t trained to fight supernatural foes, not like Jackson’s and Marcus’s troops. While some of their modern weapons might give his squad a temporary edge, once that was gone. . . . He did not allow himself to think about the likely aftermath.

Besides their loyalty was to the US Army and the men of King Company, in particular. Fighting their *own* war against the Germans, their madman leader, and the forces of chaos. The situation facing his squad was complicated enough, without taking on “ghoulies, ghosties, and long-leggedy beasties.” And he was determined to find some way to convince Hanley to help them get back to that desolate corner of France where reality had somehow slipped off the road map.

Saunders tucked his grenades inside his jacket for safekeeping and started to have second thoughts about the impulse that had brought him back to ride with the rearguard. Until he spotted the two wagons with the wounded aboard. He wasn’t sure what was delaying Doc and Hanley’s healer now, but he intended put the fear of God in that medic of his, making sure they didn’t stop those wagons again.

“*Doc*,” he said in the low-voiced growl that usually froze Kirby in his tracks.

The medic peered out of the makeshift ambulance over his driver’s shoulder, “Sorry Sarge, but Rhiannon had to go check on one of our prisoners. Billy said it sounded like he

was wheezin' real hard and couldn't catch his breath."

Saunders was too worried to make any idle threats, even under his breath. He just turned his most intimidating gaze on Doc and his driver, "Get this wagon moving toward the front of the main column, where it belongs. I'll bring Rhiannon as soon as I can."

Reining his mount over to the wagon that held their prisoners, Saunders lifted the tarp and peered into the back, noting with exasperation that the healer was kneeling right beside one of the prisoners, despite his earlier warning. Not only that, Billy had put down his rifle and was following her instructions to put pressure on the man's wound. Both of them totally oblivious to another of the Germans groping inside her bag . . . probably looking for a weapon.

Sliding out of his saddle onto the wagon bed, Saunders shoved his Thompson in the German's face, ordering "*Hande hoch*," and watched grimly as the German raised his hands, holding up a razor-sharp scalpel.

Billy blanched as he grabbed up his M-1. Saunders did not raise his voice, knowing that Nelson had learned his lesson and would not let down his guard a second time. Instead he turned his wrath on the healer.

"What the devil were you doing? You coulda got yourself killed, and Billy with you," he said in a harsh voice.

"It's my duty to save lives."

Too angry and pressed for time to argue with her, Saunders slung Thompson over his shoulder and picked her up in his arms, depositing her onto the front of his saddle.

Turning back to the young GI, he growled "Don't drop your guard *again*. And sit down and brace yourself. These wagons are going to start moving fast so we don't have another run-in with the things we saw earlier."

Billy nodded, his face pale.

Saunders dropped into the saddle behind Rhiannon, urging his mount to catch up with Doc's wagon. His arms were wrapped around her slender body during their rush for the other wagon and as he felt her trembling against his chest, he tried to apologize.

"I didn't mean to frighten you." He raised his voice to be heard over the pounding of the horse's hooves. "But our prisoners are ruthless. The one I stopped would've cut your throat without a second thought."

The tremors stopped and the tension went out of the healer's body as she relaxed within his embrace. All too soon they'd caught up with the other makeshift ambulance and Saunders called out, "*Stop*, so I can put the healer inside."

The wagon rumbled to a stop. As Doc pushed aside the canvas, Saunders lifted Rhiannon and deposited her inside. For just a moment, their gazes locked, then suddenly she leaned over and kissed him. Saunders drew back, his own gaze hooded, startled by the rush of desire jolting down his spine.

As Rhiannon stepped cautiously over the wounded, heading toward the front of the

wagon, Saunders ordered Doc, "The two of you stay down, no matter what happens with your patients. We've got to keep moving and can't stop, even it's a matter of life and death."

With the sky overhead darkening by the minute and eerie bolts of energy rippling between the clouds, the driver of Doc's wagon used the reins to lash his horses, hurrying to catch up with the main column. Despite its driver's determined efforts to control his team, the prisoners' wagon continued to lag behind. Even as he struggled with the reins, his horses were neighing frantically, eyes rolling and foam covering their necks and chests.

Jackson's column headed toward the rear as the young officer circled his arm to form his patrol into two ragged lines.

"All right, you yellowlegs. We're ridin' rearguard and you know what that means. Our chief job is to protect the main column . . . we don't try to tangle with the enemy unless there's no other choice."

As his troops moved into a trot, before going to a canter, Jackson gave Saunders a sidelong glance, "Not sure how that weapon of yours will affect Kronus' slaves, so stay close. Keep a close lookout for anything that tries to bring down your mount. A man afoot in the middle of this kind of battle is as good as dead."

Just ahead, the ambulance holding the German prisoners teetered wildly as the horses wheeled around, charging blindly back toward the forces in pursuit. Saunders stared in disbelief as the frantic driver grappled with the reins, trying to slow down his out-of-control team, but the horses were running blind.

Jackson yanked the reins hard, trying to control his mount as it shied away from the careening wagon. "Hellfire and damnation, what's wrong with that driver? He's steering that wagon back into Kronus' clutches, takin' your prisoners with him."

Saunders face was grim as he clutched his horse's mane while it danced sideways, startled by the headlong course of the wagon as it passed them. Urging the skittish animal to follow Jackson, they tried to overtake the wagon. The captain quickly realized that the driver was standing up in the wagon bed, pulling back on the reins as hard as he could. But to no avail.

"It's not the driver's fault." Jackson gasped, pulling up sharply. "He's tryin' to turn that team, but they're runnin' wild, like they were *possessed*." His voice trailed off, as he caught the look on Saunders' face.

Putting two fingers to his mouth, Jackson gave an ear-piercing whistle. Four troopers peeled off the rear of the column and galloped back to join them. Jackson snapped a quick order before waving one of the men to rejoin his troop.

"Tell Lt. Andrews to keep the column moving no matter what happens. We're going after that wagon."

As Jackson and his fellow cavalrymen lashed their horses into a full gallop in pursuit of the runaway wagon, Saunders clung to his horse's reins as he struggled to keep up with the more experienced riders. Unless they slowed down, he had little chance of using his weapon, even if the enemy was right in front of them.

After almost ten minutes of terrifying, bone-jarring pursuit, two of Jackson's cavalymen pulled alongside the madly racing horses, trying to snatch their reins and turn them back toward the main column. Suddenly there was a loud crackling noise and the sharp smell of ozone as a bolt of energy seared out of the heavens, right in front of them. Rather than stopping the team, it only spurred them to run faster.

Jackson screamed, trying to warn the lead man. "Kronus is *here*. Mathers, look . . ."

But before he could finish, a second bolt struck one of the troopers, leaving nothing behind, not even a scream. Jackson leaned forward, galloping to overtake the second trooper who had just reached over to grab the reins of the runaways. Another bolt crackled right in front of that man, stunning him and causing him to slump across his horse's neck.

Attempting the recklessly dangerous "Comanche pick-up," Jackson leaned over and grappled with the barely conscious trooper, slinging him across the front of his own saddle. Weighed down by the double burden, the captain's horse slowed and dropped back from pursuit of the wagon as the third trooper reined up as well.

Cursing to himself as the veteran riders fell back, Saunders managed to shift his SMG into firing position, one-armed. Though he didn't have Jackson's skill as a horseman, just maybe he could bring down the leaders of that madly galloping team . . . and pray against all odds that Nelson and the driver would survive the resulting crash.

He urged his mount alongside the laboring horses, but before he could fire, a huge leathery winged beast, part-horse and part-dragon, swooped down directly in front of him. Terrified, his horse gave an almost human scream as it shied, jerking Saunders off-balance in the saddle. Desperately, he kicked his feet out of the stirrups and lunged away from the rearing beast. He'd rolled down enough hills, dodging artillery and sniper fire that he thought he could go limp and take the fall without shattering every bone in his body. Still, he hit the ground so hard, for a moment he saw stars.

As he staggered to his feet, bruised and out of breath, a beam of energy arced down from the beast's rider and struck the wagon, freezing it in a flickering unearthly light.

Saunders screamed hoarsely, "Billy. Billy, get out . . . *now!*"

He stumbled toward the wagon, determined to reach the young soldier despite the beast hovering overhead, its foul breath blowing over him like a wind from hell. Raising his SMG, Saunders fired a burst directly into the creature's reptilian face with no more results than if he'd thrown a handful of pebbles.

The beast roared again and flapped its wings, landing directly in front of him. As the air grew close and still, Saunders found himself facing the pitiless, inhuman regard of its master, leader and creator of the forces that had attacked them: the being Hanley called Kronus.

At the moment Kronus was wearing a human face and form, though mounted on the monster Saunders had just tried to destroy. A futile effort, judging by the malignant power rolling off the entity in waves. The sergeant swallowed hard and started to fire again. But before he could pull the trigger, the air around his target shimmered and suddenly he was facing Captain Jampel.

The apparition had the Captain's thinning gray-brown hair, broad forehead and square

jaw. He even had the compassionate, yet resolute expression that Saunders had last seen before the Captain had sent them into the hills after the German marauders. Even though he *knew* that Jampel was back at the company CP—some unimaginable distance away, if he could believe Hanley—the focused will of his foe was so intense that it was all the sergeant could do not to drop his weapon and salute this imposter.

Kronus nudged his mount forward, gazing down at Saunders.

Even the hoarse, battle-roughened voice was the same . . . almost.

“Saunders, what the hell are you and your squad doing, fighting a battle that doesn’t concern you, in a world where you don’t belong? Get your men together and I’ll lead you back.”

Saunders closed his eyes and bit the inside of his cheek, trying to break through the illusion and its tempting offer. “You’re. Not. The Captain,” he panted.

“Does it really matter who I look like, Sergeant? You know you and your men don’t belong here. I can open a gate for you. Send you back to your own world, back where you’re needed, where your homes and families are.” The figure wearing Jampel’s face spoke in a sly, cajoling tone, so unlike the captain’s usual terse, businesslike voice that Saunders began to shake off its influence

Raising his weapon in angry defiance, he repeated his rejection of the offer, against his better judgment, “You’re not the captain.”

An impatient look crossed the fake Jampel’s face, as he blustered, “Your weapons are useless here. You should know that by now. Gather your men and I’ll show you the way back.”

“No. . . .” Saunders voice went low and menacing. “I don’t think so.”

The Captain’s eyes were beginning to glow malignant yellow and with slow deliberation, Saunders lowered his Thompson, reaching inside his jacket.

“You always were a weakling, Sergeant. Coddling your men, picking up every stray dog and orphan in the area, making yourself a target, ripe for betrayal. Now do as I say. That’s an order, soldier.” As “Captain Jampel” urged his mount forward to ride over Saunders, the sergeant rolled out from under the creature’s cloven hooves, pulling the pin on the grenade in his hand then tossing it into the creature’s path.

Diving away from the blast as it engulfed the creature, Saunders scrambled to his feet only to be slashed across his shoulder and chest by the razor-sharp claws on its wing. He fell to the ground just as the beast vanished in a cloud of foul-smelling smoke. Though his mount was gone, “Captain Jampel” remained, his body rippling like a sheet in a high wind. Suddenly the image transformed into the features of Steiner, the SS captain who’d been in charge of the POW camp that Saunders and his squad had barely managed to escape.

“Nice try, Sergeant. Too bad it failed. However, I’m looking forward to a most stimulating conversation with your young comrade, Pvt. Nelson. Too bad you won’t be around.”

“Steiner” snapped his fingers and the beam of light blinked out, along with the wagon and its passengers. All of them vanishing as though they had never existed. Then “Steiner” vanished too, in a thick pillar of black smoke which soon dissipated.

Saunders pushed up on one elbow as he heard the bass rumble of the BAR and Caje’s Garand firing futilely at the vanishing smoke. He shook his head in disbelief. What were they doing here? He’d told them to stay with the wagons and keep out of this battle.

Littlejohn reached his side first and slid off his horse, kneeling at Sanders’ side. “What happened to the wagon, Sarge? Where’s Billy?”

Saunders tried to catch his breath, despite the pain radiating across his chest. Finally, feeling as hopeless and helpless as when they had lost Billy retreating from that French village months before, all he could do was gasp out, “Horses . . . bolted . . . couldn’t stop them . . . Kronus . . . wagon . . . gone!”

He groped dizzily for a dressing pack from his belt, fumbling with it one-handed as his vision wavered in and out. He sensed more than saw Doc’s calming presence beside him, easing his head down as the medic took the pack from him, opened it with his teeth and sprinkled sulfa onto the deep, jagged wounds.

“Take it easy, Sarge. Just lemme get a bandage on that. Rhiannon, get over here. *Now.*”

As the healer rushed over, he heard Littlejohn’s grim report as the rest of the squad joined them. “The wagon’s gone. Vanished, taking Billy with it. And Sarge is hurt . . . *bad.*”

Doc turned his fiercest look on the hapless GI, “Shut your mouth, Littlejohn. You don’t know anything.”

Saunders started to protest weakly, but as Rhiannon knelt beside him, he lost himself in the shimmering green depths of her eyes like a drowning man.

#

Some indefinite time later, Saunders drifted back to consciousness. He was being jolted along, probably in the remaining ambulance wagon. His whole body felt cold and numb. Doc checked his pulse then pulled the blanket up tighter around his shoulders, doing whatever he could to ease suffering.

Saunders’ mind wandered back to the winter he was twelve and had almost died of pneumonia, when such a raging fever had burned through his body that nothing had relieved it. Nothing. Until as a last resort, the doctor had told his family to wrap him in sheets soaked in ice water. He still remembered those hellish hours. How he’d ached so much from shivering that he’d begged his mother through clenched teeth to at least give him a blanket, so he wouldn’t freeze to death. She’d wept bitterly even as she followed the doctor’s orders, sitting beside him all night, soothing him as she caressed his face, her gentle hands the only comfort in his frozen, feverish world.

Doc’s square competent hands were nothing like his mother’s delicate fingers, but he had the same tenderness, the same calming touch, the same ability to hold pain and death at bay when all other remedies failed. Saunders struggled to open his eyes, staring into Doc’s

worried face.

“Just try to hold on, Sarge. We’ll be there soon. At the Stronghold”

“Hanley’s base,” Saunders murmured, his throat raw.

Doc held a canteen to his lips, offering small sips as Rhiannon knelt beside him, raising his head in an effort to help.

The healer peered into Sarge’s face, her face bleak, “It is not just his wound that worries me, but the fact that Kronus had access to his mind and memories.”

“Kronus? You mean that *thing* that made the supply wagon, along with Billy and our prisoners, vanish.”

The healer clenched her hands as she stared at Doc, her face troubled, “What did you see?”

Doc shrugged, “Just some kinda bogey man, all teeth and claws. Like somethin’ out of a nightmare.”

Rhiannon rested her fingertips ever so gently on Saunders’ forehead, as she closed her eyes and then drew back, shuddering. “The sergeant saw two faces he knew, one friend, one foe. This could be a very bad sign.”

Doc shook his head, wondering what could be worse than the deep jagged wounds gouged across Saunders’ shoulder and chest. So far he’d been able to control the bleeding and keep the Sarge breathing, but unless Hanley had a skilled surgeon at his Stronghold, Saunders’ chances for survival were practically nil.

He caught that intense blue gaze resting on him, with the momentary calm and clarity that sometimes came *in extremis* before a patient lapsed into a final coma and death.

“Take care of the others, Doc.”

“Just take it easy, Sarge. It won’t be long now till we get you to proper help.”

Saunders coughed, a bloody froth showing at the corner of his mouth.

“Tell Cajé, he’s in charge. Can trust Hanley. . . just not too far. Need fighters here.

Hanley knows. . . how good. . . squad is.”

Doc answered sharply, “Tell him yourself. We’re not goin’ anywhere without you.”

Saunders’ legendary temper flared as he gave a weak snarl, “Don’t be a fool. I ‘m done . . .men can go back. Soon as Hanley finds the way home.”

“We’re not leaving without you, Sarge.”

Saunders gave him that exasperated look he only used when one of the squad made a

particularly stupid mistake, “You know. . . not going to make it. . . but the others can . . . even without Billy.”

His urgency triggered another coughing spell that left him weak and breathless and Doc tried to calm the noncom without openly lying to him. “We’ll make it back, Sarge. All of us. We’re not leavin’ anyone behind.”

Saunders slumped into unconsciousness so abruptly that Doc clutched at his pulse, relieved to find it still there though weak and thready. He stared down into Rhiannon’s face as she knelt beside him, remembering how she’d helped one of Hanley’s critically injured men earlier that day and somehow hoping that her powers might be able to keep the sergeant alive.

She gazed into his pleading face, saying in a low voice, “If he can just survive until we reach the Stronghold, Cerridwen is head of the Sisterhood. They’re trained healers.”

“But they can’t bring someone back from the dead, can they?”

Rhiannon shook her head reluctantly.

“What about your powers? What you did to help that young trooper. Can’t you do the same for the Sarge? Help him to hold on.”

He gripped her shoulders frantically as she stared at him, her eyes shifting color from green to gold to amber. Shaking off his anxious grip, she clasped his right hand and turned it over so it was palm upward and then delicately laid her own across it. A brief spark of energy flared between their hands.

Doc flinched back, startled and then gazed at his hand, expecting to see a burn mark. But his hand was unmarked, other than its usual scrapes and bruises.

Lacing their fingers together, Rhiannon continued in a low whisper, “My grandmother knew I had the power, but did not want me to become one of the Grove’s healers, fearing I would give up all thoughts of home and family. Alone I cannot save your sergeant’s life, but there is a healing power within you. Like that of the sisterhood, only different. What you are asking takes more power than I have. But if you link your strength with mine, I think we can save him, although it could cost you your life. Are you willing to take that risk?”

“What do I have to do?”

“Join your hands . . . and your mind . . . with mine. We will try to save him.” She hesitated a moment. It might also help if you would hold a picture in your mind of your Sergeant, whole and healthy. A time when he was happy, carefree.”

Not many of those I can recall Doc thought grimly. “I’ll try.”

Closing his eyes so he could visualize more clearly, Doc let images of the past months spool through his mind like a movie reel at triple speed. Battlefields and patrols. The Lieutenant going missing during a heavy bombardment. Blowing up bridges and assaulting bridgeheads. Letters from home. Some with good news, others with bad. Saunders’ grim expression as he tried to save a wounded soldier by going with a German prisoner to find a truckload of plasma. Then a sudden flash of the Sarge grinning after Barnarbo located those hot showers in that French village.

The image grew clearer. Him, Cajé and the Sarge, luxuriating in the hot water with that bar of finely milled French soap. Laughing, singing and clowning around, like a bunch of high school boys in a locker room, until that German captain interrupted. Doc felt a sudden stab of guilt until Rhiannon gave him a sharp look.

“I have the image in my mind, but why does it trouble you so?”

“I had to kill a man . . . two men . . . to save Cajé and the Sarge. I’m supposed to be a medic, not a soldier.” Doc’s face was sorrowful.

“I understand. I’m frightened too. Using my power without the proper training is dangerous, but it’s his only hope. Now concentrate, we must bend our minds to the task of reweaving the frayed cord of your sergeant’s life.”

Taking a deep breath, Doc visualized pouring his strength into the Sarge like pouring water from a pitcher into a glass and he saw the healer drawing a thread as fine as a spider’s web over Saunders’ chest.

More she demanded in his mind.

From a spigot into a pitcher, and the web spun into a silk suture’s thickness.

More! The voice inside his head grew intense.

Using an old-fashioned pump to fill a bucket, Doc saw the suture weaving together into a fine gold chain.

MORE! He couldn’t hear anything over the shrill voice inside his head until he visualized a fire truck with its manual pump pouring out water on a blaze and as he did, suddenly his mind was filled with an avalanche of images.

A small white-framed house on a tree-lined street. A neighborhood full of kids, running, laughing, playing stick ball and Kick the Can. The smell of home-cooking and pies cooling on a window sill. Swimming holes and lazy days spent staring at floating clouds or watching bumblebees wobble thru the clover. A dozen other images spilled through his mind from Saunders’ past that Doc tried not to examine too closely, not wanting to violate the privacy that the Sarge guarded so closely.

Yet even as he tried to avoid being a voyeur, he felt Rhiannon clutch desperately at those images, braiding them together until they formed a brightly woven cord that faded in and out, shimmering like a rainbow.

Barely conscious, the healer slumped across Saunders’ chest, pressing that glimmering knot of energy against his bloody bandages. Doc felt numb, half-frozen inside, teetering on the edge of unconsciousness. But he fought his way back, fearing that in her efforts to save Saunders, she might injure him further. There was a brilliant flash of light and the cord was gone.

Panting in exhaustion and barely able to stay upright, Doc moved the healer gently aside as he checked the Sarge’s pulse. To his amazement it was much stronger and his breathing was even and unlabored.

He glanced over at the healer, whose face was as pale as ashes. She struggled to her feet and pulled her hood up, hiding her face in shadow, before turning her attention to their patient. Rhiannon gazed at Saunders for a long moment then said in a hoarse whisper, "The wound is closed and the damage healed. He should wake soon."

Hardly daring to believe, Doc checked Saunders' bloodstained dressings, dumbfounded to see the torn flesh closed, healed, without even leaving a scar.

Doc turned to the healer, with an amazed and grateful look on his face. "I don't know how to thank you, for what you did to save him."

"Let us hope that we both don't come to regret my actions."

As Doc moved away from Saunders' side, Rhiannon pulled the blanket a little higher on his chest and stroked his unshaven cheek with surprising tenderness, before turning her attention to their other patients.

Chapter III

As they approached the Stronghold, Saunders stirred restlessly under his blanket, his hands brushing against his chest, feeling the absence of bloody dressings. Taking a deep breath, his eyes fluttered open as he realized that he was able to breathe now without the ragged pain he'd felt earlier. As he pushed up on one arm, he looked around for Doc, wanting some kind of explanation for this miraculous occurrence.

Shoving the blanket aside, he glanced around the wagon. No sign of his medic, just other wounded troops lying on rough pallets as the healer, Rhiannon, moved among them checking dressings, offering sips of water, or just a reassuring word. Saunders made sure he was still wearing his pants before pushing weakly to his feet in search of Doc and the rest of the squad.

Rhiannon looked up, her gaze meeting his for a long moment as Saunders suddenly recalled the softness of her lips and gentleness of her touch on his wounded side. He looked away, knowing that he had to bury those feelings. He couldn't get involved with her, not when he had a duty to his men and to King Company, to get back to HQ with a prisoner.

Setting his mouth grimly, he whispered in order not to disturb the other patients, "Where's Doc?"

The healer pointed to the front of the wagon and Saunders nodded then walked unsteadily forwards, pushing aside the canvas cover that protected the wagon's interior from the heat and the dust. Doc was seated next to the driver, gazing all around as the wagons rumbled down a dusty road and into a narrow pass.

"Hey Sarge, it's good to see you on your feet. How ya feelin'?"

"Confused," he answered tersely. "What happened after I passed out? I thought I was done for this time. What did you do that's got me feeling almost normal?"

"I didn't do it, Sarge. It was Rhiannon, that girl the lieut . . . Hanley . . . calls a healer. Apparently there's a kind of good magic in this place, besides the nasty stuff we ran up against."

"Magic, huh," Saunders shook his head skeptically before gazing around at the countryside they were traveling through. "I can't complain about the results, I guess. Just where are we, anyway?"

"Not exactly sure," Doc answered, "except it seems to be the Warder's main base, which everyone calls the Stronghold. Also, according to our driver, it's home for a lot of the folks ridin' with us."

Even as he heard Doc's words, Saunders wondered whether he had expected a rough hewn wooden fort that belonged with Jackson's background or some kind of medieval castle with a moat, drawbridge and portcullis. As he leaned forward, one hand resting on Doc's shoulder, they watched intently as the wagon rattled through a rocky defile that opened into a welcoming verdant countryside dotted with fields of golden grain, shadowy arbors, and lush green pastures.

The threatening clouds that had loomed overhead ever since his patrol had entered this world finally dissipated and the sun appeared, illuminating the fields below where horses, sheep, and cattle grazed in rolling green meadows, fenced in by low hedges. After all the battles and hardships that they had survived over the last months, Saunders felt the tension in his shoulders begin to dissolve as they drove along the quiet country road. Until he spotted Littlejohn trotting grimly alongside their wagon and remembered Billy wasn't with them.

As they rumbled past snug cottages with vine-covered, flowering roofs, the three GI s were momentarily lulled by the peaceful atmosphere. Saunders shook off that sense of a homecoming, determined to confront Hanley as soon as possible about coming up with a plan to rescue Nelson. . .and then find their way back.

"Where exactly are Warder's headquarters? We've wasted too much time already. We need to start planning how to rescue Billy and get our prisoners back, if possible."

Rhiannon stepped over tentatively by Saunders side, "I know you are eager to see the Warder, but we must stop at The Healer's Grove first and deliver the injured into Cerridwen's care."

She glanced down at the young blue-coated soldier, who was stirring uneasily beside the pallet Saunders had occupied earlier. He was still whimpering in pain from the raw blackened area that ran nearly the full length of his chest. She'd managed to ease most of his pain moments before she and Doc had merged their skills to save Saunders' life. Still, the burn would need careful attention if it was going to heal without permanent scarring.

Placing a hand on the sergeant's shoulder, she gave him a troubled look. "And it would not be a bad idea for Cerridwen to examine you as well. Even with your friend's aid, I do not know if we healed your wounds completely. There could still be foul matter from the beast's claws that was not completely cleansed."

Saunders stared at Rhiannon, trying to ignore the growing sense of attraction he felt toward her. *She's beautiful . . . and kind*, he thought to himself. *And it's been a long time since my last R and R. Besides, I'm just grateful for what she's done. Easing the pain from that*

knife slash and then saving my life, with Doc's help. It's gratitude, nothing more.

"I appreciate your concern," he ducked his head, not willing to meet her eyes. "But, I need to check on my squad and meet with the lieutenant. I mean, the Warder."

Grabbing up his ragged, bloody shirt as he stepped cautiously around the bodies of the wounded, Saunders jumped down from the back of the ambulance wagon. He shrugged into the tattered shirt as Littlejohn's mount trotted alongside and looked up and demanded, "Who's carryin' the Thompson? And my pack?"

"Caje has them," Littlejohn replied. "I think he and Kirby were ridin' with Captain Jackson's troops." He reached down a hand, which Saunders grasped and then swung up behind Littlejohn.

"Let's go find them before Kirby finds some place to get drunk and start a fight."

With a sharp nudge of his heels, Littlejohn urged his mount to catch up with what remained of Jackson's cavalry detachment and Marcus's legionnaires. As they rode through the valley, individual riders broke ranks and galloped off, returning home to their crofts and farms. Saunders and Littlejohn watched somewhat enviously as one of Jackson's blue-coated cavalry troops rode up to a small, snug cottage just down a small byway and after dismounting, was eagerly welcomed with a passionate embrace by a plump young woman carrying a baby in one arm and with another clinging to her skirts.

A ghost of a smile haunted Littlejohn's face, "I wouldn't mind comin' home to a welcome like that."

But Saunders pushed that domestic scene to the back of his mind. He couldn't let down his guard now, even if this was a safe haven for Hanley and his men. This wasn't his world . . . and Hanley's battles were no longer the same as the squad's. Captain Jampel had given him a mission. To stop the Nazi raiders. Even though he wasn't that familiar with Hanley's enemies, he needed to get enough information so he'd be able to lead his squad on a raid against them, to rescue Billy and recapture his prisoners.

He tapped Littlejohn's shoulder and pointed him in the direction most of Hanley's troops seemed to be heading. It led into a busy open area where a tavern, a smithy, and several small shops were clustered on either side of what looked like a cozy boarding house.

Hanley's troops were milling around, some of them leading their horses into an open corral between the smithy and main stables. Others were collecting gear and belongings from their saddles before heading for the tavern, the shops, or rooming house. As Littlejohn turned his mount into the courtyard, Saunders was somewhat surprised to see Caje and Kirby standing in front of the tavern, sharing one of their few remaining cigarettes, obviously drawn by the sounds of drinking and roistering, but not quite sure whether they had anything they could use to pay for their drinks.



"Think that bartender would gimme a beer in exchange for a pair of my socks?" Kirby

asked wistfully.

“If they’re the same ones I been smellin’ for the past week,” Cajé frowned, “We’d be lucky if they didn’t toss us out on our heads.”

As Littlejohn pulled up his mount, Saunders slid down from behind him and approached the remainder of his squad. “Have you seen Hanley or Jackson, or any of Hanley’s seconds? We need to get some answers, about what happened to Billy . . . and how we’re gonna get him back?”

The two soldiers gaped at their sergeant, standing there on his own two feet, miraculously recovered from the life-threatening injuries that had left him pale, sweating and barely breathing only hours before.

Kirby blinked hard, trying to look anywhere but Saunders’ bloodstained shirt. Cajé just maintained his usual stoic pragmatism as he handed over Saunders’ weapon and pack.

“If you don’t have a clean shirt, I can lend you one of mine.”

Shouldering the pack as he slung the Thompson in its accustomed place, Saunders shrugged off the offer, “Thanks, but I’ve got one in my pack.”

Kirby fidgeted, clearly uneasy with Saunders’ miraculous recovery, “Where’s Doc?”

“He and Hanley’s healer were dropping off the rest of the wounded.” He paused for a long moment, shrugging irritably before demanding, “Did the troops you were riding with give you any hint about where Hanley’s HQ is located? We need to get together with him and start making plans how to get Billy—and our Kraut prisoners—back.”

Kirby’s expression was a mixture of confusion and skepticism, as he asked plaintively. “How the hell we gonna do that? That wagon just vanished into thin air, like some kind of magic trick. How we gonna find ‘em after that kind of disappearin’ act?”

“That’s why we need to talk to Hanley,” the Sarge explained with unusual patience. “He knows this place and how things work here. He can tell us what we need to know—about Kronus, his forces, and how to fight him.”

“The hell you say! And just how do you expect the four of us to go up a whole freakin’ army of things that look like they belong in a Boris Karloff movie?”

Kirby’s expression was dubious and Saunders couldn’t really blame him as the BAR man continued with his rant, “You heard what Jackson and the others said. Our bullets ain’t no damned use against those . . . those . . . *things*. We might as well have been throwin’ spitballs durin’ that last round, just after Billy’s wagon vanished into thin air.”

Saunders listened until Kirby finally wound down. Despite his reputation as a whiner and troublemaker, over the last few months Kirby had become a trusted member of the squad. He had a tough, scrappy fortitude that had seen him through some of their roughest battles. But he tended to depend on someone to tell him what to do even in ordinary situations, and this situation was so extraordinary Saunders felt a bit adrift himself.

Still, he couldn’t let his men lose heart, no matter how impossible their situation might

seem.

“Hanley and his troops were fighting this enemy long before we arrived and they know what they’re up against, even if we don’t. I trust Hanley. He’ll help us get Nelson back.”

“Awight, awright,” Kirby jerked his head in reluctant agreement. “I guess we can trust the lieutenant—even if he’s not *our* lieutenant anymore—to tell us what to do and how to get home again. *Unless* he doesn’t want us to leave.”

“Who’d wanna keep you around?” Littlejohn prodded him.

“I’m just sayin’,” Kirby continued in a skeptical voice.

But before they could start to ask any of the local citizens where Hanley’s headquarters might be, Captain Jackson trotted up with Doc hanging precariously onto the back of his saddle.

“Hell, I thought you boys would already be chuggin’ down your second beer at the saloon,” he nodded his head over at the tavern next to the stable, which seemed to be doing a booming business despite the early hour.

“One of my men was captured, Captain. We want to start planning how to rescue him . . .and get our prisoners back.” Saunders’ voice was flat and unemotional, but even Kirby could read the tension in the sergeant’s face.

“The Warder’s got other concerns at the moment, Saunders. But I’m to show you the guest quarters so you can get cleaned up, eat something and maybe catch a little shut-eye.”

Correctly interpreting Saunders’ closed but fierce expression, Jackson offered a tiny hint of consolation. “He’s called a big powwow with everyone who’s had any contact with Kronus in the past, from healers in the Sisterhood to Myrrdin and the other adepts. Rescuing your man is the only reason for that gatherin’.”

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Much to their surprise, the billeting area where they were assigned wasn’t a noisy, overcrowded barracks like they were expecting. Instead they were led to a clean, cozy cottage belonging to two plump, somewhat elderly women who greeted Captain Jackson with big smiles and repeated invitations “to have a cup of tea and sit a spell.”

Politely declining, Jackson gestured to Saunders and his squad, “These fellahs are guests of the Warder’s, Miss Polly, Miss Kate. They’ve had a hard time of it, including a run-in with some of Kronus’ forces. They could really use a hot bath, a soft bed and one of your delicious meals.”

“So I see,” said the taller of the two women, whose gray-streaked hair was wound in a coronet of braids.

The shorter and plumper of the two, with snow white hair fluffed softly around an angelic face gave them a warm smile, “You’re most welcome to our home.”

Saunders turned his most intimidating glare on Jackson, “Don’t think you can just drop us off and forget about us, Jackson. If I haven’t heard from Hanley within six hours, I’ll come looking for you.”

“Try to relax and enjoy these ladies’ hospitality while you can, Saunders. As soon as the Warder and his advisors come up with a plan of attack, we’ll send for you.” He tipped his hat as he wheeled his mount away from the neatly tended yard.

“I’ll stir up the stove, Kate, while you show them down to the springs,” said the gray-haired woman.

“All right, Polly,” giggled Kate, as she beamed at Saunders. “If you gentlemen will just follow me.”

The “springs” turned out to be a rough-plank bathhouse built over a deep natural basin filled with hot water bubbling up from a split in the rocks.

Pulling off his boots with a grunt, Kirby dipped his toe in tentatively, noting that the water was almost uncomfortably warm, “Man, I’m looking forward to relaxin’ in *this* bath. It’s been nuthin’ but cold showers ever since we hit the beach.”

“Just don’t use all the soap,” Littlejohn sighed as he pulled off his boots and massaged his sore feet, pausing for a moment with a troubled look on his face. “I wish Billy was here. He’d really love splashin’ around like this.”

Saunders spoke up softly, “We’re not forgetting about him, Littlejohn. If Hanley doesn’t send for me soon, I’ll go looking for him. Whether he gives us any help or not, we’re going after Nelson.”

“I know, Sarge.” Littlejohn nodded grimly, before making a deliberate effort to rib Kirby again. “Maybe the rest of us would like a chance to scrub some of the countryside off. And soak a little of the dirt and sweat out of our clothes as well.”

“Now, just a doggone minute,” Kirby protested. “I was here first and I’m gonna get a nice hot bath, without sharin’ the tub with everybody’s dirty underwear.”

Doc took a closer look at the water and dipped his blood-streaked hands in it, watching as the floating dirt swirled away and quickly vanished. “It looks like used water drains off and is replaced on a constant basis. We don’t need to worry about who’s first or last, it’ll stay clean and hot for everybody.”



By this time, Caje had already peeled out of his shirt and trousers and plunged into the waters, “Besides, this ‘tub’ is as almost as big as our swimming hole back home. There’s enough room for everybody to soak off dirt and grime, without having to wait.”

Moments later he was joined by Littlejohn, splashing and blowing like a dolphin, while Kirby sat on the side with just his feet in the pool, “Now just a danged minute, Caje ol’ buddy. I

spotted it first and that's got to give me some kind of head start on the rest of you guys. So I shouldn't have to settle for everybody's secondhand water."

Gliding through the water, his dark hair slicked back, Caje was as sleek and graceful as an otter, while Littlejohn dog-paddled over to where Kirby was sitting and soaking his sore feet. Reaching up, Littlejohn pulled the protesting BAR man into the bath and the two of them engaged in a brief but ferocious water fight.

Sitting silently beside the basin, out of range of anything but the most enthusiastic splashers, Saunders put his boots carefully to one side as he peeled off his bloodstained jacket and shirt. He stared at their tattered fronts for a long moment before tossing them aside, still finding it hard to believe that Rhiannon and Doc had miraculously healed those wounds. Running his hands down his chest, he couldn't help but wonder if it had just been a bad dream . . . until he met Doc's troubled expression and saw the doubt and uncertainty that mirrored his own.

Abruptly stripping to his shorts, Saunders made a racing dive into the pool, splashing almost as much water as if he'd cannonballed in. Doc quickly joined the rest of the squad, scrubbing themselves and rinsing out their dirty uniforms. Somewhat surprised to find that clean, warmed towels had been laid out on the benches beside the bathing area, the squad quickly finished washing up, exited the pool and dressed, though in most cases it meant putting on damp clothes that they had just rinsed out.

Neatly pressed clean clothing had also been left for them in the anteroom just beyond the spring-filled basin. Some of it was wool trousers and flannel shirts, along with dark-blue homespun uniforms like Jackson's men wore. Kirby pawed through it suspiciously,

"Damn, we already been drafted for one army, and I ain't about enlist in another one, no matter whether they answer to the lieutenant or not. He wasn't leadin' the patrol when we caught those Germans," he grumbled.

As they hurried up the trail to the cottage, they sniffed appreciatively, savoring the aroma of pot roast with fresh vegetables, just-baked bread and apple pie.

Miss Kate and Miss Polly hovered around the table, bringing second and third helpings, pouring coffee and offering cream and sugar, which Kirby added liberally to his coffee, though the brew that the two ladies served was much better tasting than the paint stripper they had been drinking in the field. The bread was warm and soft with lots of butter, and the fresh carrots, celery and new potatoes a welcome change from their canned rations. Everyone but Saunders had seconds of the apple pie.

After finishing that meal, Littlejohn leaned back on his chair's back legs, chewing on a toothpick, as he sighed,

"After a meal like that, I could sleep for a week."

"I'll show you to your room," Kate nodded toward the back hallway, "I see you've already washed your own clothes. But if you'll leave them outside the door, we'll hang them on the line to dry so they won't be musty. We can also fix any rips or tears." Her eyes rested momentarily on the tattered shirt and jacket Saunders had brought up from the bathhouse.

"Those are a little beyond our ability, I'm afraid. Though we might have some patches,

somewhere.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Saunders gaze was remote. “But I have a spare in my pack.”

Inside the guest room, the beds had such soft mattresses Doc thought he was going to have to put a blanket down on the floor to be able to get to sleep. However, Littlejohn, Cajé, and Kirby were snoring like buzzsaws and after only a couple of minutes, he was sound asleep too, settling in between the clean sheets and soft comforters like a bear hibernating for the winter.

Only Saunders seemed to resist the temptation of those comfortable beds. Once he’d been able to sleep through an artillery barrage, but now he lay on top of the covers, his head pillowed on his folded arms, staring at the ceiling, his face haunted.

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Still, he must have managed to drop off eventually, because the loud pounding at their door caused him to jerk upright, out of an uneasy doze. As the rest of the squad scrambled to their feet, snatching up pants and boots, one of Jackson’s troopers stuck his head in the door.

“The Cap’n asked me to see if you have eaten and if the food was to your satisfaction?”

Sitting on the side of the bed, Saunders rubbed his hands down his face, and glanced over at Doc, “What time is it?”

“About half past four,” he glanced down at his watch and then over to what looked like early morning light streaming through the curtains. “If that means anything?”

Quickly retrieving his helmet and shouldering the Thompson, Saunders nodded at the trooper, “Where’s Hanley?”

“My orders are to take you to Myrrdin’s tower.”

The squad was sifting through their packs, refilling their ammo belts, but clearly intending to leave most of their gear in the room.

Saunders noted that they were planning to travel light and ordered, “Forget about stowing your gear. We take everything with us, grenades, extra ammo, blankets, even rations.”

“Aw hell, Sarge” Kirby grouched. “You mean that after eating home-cooking like this, we gotta go back to spam and cheese and sleepin’ on the cold ground?”

Saunders didn’t argue, but shouldered his own gear and slung the Thompson over his shoulder where he could swing it into firing position almost instantly.

“Just get your gear together, Kirby.” Saunders’ voice was even, but Cajé sensed the raw tension just under the surface and hurried the BAR man along.

“Don’t argue, man,” he muttered, as he helped Kirby gather his gear, assuring that all their remaining ammo was easily accessible. With Miss Polly’s help Doc had managed to

replace some of his dressing supplies after supper, but he was still low on sulfa and morphine.

Saunders' fierce blue gaze raked over his squad, making sure they were ready to march, then he nodded to Jackson's messenger. "Take us to the lieutenant, to Hanley."

Though he was obviously more accustomed to getting around on horseback, Jackson's messenger led them to a stone tower covered in lichen and moss, with brightly flowered vines tumbling down from the ramparts. Doc reached up and plucked one of the flowers, sniffing its rich fragrance before he stuck it through the button hole of his jacket.

"Whatcha gonna do with that?" Kirby muttered. "Give it to your girl friend?"

Saunders gave both men a sharp look, "Cut the chatter."

Their guide rapped sharply on a heavy wooden door at the base of the tower, which was opened by a woman with a stern, ageless face, wearing a long gray robe.

"Sergeant," her gaze looked directly into his. "You and your medic may come into the Sanctuary. The rest of your men can wait outside and please leave your weapons in their custody. They have a negative effect on Myrrdin's farseeing crystals."

"See, I told ya, we shoulda left our gear," Kirby muttered. "Hell, the rest of us could still be sleepin' . . ."

"Shut up, Kirby," Saunders said automatically as he handed over the Thompson and .45 to Cajé. He fumbled briefly at his belt, then realized his bayonet had been missing for weeks.

"You're in charge, Cajé," he told the scout. "Try to keep him out of trouble," he nodded over to Kirby before following their guide inside.

Chapter IV

Private Billy Nelson stirred and opened his eyes to almost total darkness. Not sure whether he'd been buried alive, he felt a brief burst of panic bubbling up, threatening to erupt from his raw throat. As he struggled, he realized that his hands and feet were bound and, judging by the rattle as he moved, he was lying on a stone floor, his hands chained to some kind of wall.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes again and muttered to himself, "They *wouldn't* leave me behind. Especially not Littlejohn or the Sarge."

As he sucked in lungfuls of the damp, moldy air, he glanced around taking in more detail about where he was. Though his hands were manacled, his feet were only bound with some kind of rough hide lashings. Pushing to a sitting position, he struggled with the ties, finally managing to untie his feet.

Slumping against the cold, damp wall, Billy dragged himself upright, massaging the

pins and needles sensation out of his legs as he tried to discover more about his prison.

“Stone cell,” he muttered to himself. “None of the comforts of home – window, bed or plumbing facilities.” He felt around the floor at the limit of his chain. “Not even a dried crust of bread.” Hearing a faint rustling in the corner, Billy pressed back against the wall, “But rats,” his voice quavered. “Definitely has rats.”

To his dismay, there did not appear to be a door in his prison, leaving him to wonder how he wound up in here and if his captors had any plans to feed him and keep him alive. Or if he’d been walled up in a dungeon cell to die.

Shuddering, he recalled a story by Edgar Allen Poe that his English teacher had made the class read. What was it called? *A Cask of Amontillado*. He slumped back against the wall where he was chained, determined not to scream for help, like in the story. He was tougher than that.

Still, he could not resist tugging hopelessly at his bindings, wondering how he’d been put inside this prison in the first place. As a cold chill ran up his spine, he had the oddest feeling that he was being watched.

He jerked around and spotted the one man who could *not* be here.

“Steiner!”

Billy staggered to his feet, lurching to the end of his chain, as far away from the apparition as he could get in the tomb-sized cell. “You’re *dead*,” he gulped. “Gates killed you. Kirby told me while I was in the hospital recovering. After the others had escaped from the compound, Sarge went back for Gates and Steiner tried to stop him . . . and Gates shot him. I mean you.”



The SS officer gave his usual charmingly malevolent smile, “If I *am* dead, then this must be Hell, Private, and perhaps I’ve been assigned as your own private demon. Or it just might be *Uberlauten* Hoffman who has been assigned to make sure you’re punished for your sins.”

Steiner snapped his fingers and the critically wounded officer who had been one of the prisoners in the wagon Billy had been guarding suddenly appeared. Like Steiner, he too was somehow miraculously recovered, no longer wearing the bloody rags he’d had on when the wagon was attacked. Instead, he was resplendent in full dress uniform, complete with medals and awards.

Billy swallowed hard, then looked directly into the younger German’s eyes, seeing a fear and confusion that almost equaled his own.

Taking a deep shuddering breath, he turned his back on the two German officers, “I don’t know whether I’m alive and you’re some kind of halla . . . hallu . . . fever dream. Or if I’m dying and you’re part of my life flashing before my eyes. Whatever it is, this place and you, you’re not *real*. And I’m not gonna waste my breath talking to you.”

Billy pulled himself to the very end of his chain and lay down on the floor, ignoring his two visitors. The Stygian darkness wavered and then dissolved into a more traditional cell with straw-stuffed mattress, barred window and door, and primitive sanitary facilities, though Billy continued to ignore the presence of his two jailors.

“Steiner” shrugged and addressed the younger officer, “For the moment his mind is closed to my manipulations. However, considering the lack of mental discipline shown by the American troops, I doubt his resolve will last too long.”

A brief frown crossed the SS officer’s face, “Ah well, come to my office and we’ll share a glass of brandy while we discuss your future as a commander of my forces.”

“That’s not possible, *Herr Hauptmann*,” Hoffman protested. “While I appreciate your rescue efforts on behalf of myself and my troops, our duty is to the Fatherland and our mission is to undermine American morale and slow their advance. We must not waver, or our loved ones will be at their mercy.”

Kronus, who had assumed the guise of “Captain Steiner,” stared at the young lieutenant for a long moment, his pale blue eyes flickering briefly into a soul-devouring darkness.

“Surely you realize that the Fatherland is lost, lieutenant? The Fuhrer’s divine madness has already burned itself out and nothing remains but the bitter ashes that will be your people’s heritage for the next generation. The glorious depravity that he injected into his followers has succeeded in spreading its contagion – massacres and pogroms will soon become the standard behavior in wartime. Anyone different from the national accepted norm will be seen as the ultimate threat and subject to slaughter. Or slavery.”

The young SS lieutenant felt a chill at the pit of his stomach as “Steiner” described openly what their leaders had classified as Top Secret. Even though it was an open secret among his fellow SS officers, still the goal of eliminating or enslaving all inferior races had not been verbalized so plainly before. It left the lieutenant with a brief sour taste in the back of his throat.

“Come, come, lieutenant, now that your surviving troopers have given in to their true natures and embraced their transformation, surely you must realize there is no return for them. Nor for you either. Your destiny lies here, leading my troops in their attack on the Stronghold. The Warder’s time lost forces cannot stand against them as they rape, pillage, and slaughter until true chaos descends.”

As “Steiner” gloated, the young SS officer struggled to organize his confused memories and overcome the disorientation that had filled his mind ever since their clash with the *Amerikaner* squad who had ambushed his elite unit.

Dieter Hoffman was the typical Aryan youth—blond-haired, blue-eyed, with fair pale skin, unmarred by a single freckle or blemish. He’d joined the Hitler Youth and excelled in all the proper skills – swimming, gymnastics, marksmanship . . . and beating up elderly Jews and others inferior to the German Race. When he was old enough, he’d joined the *Waffen* SS, rising through the ranks slowly but steadily as the German Blitzkrieg had smashed its way across Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Low Countries. After they’d swept over the hated Maginot line, humiliating the arrogant French who had sneered at them since the treaty of Versailles, Dieter had assumed that the war would soon be over and they would be able to

enjoy the fruits of their victories.

But that stubborn English bulldog Churchill refused to surrender despite nightly bombing raids that should have broken the British will. Worse still, he had won over that crippled Jew-lover, Roosevelt, and brought the Americans into the war. In spite of their mongrel, 'melting-pot' origins, American troops had actually succeeded in overwhelming the physically pure Aryan forces and defeating the technically superior German-crafted weapons

Despite his superiors' denials, Dieter knew that they could not hold out against the Allied Forces much longer and he wondered what would happen to his family, his neighbors, his homeland? Would it be broken up into satraps, ruled over by depraved potentates? Or, like medieval warlords, would the victors turn the whole country into a Wagnerian funeral pyre, slaughtering the citizens, poisoning the water, salting the earth? Would the few survivors become like the gypsies they so despised, a desperate homeless, stateless people? Earning a few scraps of bread by rag-picking, fortune-telling, and petty theft?

Surely there was something he could do, some hope that he might hold on to, that the German people would not be destroyed. Then he gazed at the desolate landscape surrounding him, recalling how his troops were transformed into subhuman monsters. He'd protested to "Steiner," hoping that somehow the change might be reversed and his troops returned to human form. But the older man had laughed at him, "Do you think they truly want to be human again? After they've fed on their enemies' blood and terror?"

Dieter had swallowed convulsively, remembering how his troops had reveled in their inhuman actions against French civilians, the rape, pillage, and slaughter seeming to feed some darker side to their nature. Despite his contempt for the French who often held out one hand for bribes while trying to stab his troops in the back with the other, he did not think that whole villages should be ravaged. But he had his orders . . . and "Steiner's" words made so much sense.

"Embrace your inner wolf, Lieutenant, and eagerly rend the flesh from the bones of your foes. Only the true predator can survive the battlefield. Don't cast out your demons but embrace them. According to the great mythologist Wagner, the Wolf, the Serpent and the Hellqueen were victors over the gods themselves." "Steiner's" eyes glittered with a feral yellow gleam, "Remember that, *Uberlauten* Hoffman and know who your *real* masters are."

Hoffman wondered if this mad self-immolation "Steiner" described was the only future that remained for the German people. If so, then there was nothing left for them to live for, to return to. He and the few survivors of his original platoon owed their lives to "Steiner", and the only way to repay him was life for life and blood for blood. Most of his men had already undergone the necessary transformation, leaving them with odd-colored eyes that glowed red or yellow with slitted rather than round pupils, while their faces had grown wider and longer, changing shape to accommodate fangs and tusks. Others had their hands and arms become thicker, more muscular as their fingers had sharpened and elongated almost like the claws of a wild beast.

Dieter rubbed his hands across his eyes, wondering what change he might have to undergo. His utterly pragmatic nature briefly emerged as he wondered, *What if this was all a nightmare, some kind of fever dream? Would he awaken in a clean, well-ordered field hospital and all of this blood, savagery, and destruction would have vanished?*

If only he could believe that.

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Hunkered behind a row of gray, spiny undergrowth that bordered enemy territory, Saunders peered down into the shadowy area below, contemplating his warning to Caje a short time before, about keeping Kirby out of trouble.

Too bad I didn't have him along to keep me out of trouble he thought, studying the hostile terrain. Still, if they were going to have any hope of rescuing Billy and recapturing their German prisoners, they had to take this chance, reckless as it might be.

He just wished that he could be sure Captain Jackson and Hanley's other allies would go along with their battle plan. Although they seemed to agree that the attack was totally necessary, there was a lot of discussion about actual deployment of their forces. After the cavalry officer's outburst during the final briefing, Saunders wasn't confident Jackson could actually be trusted to do as he was ordered. Judging by the angry words between the two, it was clear that they had been butting heads for some time now and, having clashed with Hanley numerous times himself, he had a certain sympathy for Jackson's point of view.

In fact, it seemed like all of Hanley's lieutenants had their own misgivings about this rescue mission. Although most of them were in favor of this all-out attack on Kronus' fortress, they weren't reluctant to express their misgivings.

The Viking warrior who'd loaned Littlejohn his horse made a cryptic observation, "It took the guile of the Aesir, along with the sacrifice of Tyr's right arm, to bind Fenris Wolf and delay the final battle with the Frost Giants. Will this sortie sacrifice as much to the same end?"

Marcus shook his head in disagreement, "To face Typhon the Destroyer is a sure guarantee of death. I vote against it."

Jackson had leaned back, propping his boots on the table as he lit a cheroot so foul-smelling that Saunders didn't even give it a second look, "Seems like goin' after the sergeant's boy is gonna put us up against Kronus on his home ground." He turned a piercing hazel gaze on Saunders, "Are we sure we have enough weapons and troops to do the job *right*?"

Hanley leaned on the table, a determined look on his face, "I appreciate your tactical input, gentlemen, but the necessity for this attack is *not* open for debate. Kronus' forces have been striking closer to the Stronghold week by week. The assaults on outlying settlements and ambushes of our supply wagons are too frequent to ignore. A direct attack will be extremely costly, but if we divert Kronus' attention with Nelson's rescue, he won't be prepared for a direct attack. That element of surprise will work to our advantage."

"Staking us out as the sacrificial lamb, lieutenant?"

"When you and your men sneak in under cover of darkness to rescue Nelson, I doubt Kronus will be expecting you. Once you've found him, stir up as much trouble as you can while bringing Nelson out. That will distract Kronus and divert a large number of his forces before we hit them."

"Putting us on the hot seat, until your troops get a foothold," Saunders frowned.

“Don’t worry, Sergeant. There will be more than enough of us to occupy Kronus’ forces, while you’re making a break for it.”

Saunders and his squad were supposed to infiltrate past the sentries and make a sortie into the holding area just outside the fortress walls. Most of the prisoners were kept there until Kronus decided what to do with them. He’d balked at first, wondering about the source of Hanley’s intelligence as to Billy’s location, until Myrrdin had unrolled a shimmering scroll, totally unlike the maps Saunders was accustomed to.

He’d pored over the map, which, with its glowing illustrations of beasts and monsters scattered across the surface, looked like a guided tour through hell. After studying it for several minutes, he’d questioned the young adept closely. “What else can you tell me about this area where Billy is located?”



“We know Kronus has not imprisoned your soldier inside his main fortress. Possibly because he has some use for him. There’s a small chance Nelson will be able to resist the chaotic forces within the holding area for another day, possibly two. After that, the energies within the area will likely shatter his mind. You won’t be able to recover your prisoners though, since they will have been transformed into changelings and monsters to replace those he lost in battle.”

“How do you know that?” Saunders demanded.

“It’s common practice,” Cerridwen spoke up, her silver hair falling loose and unbound to her waist. “Those who have surrendered to evil show their true nature as soon as they enter his influence.”

Myrrdin continued describing how their enemy would likely respond to Saunders’ sortie to retrieve Billy Nelson. “Kronus will almost certainly know as soon as you enter his territory but will be intrigued by anyone foolhardy enough to try and stage a rescue of one of his captives. While his attention is focused on you, the Warder’s forces will attack.”

“What’s to keep him from just blasting us to pieces?” Surprisingly, it was Doc who asked that very crucial question.

“By that time, the Warder’s troops will have attacked and his attention will be diverted elsewhere.”

“You hope,” Saunders’ voice was utterly pragmatic.

“We hope,” Myrrdin agreed.

Saunders looked into the face of the youth Hanley had told him knew the most about the breach they’d come through and whether there was any chance of the squad being able to get back to their own time and place. Myrrdin wasn’t much older than the French boy Gilbert who’d wanted to join their fight against the Germans, but when Saunders gazed into the boy’s eyes, he’d been shaken by the determination he saw there, and the absolute honesty as well. He might be skeptical of the young seer’s skills, but not of his intentions.

Jackson's cavalry troops were going to be one arm of the pincer while Hanley and Marcus charged with the legionaries down the opposite side of the valley from Jackson's position. Hopefully, while the battle was in progress, Saunders and his squad would succeed in rescuing Billy and making their getaway.

Then before they'd left to gather their gear and supplies, Rhiannon had come over to consult with Doc about supplies they would need on the mission. Saunders protested angrily. "You can't come with us, Rhiannon. This will be a major battle. You could wind up captured . . . or dead."

"As might you, Sergeant. Besides, I was sent to the Stronghold to share my skills."

Saunders turned to Hanley, hoping he might listen to reason, especially since Doc would be with them, but his friend and former CO had just shrugged, saying, "Cerridwen informed me that it's a necessary part of the girl's training, Sergeant and in the years since I took command of the forces within the Stronghold, I've learned not to argue with her. Rhiannon's part of the medical complement and I think you'll be glad to have her."

Saunders gave a reluctant nod and watched as Doc went over to consult with the two healers about local remedies that might replace his depleted stores of sulfa and morphine. The sergeant could tell that his medic was beginning to feel at home here.

It was obvious that Hanley was trying to win his squad's loyalty and persuade them to stay here and join his forces. He'd seen Littlejohn's eyes roving over the green fields and Kirby flirting with the abundance of pretty girls and, despite his strong family ties, even Caje seemed to be tempted by the relative peace of this place. The war had been dragging on for so many months now and things were starting to get very ugly as they approached the German border.

Taking off his helmet, Saunders slumped down in one of the chairs as he ran his hand through his hair. He'd been fighting for so long, seen so much war and destruction. So many buddies ripped to pieces by hot metal and so many men screaming in unbearable pain, dying far too young. He just wanted to go home and see his mother, brothers, and sister again, but he'd begun to doubt that he ever would. He'd cheated death too long and likely the dice would stop rolling his way very soon.

Why not stay here and help Hanley protect his Stronghold and make a new life for himself?

Then he remembered the oath that he'd sworn as a soldier in the U.S. Army . . . and the obligation that he had to Billy and the rest of the squad. They'd signed up for the duration, all of them, and it was his responsibility to rescue Billy and do everything in his power to retrieve one of his prisoners and report back to Captain Jampel.

"Got what you need, Doc?" he asked, before turning his attention back to Hanley. "How long until H-Hour, Lieutenant?"

Hanley flashed him the ghost of a grin as he gathered up the preliminary maps and sketches and dumped them into the roaring fire that Saunders thought had been unnecessary given the mildness of the weather. "As soon as we can get everyone mounted and supplied, Sergeant. The saddler's by the Boar and Brew Tavern is our rendezvous spot. You and your

men will need steady mounts to get you to Kronus' territory."

Although it was comforting to hear Hanley give them those familiar orders in this utterly unfamiliar environment, Saunders did not deceive himself that this mission was going to be like anything he and the squad had faced in the past.

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By the time they reached the hills on the edge of Kronus' territory, it was well after dark. Hanley had sent scouts out to determine how close they could approach without risk of discovery. Since some of Kronus' sentries were nocturnal by nature, the Stronghold's troops made sure they were well sheltered by the rocks surrounding them.

Even so it was a cold camp, with not even the smallest fire allowed to heat rations or coffee. The troops shared out jerky, hardtack, and the few canned rations Saunders' men had left from the gear they'd brought. Jackson had a bottle of rotgut whiskey stowed in his saddlebags and offered Saunders a slug before passing it around to his men, "Start a fire in your belly, if nothing else."

Taking a whiff of the potent fumes, Saunders declined and gave Kirby a hard look as he reached for it. The BAR man shivered, his half-gloved hands tucked into his armpits as he muttered under his breath, "Can't build a damn fire. Now a man can't take a little belt to keep his hands and feet from freezing."

"Shut up, Kirby," Littlejohn growled irritably, "and crawl under your blanket like the rest of us. We got a hard day ahead of us, rescuin' Billy. And we don't need you pukin' and whinin' with a hangover."

As the squad huddled together trying to keep warm in the damp chill, Saunders hunkered down off to one side, not exactly dozing but in that semi-relaxed state that was the best he could manage in a totally unknown situation like this. His body craved sleep, but his mind wouldn't shut down, haunted by too many terrible images of what might be happening to Nelson.

He sensed more than saw Hanley's approach and was somewhat surprised when the lieutenant crouched beside him as though he was settling in for what remained of the night. After a few moments of shifting and settling, he heard that deep, low-pitched voice.

"Even if we *do* rescue Nelson, you realize the odds aren't good for you and the others getting back to King Company?"

Saunders did not reply, only turned that piercing blue gaze on Hanley, as though he held the secret that would take them back to their own world.

Hanley ignored that look, trying to make his point, "Myrrdin is not a sorcerer, he's a seer. He senses power and its fluctuations, but can't really use it."

"Like an artillery observer," Saunders' voice was a harsh whisper. "Only he can't call in a barrage."

"Something like that," Hanley nodded, his face rueful at Saunders' insight. "This isn't a bad place to make a life, sergeant. We have our battles with evil forces, wild beasts, and even

inclement weather, but much of the time, things are peaceful. You could do worse, much worse, after the war is over.”

“The war wasn’t over for you, was it, Major?” Saunders still recalled Hanley’s words when he first recognized his CO, despite the obvious years that had passed for the other man.

“No,” Hanley sighed, reaching in his pocket for his long absent cigarettes. “It wasn’t over for me.” Saunders shook out one of his few remaining Luckies and lit it with his Zippo, taking a brief drag before passing it on to the other man.

Hanley gave him an appraising look before sucking the smoke deep into his lungs.

“But I’m *not* going to tell you what happened, just on the off-chance that you and the others do somehow get back to your own time and place. Let’s just say, I was caught up in a battle where the lines weren’t clearly drawn and when I turned that corner on a dark street in Eastern Europe and wound up here – in Avalon – it was something of a relief.”

Passing the cigarette back to Saunders, he made his appeal, “I’m not saying this world is perfect, but it’s worth fighting for and you could make a real difference with the kind of natural leadership that Jackson and Marcus just don’t understand. I know how you took a bunch of goldbricks, loners and green recruits, wore down their rough edges and forged them into genuine soldiers. Warriors who obey orders but are capable of acting on their own.”

He turned his most entreating gaze on his sergeant and his friend, “We need that kind of skill, that kind of leadership, if we’re going to survive.”

Saunders did not respond to Hanley’s praise or his desperate appeal, although his gaze did turn toward the light green quilted covering that marked Rhiannon’s sleeping place.

He gave an abrupt shake of his head as he ground out the cigarette roughly, “You’re right, Major. This isn’t our world. Or our war. We have families and obligations at home, after the war ends. Besides, we swore an oath when we joined the Army and I’ve broken too many promises already.”

Pulling his blanket up around his face, Saunders appeared to have closed his eyes, but as Hanley climbed slowly to his feet and walked away, he could swear that intense gaze was still turned toward Rhiannon.

Chapter V

In the misty darkness just before dawn, when sentries were usually half-asleep and visibility was at its lowest, Saunders and his squad prepared to skulk down into the central holding area where Myrrdin’s map indicated that Billy was likely being held. Despite his own doubts, Saunders was willing to gamble on the seer’s supernatural skills, mainly because Hanley believed in him. The one thing that worried him most was their rapidly dwindling munitions supply, including grenades.

He felt in his pocket for the two crystalline objects the seer had given him just before

they left with the cryptic instruction, "You'll know how to use them when the time comes."

Saunders tucked them inside his jacket, along with the map and binoculars.

As they crouched, nervous and sweating, behind a thick row of thorny undergrowth, they listened intently for any sign that the sentries might have been alerted to the coming attack. Nothing but silence, without the sound of a single birdsong.

Taking a deep breath, Saunders signaled for Kirby and Littlejohn to circle around to the right while he, Cajé and Doc moved up on the left. Slimy debris underfoot sucked at their boots, threatening to throw them off balance and slow their advance, but as they trudged past the squalid shanties and tumble-down hovels, there was a shimmering in the gray half-light and suddenly they were back patrolling the cobbled streets and shell-shattered shops and cottages of Northern France.

Saunders froze and signaled for the others to stay low while he consulted Myrrdin's map. To his amazement, it was no longer the gold and crystal-etched scroll he'd been given earlier. Instead it looked like his usual folded and creased topographical chart with scribbled lines and marks showing the position of American troops. His hands clenched and he swallowed hard, trying to overcome the sudden doubt settling in the pit of his stomach.

Was this an illusion? Or maybe even some kind of fever dream associated with his earlier injuries? Had the enemy Hanley warned them about taken over their minds and then led them into a trap?

He looked at the map again. Though the glowing white light that highlighted Billy's location was gone; in its place was a red circle drawn around a centrally located building, identified as the village church. Right in the middle of that circle was an X.

"X marks the spot," Saunders muttered to himself, turning his attention to Cajé and Doc and raising one blond eyebrow. "Do you see it too?"

"You mean how everything changed?" Doc swallowed hard. "I'm not a drinking man, but if I was . . . I'd be thinking about givin' up the hard stuff."

"Me too," Cajé nodded. "Want me to scout out the area, Sarge?"

Normally Saunders wouldn't have hesitated; sending Cajé to check out an unknown area had become second nature. But not this time.

"No," he shook his head and then checked that his Thompson was ready to fire. "I wanna see if anything around here still matches what Myrrdin showed me. Stay alert and signal Kirby and Littlejohn to stay back, until I find out exactly where we are."

As he inched his way warily down the street, ducking into doorways and under windows, trying make sure he always had a wall at his back, Saunders sensed that he was being watched. He peered warily into every window and alleyway before going past it and kicked in the doors of at least a half dozen shops and stores, finding nothing but shattered



windows and scattered merchandise.

The uncanny silence, with no insect or bird sounds, began to wear on his nerves. Even more alarming was the utter stillness of the air, without a single breeze and even the white, puffy clouds seemed to be frozen overhead. His throat was so dry that he took a moment to grab the canteen off his belt and gulp down two hasty swallows. After wiping his mouth with his sleeve, Saunders continued to inventory the deserted village, certain this was some kind of trap.

Nelson was here, that much he was sure of, imprisoned somewhere in this illusion of a French village that was familiar ground to his squad. The sergeant wasn't fooled by the illusion; he'd seen too many squads ambushed and men killed because they got careless and let down their guard. And that was one thing Saunders did not intend to do.

He pulled out Myrrdin's map again, trying to orient himself to how this particular illusion was laid out. Since the village appeared to be abandoned for the moment with no sign of Germans, monsters, or even imaginary citizens, he signaled for Doc and Cajé to join him.

As they scurried over, Saunders waved for Kirby and Littlejohn to continue scouting the buildings surrounding the main square, which was where their map was leading them. Although he trusted Myrrdin's directions, Saunders wanted to make sure that there were no hostile forces lying in wait, ready to ambush them. The whole village remained silent as a tomb, as if just waiting for the Americans to drop their guard. Saunders peered around the corner into the main square, which had a tinkling fountain in its center. Gazing upwards, he took note of the thick stone walls, heavy wooden doors, bell tower and stained glass windows of the village church.

Solid.

Sacred.

It looked like it had been standing there for a thousand years, although Saunders knew that was an illusion.

Still, it left him with a knot of uncertainty in his stomach, that Kronus could actually use a church as Nelson's prison. Until he remembered another village and how a German officer, disguised as a priest, had murdered one of Saunders' squad to keep from being discovered before he could blow an important bridge.

"If we can believe this map," he muttered, "that's where Nelson is being held."

Cajé took a deep shuddering breath, "Anyone inside can look out and cover the whole square. But maybe if I sneak up along that alley, I could pitch in a couple of grenades as a diversion?"

Sarge shook his head, "We don't have any to spare. No, there's got to be another way in without using explosives . . ."

But before the two GIs could make the attempt to break through the door, they spotted a man wearing a tattered shirt and jacket, waving urgently at them from a shadowed alley across the street. Saunders and Cajé exchanged glances.

"I'll go see what he wants," Cajé volunteered and Saunders nodded in agreement, knowing that the scout would be more likely to understand any of the village's inhabitants.

When Cajé returned, he had his gun pointed at the head of the German officer who'd commanded the band of marauders they'd been battling before they wound up in Avalon. He'd been barely alive when the wagon holding him and the other German prisoners Billy had been guarding was conjured away by Kronus. Now he was standing before them, whole and uninjured, although his uniform was still ragged and torn.

Saunders buried both hands in the German's tattered shirt and pulled him close as he demanded in a hoarse whisper, "Where is he, Kraut? The boy who was guarding you when the wagon disappeared. If you've harmed him . . ."

"Take it easy, Sarge" Doc tried to calm the sergeant. "He's trying to say somethin' . . . but you're choking him."

As Saunders loosened his grip, the German pulled away and tried to straighten the ragged remnants of his uniform, though his voice remained flat and without inflection, "My name is *Oberlautner* Dieter Hoffman, Sergeant. And I was in the wagon when it was transported to this place where my wounds and those of my men were miraculously healed."

Doc was perplexed by the totally unemotional words of their captive as he answered their questions. Something wasn't right about this whole situation and he wished he could pull Saunders aside and warn him to be careful.

"What about Nelson?" Saunders demanded. "The private who was guarding you. What happened to him?"

"He is the prisoner of the officer who commands this compound, *Hauptman* Steiner."

Saunders did not bat an eye at that startling revelation, although Cajé and Doc exchanged alarmed glances as the scout rubbed almost reflexively at a pale white scar along one cheek.

"So, where is this '*Hauptman* Steiner'? And where's he keeping Nelson?" Saunders demanded, his SMG not exactly aimed at Hoffman's midsection, but readily located where it could swing in a killing arc that would cut the German in half.

"If you will follow me, I will take you to them." To the Americans' surprise, Hoffman didn't demand that they surrender their guns, guarantee his life or freedom, or even promise not to shoot "Steiner" down in cold blood.

Although not a gambling man, this casual disregard left Saunders with the feeling that he was holding a pair of treys while his prisoner had an ace high royal flush. For a moment he almost balked and then realized that this might be their only chance of finding Nelson and rescuing him, even if Kronus decided to appear as the Devil himself.

Besides, he had a couple of hole cards that the German wasn't aware of, if he could just figure some way of alerting Kirby and Littlejohn.

He signaled Cajé and the scout nodded his understanding, ducking down the alleyway behind the church which caused Hoffman to turn a mildly accusing glance toward his captor.

"I said I will take you to see Captain Steiner . . . and Private Nelson. Where is your man going?"

"He's just checking to make sure we're not walking into an ambush or some other kind of trap. I heard of this Steiner fellow . . . and he's kind of tricky."

"More than you know," Hoffman's voice held a dark, sinister note as he opened the large wooden door and led them into the sanctuary. Much to Doc's and Saunders' surprise, the room they entered was not a shadowy sacred space, illuminated by muted sunlight streaming through the chancel windows. Instead they'd been led into the middle of a stifling darkness, surrounded by moans and inhuman screams that sent cold shivers up their spines.

Doc wondered if they'd stepped into hell, while Saunders dropped to one knee and swung his weapon around, trying to spot their so-called guide and avoid any attempt to knock the Thompson out of his grip.

Without a weapon, there was little that Doc could do except stay out of Saunders' way and offer up a silent prayer. *Dear Lord, if it's your will, help us to find Billy and escape this evil place. Amen.*

In the midst of that pitch-black setting, a figure materialized in front of them, spotlighted from some unknown source. To their shock, it seemed to be Steiner, wearing the same charming, evil smile he'd used to try and break their wills when they were his prisoners. Doc also remembered how he'd also used deceptively cultured tones to threaten and promise, torturing the POWs with their own imaginations as much as the actual beatings his guards had inflicted. But Sarge had stood up to him. Better yet, he'd outsmarted him, getting his squad and Sgt. Akers' men away from that camp using skill, cunning and sheer raw courage to get all the survivors away.

Except for poor Gates.

"Looking for something, Sergeant?"

Saunders snarled, his eyes as hard as flint, "You know damn well what I want, you bastard. Nelson. Where is he? Or do I have to blow this place to pieces to find him."

The SS officer gave Saunders an icy smile, "Don't be in such a hurry, Sergeant. Besides if you start shooting off that weapon of yours, there's no telling *who* you might hit."

Another bright light flashed, banishing the darkness as it revealed Nelson trapped in its beam, slumped despondently on a metal cot. Sarge's grip on the Thompson tightened as he leaned forward, saying in a hoarse whisper, "Billy."

"Sarge. Littlejohn. I knew you'd come. I knew you wouldn't leave . . ." But before Saunders could reach the young private, the light blinked out. Only to return a second and then a third time. Illuminating Billy each time, but showing his growing doubt and despair, as though days—and not mere seconds—had passed between each display. The fourth time seemed to have been the longest of all. His uniform was in rags, a scraggly beard covered his cheeks as his tears overflowed. "Sarge. Doc. Littlejohn. Where *are* you guys? I've been here for weeks, and nobody came. Except to bring my rations." He gave a gulping sob. "Thought about not eating, starving myself. Then I found a way to escape. It's just a spoon, but I've been sharpening it on the bed frame."

“See.” He held up a small piece of metal barely longer than his little finger, so the light reflected off its deadly edge. Half-laughing, half-sobbing, “Here’s my way out.”

Doc jerked forward, trying to reach the young private but could only watch horrified as he used the improvised knife to slash his throat. Sarge lunged as well, determined to stop him, but came up short against an invisible wall. “No!” Saunders denial was a low growl as he pivoted around, aiming his Thompson into the darkness, “Damn you, Kronus. Damn you to hell.”

As the blood-splattered scene faded into darkness, “Captain Steiner” appeared with Lieutenant Hoffman at his side, both of them immaculate in their black SS uniforms with the lightning bolt emblem on the high collar and the death’s head on their caps.

“Temper, temper, Sergeant. Or you might disturb our prisoner’s beauty sleep.” “Steiner’s” smooth voice mocked him.

A fifth light shone, showing Billy in his cell, curled up on a bare cot, shivering. His face was pale, but judging by the scant growth on his cheeks, he’d only been there a couple of days or less. Saunders remembered Myrrdin’s warning and hoped they’d arrived in time.

“Let him go, Kronus,” Saunders turned and pointed his Thompson at the two SS officers.

“Steiner” gave his usual good-natured chuckle before illuminating the darkness that surrounded them, revealing a legion of monsters and beast-men, some of which retained a bit of their human form, still clad in the ragged scraps of their field gray uniforms. Others had surrendered totally to their bestial nature and brandished a chimerical mixture of talons, claws, wings and tusks

“I hardly think you’re in a position to give orders, Sergeant. They’ve been ordered to capture you alive, but I won’t protest too much if a few bits and pieces are missing – a finger, a foot, or maybe even an eye.”

His own eyes glittered malevolently as he strutted before Saunders and Doc. “It’s surprising what monsters haunt a person’s mind. When my beasts first brought Nelson before me, he was more defiant than fearful. A situation that could not be allowed to continue. So I peered into his memories, looking for something or someone he *truly* feared . . . and much to my surprise and amazement, ‘Captain Steiner’ showed up, again.”

“Steiner’s” face *changed*, displaying Captain Jampel’s craggy features before resuming the SS officer’s somewhat amused expression. “A monster who haunted the minds of two brave men could not be allowed to languish in obscurity. So I ‘resurrected’ him, with Nelson’s help. Fortunately, *Uberlauten* Hoffman and his brave troopers could give me a little more history about his background and career.”

Yet in the midst of his gloating, “Steiner’s” whole body seemed to ripple and then waver, as though he was an image projected on a movie screen which was tearing and about to collapse.

“What?” he demanded of some unseen messenger. “What do you mean we’re under attack? That’s not possible. My spies would have informed . . .”

Then his image froze completely, leaving Hoffman and the beasts that surrounded the three Americans uncertain and off-balance.

Not letting the Thompson waver a single millimeter, Saunders reached inside his jacket and retrieved the two crystalline objects Myrrdin had given him, passing them over to Doc.

“Open that cell,” he said in a hoarse whisper, “and get Nelson out.”

Doc stared uncertainly at the odd devices shimmering in the palm of his hand, wondering just how the blazes he was supposed to open something that didn't have a door or a latch. Still, he hurried over to the rectangle of light shining in the darkness. As he approached, it was obvious that Billy was able to see him as he rolled to his feet and welcomed his would be rescuers.

“I dunno where the lock is, or if there even *is* a lock,” Nelson pressed his hands against an invisible wall, staring at the medic. “I've tried scratchin', bangin', kickin'. . .but nothing seems to work.”

Doc stared at the young soldier's bloodied fingers and then picked up the larger of the two “keys” and ran it down the edge of the invisible wall separating him from Nelson. Nothing seemed to happen at first, then the apparatus glowed and vibrated within his grip. Following its slow, meticulous path along the edge of the field, Doc could swear that he saw something tearing or unraveling, but it was slow. Maybe too slow.

He glanced over to where Saunders still was holding his Thompson on “Steiner” and his lackey, noticing with alarm that the creatures who had been crouched in the darkness were growing restless and impatient. Whenever one or another would growl or try to move closer, Saunders would swing the SMG so it was aimed at them. For just a moment, Doc wished that the Sarge would shoot a couple of the beasts, just to scare them a little, then he remembered their dwindling ammunition store and knew there were no bullets to spare.

The Thompson wasn't a particularly accurate weapon, depending more on rapid bursts to knock their foes down or provide a stream of fire to cover the squad's advance. Saunders usually hit what he was aiming at but was not a sharpshooter like Cajé. Besides, he doubted that a single shot from Sarge's weapon would do more than aggravate these creatures.

As Doc continued dragging his “key” down the edge of Billy's cell, he looked into the young soldier's eyes and saw the growing concern.

“Give it up, Doc,” he whispered. “It's takin' too long and Sarge won't be able to hold those *things* off much longer. I won't let you sacrifice yourself. Just drop that 'key' and make a run for it. Maybe I can use it myself”

“Shut up, Billy,” Doc hissed through clenched teeth, as the sweat ran down his face. He could feel the beasts' hungry red gaze raking between him and the Sarge and, while he trusted Saunders with his life, this standoff was beginning to get to him.

Though “Steiner's” image remained frozen, his attention clearly elsewhere, the SS lieutenant called out desperately, “You cannot escape. Surely you realize that my men will not permit you to leave this place. They are too fearful of ‘Steiner’ to disobey his wishes.”

Saunders called out in a harsh voice, as he glanced over his shoulder. “Speed it up,

Doc, can't you? We don't have all day!"

Only halfway down the transparent wall, Doc fumbled into his pocket for the second device, hoping it would work a little faster. Only to discover that when the two devices touched, they ignited with the blinding intensity of an electrical arc that sliced through Billy's cell until the whole light-filled cubicle shattered and Billy fell into Doc's arms.

As he did so, three of the transformed Germans could no longer resist their impulses and lunged at the two GIs, intending to rip them into quivering bloody pieces. But Saunders was too quick for them, firing a short controlled burst that stitched down the chest of one creature and across the neck of the second. Blindly Doc wheeled around, still holding out the key, only to gulp back his nausea as it sliced the third beast into two twitching halves.

Doc wanted to heave the "key" as far away as he could, but after that blinding burst of energy, it shattered into a dozen carbonized pieces. Propping the shaking Nelson on his shoulder, Doc hurried over to where Saunders still had the Thompson aimed at Hoffman

"How do we get out of here, Kraut?" Sweat poured down Saunders' face and there was a feverish glitter to his eyes that worried Doc. And apparently "Steiner" had another card to play.

"There is no escape." The lieutenant's face was no longer a blank mask but twisted with pain as the wounds that had been miraculously healed, suddenly reappeared. "We'll all die here, a glorious sacrifice to 'Steiner's' glory and the rebirth of the Reich."

Saunders grabbed Hoffman, who was again wearing only the ragged tatters of his uniform along with the bloodstained bandages Rhiannon had placed over his wounds.

Holding the German in front of the three of them as a shield, he glanced over at Billy,

"Take my sidearm, Nelson," Saunders ordered. "And try not to drop it this time."

"Right, Sarge." Nelson grabbed the .45 from the holster on Saunders' belt.

As the beasts circled closer and closer, they heard the deep basso rumble of the BAR along with background of Cajé's Garand and Littlejohn's M-1.

"Sounds like it's the cavalry to the rescue," Billy laughed nervously

"But how'd they get here, Sarge?" Doc questioned. "I know you sent Cajé after them, but I was sure 'Steiner' had taken us some place a long way away from the church?"

"Don't argue with luck, Doc. I dunno how they found their way here either, but I'm glad to see them." He swung his Thompson around using the shortest burst possible to bring down the beasts closing in on them. As their rescuers charged out of the darkness, swinging their weapons around to cover the beasts surrounding their buddies, Cajé's sharpshooting skills brought down monster after monster.

"Sarge," Kirby's voice held a desperate intensity. "I just put in my last magazine and this mob o' nightmares ain't showin' any signs of thinnin' out."

"I know, I know," Saunders said, feeling a cold chill settle into his chest. "Littlejohn, how

much ammo have you got left?"

"Five rounds."

"Nelson?"

"Empty, Sarge."

"Caje?"

"Down to three." He squeezed off a shot that took out a wolf-like creature lunging toward them. "Make that two."

Saunders knew that Doc no longer even had the key Myrddin had given him. He pulled out his carefully hoarded grenades, passing one each to Kirby and Littlejohn and keeping one for himself.

"How did you get here, Caje?" Saunders demanded, depending on the scout's superlative sense of direction and hoping the way out was still open.

"There," Caje pointed to a slit of light streaming in through a doorway that seemed a hundred miles away. It also seeming like the largest, most ferocious beasts were crouched between them and their exit. Doc was supporting the barely conscious Hoffman, and for a moment Saunders hesitated, wondering if they should abandon the German lieutenant. Then he realized he couldn't leave anyone behind to be savaged and devoured by the half-human creatures surrounding them.

"Kirby, Littlejohn, when I give the word, each of you toss a grenade to either side of us, right in the middle of as many beasts as possible. After they explode, Doc and Nelson, head for the door with the prisoner, along with Caje to cover you. Kirby and Littlejohn will follow and I'll be right behind. And don't stop for anything. All right?"

Their eyes remained locked on the beasts as they nodded a quick agreement and Saunders pulled the pin on his grenade, pitching it with deliberate care right in the middle of the largest mass of 'Steiner's' fiendish creations. Kirby and Littlejohn copied his actions, then hit the floor, covering their heads with their arms, as all three grenades exploded, creating such terrible carnage that their bestial guards cowered back and almost started to retreat into the darkness.

Doc and Billy scrambled to their feet, half-dragging, half-carrying their prisoner as they ran for the doorway. Saunders dragged a forearm across his dust-smearing face, trying to shake off the bludgeoning effects of the multiple explosions in such a confined area. To his relief, he saw that the trio had almost reached daylight, with Caje a scant yard behind still holding his Garand at the ready.

Time for Kirby and Littlejohn to make their own break for it, while he held off whatever monsters were still determined to go after live prey rather than feeding on the bloody bits left in the aftermath of the explosions.

Waving the two soldiers forward, Saunders just hoped whatever was beyond the door was less deadly than these monstrosities that Kronus had pulled out of Steiner's depraved imagination. Clutching the BAR across his chest, Kirby sprinted for the door, running like a

rabbit while Littlejohn charged headlong behind him. Turning his Thompson on the horrific creatures lurking at the edge of the shadows, Saunders emptied the magazine and then zigzagged toward the light streaming through the doorway.

They were going to make it! They were going to make. . . .

Then he heard a scream that nearly froze him in mid-stride. Littlejohn's voice was an earsplitting howl of pain that didn't even sound human anymore. Kirby hesitated for a fraction of a second, then pivoted, stumbling under the weight of the larger soldier's body as he barely managed to catch Littlejohn before he hit the ground. Saunders gaped in disbelief as a monstrous hybrid of eagle and lion lunged past its intended prey to buffet him with thundering wings, its claws covered with Littlejohn's blood. He dodged those claws and slammed the butt of the Thompson into the creature's muzzle, barely managing to dodge its thrashing wings as it lurched away, seeking easier prey.

Kirby continued his headlong retreat, dragging Littlejohn behind him, ignoring his screams. Half-blinded by the monster's blood that had splattered over him, Saunders staggered alongside Kirby, hoisting Littlejohn's other arm over his shoulder. Together they stumbled into the light, finding themselves outside the village church they'd entered an eternity before. Doc and Billy had been slowed down by the wounded Hoffman and paused some fifty yards beyond the door they'd just escaped through.

Littlejohn's cries of pain had subsided to heaving gasps for breath by the time Doc rushed over to hurriedly inject morphine, staring helplessly at the bloody carnage that the creature had wreaked on the soldier's left leg. The beast's claws had raked through muscle, tendon, artery and vein, down to the bare bone in places and the torn tissue gushed blood like a faucet.

"I need your help," Doc said in a low desperate voice, tearing open every dressing he had and desperately trying to dam the flood before Littlejohn bled to death. Billy dropped beside him and tried to follow his directions, barely able to choke back his sobs.

Kirby staggered into an alley to throw up everything he'd eaten for the past two days, then stumbled back to do whatever he could to help. Caje's saturnine features were pale as wax and his normally lively hazel eyes looked like holes punched in a piece of paper, but his strong, slender hands adeptly followed the medic's instructions. Saunders stared grimly into the resigned look on Doc's face, pleading for any answer other than the one he already knew.

"There's nothin' more I can do, Sarge. The main blood vessels are practically shredded. It's a wonder he's not already dead from shock."

Beside them, Billy pleaded, "You can save him, Doc. Just put some bandages and sulfa on until we get home again."

Doc's face flushed with frustration as he almost blew up at Nelson. He wanted to scream there was nothing he could do, nothing *any* of them could do. Nothing the blasted Chief Surgeon of the United States Medical Corps could do.

And then he remembered Rhiannon's healing skills and how she'd saved the Sarge.

"Maybe there is a chance," he muttered to himself. Maybe the healer could do *something* to save Littlejohn's life, if not his leg.

“Get some branches or sticks. Anything we can use as poles . . . and gimme your jackets so I can rig a stretcher.”

Kirby staggered over to Doc and grabbed the front of his shirt, “Are you out of your *mind*? Littlejohn’s as good as dead. That creature practically tore his leg off.”

“Shut up, Kirby,” Saunders growled as he peeled out of his jacket and shirt. “And go get those branches like Doc told you.” He didn’t believe the soldier had any more chance than Kirby did but he wasn’t about to give up now. Not after they had gone through so much to rescue Nelson. Not when he thought about the subtle sense of power that he’d felt when he met Rhiannon’s guide and teacher, Cerridwen . . . or the miracle that Doc and Rhiannon had worked on him.

Checking on Littlejohn’s pulse, which was still racing despite the fact he was unconscious from the shock of the wound and the first dose of morphine Doc had given him, Doc decided to inject a second ampoule before sprinkling his last two packs of sulfa on the wounds, tying the gauze dressings as tightly as he could.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to use any of his supplies for Lieutenant Hoffman, whose wounds were still covered with the same bandages that he’d put on them when they were first treated. Unfortunately, whatever artificial strength “Steiner” had used to animate the lieutenant was no longer present, and he’d collapsed as soon as they escaped the dark prison where Billy had been held. Doc rigged two stretchers for their wounded, though he hoped they wouldn’t have to carry them too far before finding Rhiannon, Hanley and the rest of the troops.

#

For Billy, the trip back to Hanley’s stronghold seemed almost unreal. Exhausted and drained by his imprisonment within that dark cell, Billy still wasn’t sure the whole experience hadn’t been some kind of bad dream—he *knew* Captain Steiner was dead. Sarge had told him that much while he was still recovering from the wounds he had gotten escaping from the POW camp run by the SS officer.

Still, the man who held him prisoner had looked and sounded so much like the sadistic German officer, it was hard to believe that he had not somehow escaped death, even after Gates had shot him three times. But the Sarge couldn’t have been wrong, could he?

He’d wanted to help carry the stretcher holding his buddy Littlejohn, but Sarge had ordered him to take the point and keep an eye out for hostile forces. Which had been a little silly really, now that Billy had a chance to think about it. The only weapon he’d had was Saunders’ sidearm which had been empty. Besides, he’d been exhausted, practically out on his feet and any enemy he’d encountered could have knocked him over with a hard look. Still, he hadn’t protested, too shocked and worried about Littlejohn’s condition. Which was probably why Doc hadn’t wanted him carrying the stretcher. So he wouldn’t keep pestering him, trying to see if his buddy had regained consciousness.

Doc was right to keep him away. He couldn’t do anything right, not even help carry his best friend in the world. Billy rubbed his torn, dirty sleeve across his watering eyes, only to hear Saunders’ low-pitched voice ask him, “You feelin’ okay? You wanna take a break, Billy?”

“I’m fine, Sarge. Let’s keep going. We gotta get Littlejohn back to Battalion Aide as soon as we can, don’t we? I’ll be okay, don’t worry about me.”

“We’re not headed for Battalion Aide, Billy, but Littlejohn will get the best of care. I promise you.”

By the time they reached the outskirts of the village, Hanley’s troops were gathered there waiting for them. Saunders and his squad looked around, taking in the aftermath of the battle. There were over two dozen mounts with bodies thrown across their saddles and an even larger group of “walking wounded”, still able to ride. At Doc’s direction, a stretcher was rigged between two of the horses to carry Littlejohn as they began the trip back to the Stronghold.

Billy was finally astride one of the horses he’d been so eager to ride when they first arrived at this place. But the excitement he’d felt then was gone. Instead he was filled with guilt and worry as he reined his mount as close to Littlejohn’s stretcher as he could manage, not wanting to let his friend out of his sight. Doc was mounted too, watching over his patient, although occasionally he would stand up in the stirrups, peering desperately around as though searching for someone.

After making sure Caje and Kirby had been given suitable mounts and weren’t having any problems keeping up, Saunders went looking for Hanley. He found the lieutenant–*Warder*, he reminded himself – riding knee to knee with Captain Jackson, listening to the cavalry officer’s report. Despite Jackson’s initial reluctance for his troops to take part in the mission, it was clear that he was not displeased with the results.

“Jes’ can’t believe that we got past those sentries so damn easy. Like shootin’ pigeons on a baited field. We must have killed off at least half of Kronus’ changelings and renegades, which ought to put a damper on any plans to attack the Stronghold. Guess you were right after all, Hanley, though I wish the cost hadn’t been so damn high. Marcus might have been overeager and wet-behind-the-ears, but those two subalterns of his were steady as the day was long. Not to mention losing good fighters like Leif Ragnarsson, Einar One-eye and a dozen others.”

“The cost is always too high,” Hanley’s green eyes glittered as he caught sight of Saunders, his voice was rough with remembered pain, “Einstein, Chester, Morgan, a hundred more faces, whose names I’ve forgotten though their voices haunt my dreams. Lines drawn on a map are never worth men’s lives, but sometimes you have to pay that price, if you want to live in peace.”

Jackson took a deep shuddering breath, “Maybe you got the right of it, after all. A man wants to know when he plows his fields in the spring he’ll still be alive to bring in the harvest.”

As Saunders reined in his horse alongside the pair, Hanley asked, “How’s Littlejohn?”

“He’s in pretty bad shape and I was wondering where Rhiannon is? Maybe she can help him? Or at least ease his pain.”

Hanley had seen this desperate, driven expression on Saunders face before and he wanted to take the sergeant aside and try to reassure him. But he had other duties, other responsibilities to other soldiers that he had ordered into this battle. “I think she’s back with the rest of the wounded, trying to keep them alive long enough to reach the Stronghold.”

As he pointed out the healer’s location, he gave Saunders a warning, “Just because she saved *your* life, sergeant, don’t expect her to be able to do the same for Littlejohn.”

#

Still riding as close beside Littlejohn as he could, the stress of the past two days caught up with Billy and his head dropped to his chest, half-doing although he somehow managed not to fall off his horse. Vaguely he thought he heard two other riders come alongside, speaking in low intense voices that he only half-understood.

“ . . . saved my life. . . can do the same for him. . . ”

“ . . . I *can't*, Sergeant. I don't have the power. . . not to heal him, and keep the others alive too.”

Then Billy heard something he knew only too well, the low sharp edge of Sarge's anger, “Whatta you mean, you don't have the power? You didn't just save my life, dammit, you healed my wounds completely. Surely you can do somethin' for Littlejohn, to keep him alive.”

“I'll do what I can,” her voice was a ragged whisper.

She leaned over Littlejohn and a faint spark jumped from her hand to his chest. As

Saunders watched, the rifleman's color improved ever so slightly as his breathing steadied but Rhiannon's face went chalky and her fiery hair seemed to have faded to the color of ashes. As she slumped on her horse, Saunders caught her up in his arms, his expression a mixture of fear and remorse.

Early the next morning as they rode though the Stronghold's peaceful fields and valleys, Doc was not surprised to see a degree of relief on Billy's face, despite his worries about the condition of his best friend.

Exhausted and battered as they were, the riders kept to a steady pace as they rode through the pastoral surroundings. But as they approached the Healer's Grove, even though he'd seen the results of Rhiannon's skill and felt the spiritual power that radiated from Cerridwen, Doc was beginning to have doubts that the primitive surroundings had the kind of medical facilities Littlejohn needed if they were going to save his life, much less his leg.

Rhiannon had joined them again, although she and Saunders seemed to be deliberately avoiding one another.

She reassured Billy, “It's not much further, Private Nelson. Cerridwen has already been alerted about the number of wounded we have and is preparing to give them the best of care.”

“Thanks, Rhiannon. You can just call me Billy.” Despite his efforts to remain calm, Doc could read the fear that still haunted the young private.

It was an emotion that he was beginning to share as they approached the grove of trees that was the center of Cerridwen's healing powers. Even though he'd helped deliver wounded soldiers to this place when the squad had first arrived at the Stronghold, Doc still had his doubts about The Grove actually having the kind of medical help Littlejohn needed.

He should be in an aide station or even a field hospital, which might just be a tent or rough shack, but it would have a warm cot, with clean sheets and blankets. There would be

trained doctors and nurses to debride his wounds and bandage them while he received IV fluids and plasma along with penicillin and other medicines to fight infection and shock.

As Doc slid down off his horse and walked under the enveloping branches, he had to admit that there was a certain soothing, comforting atmosphere surrounding him. Then he spotted Cerridwen dressed in a long blue robe, her silver hair unbound from its usual braid and falling to her waist. Her penetrating dark gaze seemed to look right through him as though she read the doubts troubling his mind.

When he'd met her at Hanley's Council of War, he'd thought she was old, maybe eighty or more; now within The Grove there was a timeless look about her, neither young nor old, but somehow beyond the mortal constraints that bound the rest of them.

A smile quirked the corners of her mouth. "Not quite what you expected, is it?"

Doc shook his head bleakly, not wanting to antagonize the woman who Hanley clearly trusted. But to leave the critically wounded Littlejohn to the care of this healer with her primitive poultices and potions left him with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Recognizing the uncertainty on Doc's face, she reached out with fingers as fine and delicate as ivory spindles, touching Doc's forehead just between the eyes. "Can't expect a man to trust in magic he doesn't understand. So, let's see just what kind of healers you *do* trust."

As Doc blinked, suddenly he and Billy were waiting outside a battalion aide station, with Littlejohn in an ambulance behind them, as they saw the healer again. This time she was wearing khaki and a major's oak leaves. Her snow white hair was up in a practical bun but her penetrating dark gaze was as deep and enigmatic as before. She gestured for the two of them to bring Littlejohn's stretcher into the tent and spoke with a gruff assurance.

"Just leave him over here in pre-op, medic. The surgeon's on his way and your buddy is next in line. Don't worry, soldier, Dr. Myrrdin is the best doctor on the front. He'll save your friend. You have my solemn oath."

Doc almost balked, hearing the name of Hanley's boy wizard, but the major clasped his hand firmly in hers and stared deep into his eyes, "The lieutenant wouldn't have sent you here unless he trusted our doctor, would he?"

Surrendering to that compelling gaze, Doc signaled Billy to help him carry Littlejohn into the tent. Even though it still looked like a regular aide station, Doc could smell trees and flowers and fresh green grass instead of the harsh antiseptics and stink of blood that usually prevailed.

Billy took a deep breath and smiled, "Gee, it smells nice and fresh in here. I guess it's the just the right place for Littlejohn to get better."

"I oughtta stay with him," Doc tried to argue. "So he doesn't wake all by himself and wonder what happened to the rest of the squad."

"I'll send someone to notify you when he's awake," Cerridwen said brusquely, her no-nonsense tone a match for her crisply starched uniform. "Besides, I think you should show this young man where the rest of your squad is billeted. He looks like he could use a good meal and a quiet place to catch up on some much needed sleep."

Though reluctant to leave Littlejohn alone despite the reassuring surroundings, Doc realized that there was nothing more he could do to help the soldier. Cerridwen's skills were their only hope.

As they started walking toward the cozy cottage where they'd been billeted before, Doc spotted Saunders impatiently striding toward the "Aide Station" where they'd just left Littlejohn. Doc turned back in order to report to his sergeant and was not surprised to see him turned away as well. Despite that rebuff, Saunders seated himself on a rough wooden bench in front of the station as he settled in for the duration.

"Sarge," the medic offered in a reassuring tone, "Littlejohn's gettin' the best care possible from Cerridwen and the other healers. Why not come back to our billet, wash some of the dust off, and catch a little sleep. The lieutenant'll send for us if there's any change in Littlejohn's condition."

"No, Doc. I'm staying here."

When Billy started to volunteer to stay too, Sarge shook his head, "Go with Doc, Nelson. He'll show you a place where you can clean up and get a little shut-eye. If you see Cajé and Kirby, tell them to stay with you too."

"Where are they anyway?"

"I told 'em they could have a couple of beers, then go back to the cottage."

Doc shook his head, doubting that Kirby would be willing to call it quits after just two beers, but trusted Cajé would drag him back anyway. He was uncertain about leaving Sarge here alone, keeping watch. Saunders' experience with Rhiannon's magic seemed to have had an unsettling effect. Still, there was no arguing with Saunders when he gave an order.

Chapter VI

“Show me the way to go home. I’m tired and I wanna go to bed.”

Kirby’s off-key voice grated on Caje’s nerves. Almost as much as the song he was singing, because the scout still remembered a frightened man who’d been their prisoner singing it as he tried to convince his captors he was harmless.

“I had a little drink about an hour ago and it went straight to my head.”

“Shut up, Kirby,” Caje muttered staring down into his whiskey glass, recalling Saunders had only okayed the two of them having a couple of beers and wondering just where *this* drink had come from.

He glanced up, taking in the presence of their drinking buddies, and remembered just when the “celebration” had gotten out of hand.

Lt. Andrews, Jackson’s second-in-command, had come staggering in about an hour ago, half-supporting one of the Viking warriors that they’d only caught a brief glimpse of in the aftermath of their mysterious arrival in this world. The man was obviously older than most of Hanley’s troops, with iron-gray hair chopped off at shoulder length, topped by a metal helmet unadorned by the usual wings or horns. He was also more lightly armed than most of his fellow Norsemen, wearing just a short dagger dangling from his belt, rather than the usual sword, mace or war hammer.

Judging by his wobbly notes and unsteady gait, Andrews had been hitting the bottle long before they stopped here. Though if the Norseman was drunk, he hid it behind a grim countenance.

“Hoo-rah, hoo-rah, for Southern rights hoo-rah, Hoo-rah for the Bonny Blue Flag that bears a single star.”

Caje had spotted the pair coming in, just as he’d been trying to distract Kirby from his morose attitude as he stared into the dregs of his second (and supposedly last) beer.

“It ain’t right, Caje,” Kirby had muttered grimly, “We already escaped that psycho Steiner one time, when Gates blasted him to kingdom come. Then he shows up again, ringmaster of some blasted monster circus and Littlejohn almost gets eaten alive. It ain’t fair, I tell ya, it just ain’t fair. Why don’t the good guys ever get a second chance? Why can’t Grady . . . or Cross . . . or Temple come back? Or even that crazy Reb, Moseby?”

Andrews wobbled over to their table, breathing whiskey vapors in their faces, “Rebs. Ain’t. Crazy, Yanks. They jes’ don’t know when to quit.”

“Dunno when to quit,” Kirby mumbled, staring glumly at his empty stein. “Whole damn



war dunno when to quit. We should mopped up those Germans and been home by . . . by Thanksgiving. Right, Cajé, ol' son, ol' boy? We oughta be home now, enjoyin' a home-cooked meal of turkey and dressing and pumpkin pie."

"Right Kirby. Now, finish that last beer so we can get back to quarters."

"Last beer," Kirby whined. "A man can't hardly wet his whistle with just two beers, Cajé. 'sides how'm I gonna sing the rest of that song with my throat bone-dry?"

"We've had enough of your singing, Kirby. More than enough," Cajé answered grimly, trying to wrestle his buddy to his feet and out of the tavern's main room,

"Well, what about poetry, then, Cajé ol' buddy, ol' pal? I know some *great* poetry.

"There was an old maid of Duluth

Who wept when she thought of her youth

The glorious chances

She'd missed at school dances

And once in a telephone booth."

"All right, Kirby. You're a regular Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, now let's get goin' like Sarge told us to do."

"But I know some even better ones, Cajé. What about this?"

"There was a young fellow named Dice

Who remarked, 'They say bigamy's nice

Even two is a bore

I prefer three or four

For the plural of spouse is spice."

Kirby half-choked, caught between hysterical laughter and tears. He wasn't actually drunk on two beers, but between exhaustion, worry over Littlejohn and sheer terror they'd faced the past two – or was it, three – days, the BAR man was practically out on his feet. Cajé wasn't much better off, but was determined to drag his buddy back to their quarters before they wound up in the middle of a barroom brawl.

"'Tis little more than doggerel," rumbled the Viking warrior as he and Andrews slumped into chairs beside them. "Not like the sagas skalds from my homeland told. Unlettered and tongue-tied I might be, but even Olav Skrathling can weave a better tale than those. Once I wet my throat with a flagon of mead. Innkeeper, bring mead for me . . . and my companions."

It wasn't flagons of mead that the bartender delivered to the table where Kirby had dropped back down into the chair beside the new arrivals. Instead, it was a bottle of whiskey

only slightly mellower than the rotgut Capt. Jackson had been passing around before the attack.

Resigned to sharing a round or two, just so they didn't insult Kirby's newfound friends, Cajé settled back in his chair. Before he realized it, they'd finished off almost two bottles while Andrews sang old Civil War ballads in a passable tenor and Olav regaled them with stories of sea voyages amid wild storms and battles against creatures he called "Loki's Children."

Now Kirby really was drunk and Cajé was staring grimly at the door, wondering just how he'd be able to get the BAR man on his feet and back to the cottage. Considering Kirby's state of inebriation, he was resigned to the likelihood that the ladies – Miss Polly and Miss Kate – would probably take a broom to the two of them, like his Aunt Margritte used to do whenever Uncle Jacques had sampled too much of the "white lightning" their neighbor brewed in the woods behind their house.

At least they weren't likely to run into Saunders, who was probably keeping his usual vigil by Littlejohn's cot until he was out of danger. Come to think of it, Doc and Billy would probably be there as well, which meant he had a much better chance of sneaking Kirby and himself past their two hostesses.

Olav was still rambling on some outrageous tale, half in English and half in his native language, while Lt. Andrews' head was propped on his crossed arms as he let out a discordant snore.

"Come on, Kirby, let's get back to our bunks, before Sarge shows up and we spend the rest of the war diggin' latrines."

"Sure thing, Cajé, ol' buddy, ol' pal. Just one more little versy-worsy as we swagger off into the sunset. Okay?"

Cajé managed to stifle a groan, since it was clear that nothing was going to silence Kirby, other than stuffing a grenade down his throat.

"An elderly roué named Clyde

Wed an 18-year old as a bride

They took the old lecher

Out on a stretcher

But as he left he was smiling with pride"

"Yep, Cajé, ol' boy, that's how I want to go, when I'm 110, in bed with an 18-year old bride."

"Me too, Kirby. Now, let's try to get back before Sarge comes lookin' for us, or we won't have to *worry* about dyin' of old age."

#

Saunders started up from his half-doze in front of the Aide Station where they'd carried

Littlejohn in some time ago. Twilight was falling and the ground beneath him was cold and damp. He glanced around, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, somewhat chagrined to find the hard bench where he'd been dozing earlier had become a patch of grass, just beyond a dark copse of trees. He remembered seeing Cerridwen in the blood-spattered khaki uniform of the Army Medical Corps, greeting Doc and Billy as they'd carried Littlejohn into a battalion aide station. Yet he recalled still another memory of her standing there in a robe the color of the midnight sky, her silver hair unbound, shining like starlight.

As he pushed dizzily to his feet, he wasn't sure which image had been real and which was illusion. Until he saw Cerridwen wearing the same dark blue robe, her hair loosely braided now, with Rhiannon standing beside her in a gown of forest green, her hair blowing loose and blending with the setting sun.

"Littlejohn?" Saunders demanded hoarsely, his throat clogged with dread. "How is he?"

"Your friend will recover, sergeant. Though, if you continue ignoring your own well-being, you will wind up worse off than he is. Especially, if you spend the night on this cold, damp ground. Get some rest, young man. Your friend is out of danger, sleeping peacefully, and you can see him in the morning. After breakfast."

Saunders nodded and started off in what he thought was the direction of their billet, staggering with fatigue. It was obvious that the sergeant was almost out on his feet so Rhiannon took him gently by the arm and led him toward her own snug cottage.

As the early evening air revived him, Saunders began to feel the effects of having eaten nothing all day but the stale ration crackers and cheese he'd choked down before dawn. While he hoped the growls from his empty stomach weren't that loud, he was very glad when the healer motioned for him to be seated in her cozy kitchen. She stirred up the stove, bringing the coffee pot to a boil as she sliced fresh bread and set a bowl of fruit on the table.

"There's chicken stew warming and coffee should be hot soon." She glanced up at the cloth-covered dish on the shelf over the stove. "And it looks like Miss Polly brought one of her pies over this afternoon." She sniffed appreciatively. "Apple, by the smell of it."

Saunders helped himself to bread and fruit, which took the edge off his hunger, and then dug into the bowl Rhiannon served him, which actually had recognizable ingredients like peas, carrots and *real* chicken, unlike the nondescript brown mush the Army labeled as stew.

"This is good," he gazed up at Rhiannon trying to turn his thoughts back to the men in his squad, knowing he had a responsibility to them and to Captain Jampel back at the CP. He intended to finish his meal and then go looking for Hanley, to see he had any new information about how they could return to their own world. . . and its war.

But as Rhiannon brushed against him, refilling his coffee cup and then serving him a slice of the homemade pie, suddenly talking to Hanley was the last thing on his mind. The healer had haunted his thoughts ever since their first encounter and now he felt a growing desire that threatened to push all thoughts of duty aside. He rubbed his eyes roughly, trying to banish those feelings, certain what he felt was just appreciation for her kindness and her skill.

Nothing more.

Rhiannon was practically a stranger. He'd known her barely longer than the barmaids

Kirby was always trying to seduce or the overjoyed French mademoiselles who smothered him and his men with impersonal kisses after their villages were liberated from their German oppressors.

Proximity. . .and gratitude, that was all he felt.

Then he gazed into her amber eyes and lost himself in their shifting shadows, trembling at the touch of her hand on his shoulder and recognizing the tender rush of genuine desire. For too long sex had been little more than heated gropings in dimly lit back rooms, smelling of stale wine and other men's lust. Which was the reason he'd begun avoiding those brief encounters. He couldn't blame the women, selling their bodies for food or chocolate, or just a chance to fill the empty nights. And soldiers like himself were simply trying to forget the stink of blood and death and war, even if the only substitute was wine and cheap perfume.

Even as he tried to draw away, Rhiannon clasped his hand and led him to her bedroom, lighting a single candle before she turned and reached up, looking deep into his eyes as she caressed his face.

"I knew as soon as I saw you that we were fated for one another," she said in a low, intense voice.

"I can't stay," he tried to protest, even as he was caressing her lips, her forehead and brushing aside her flame-colored hair to kiss the sweet curve of her neck. "I have my orders. To deliver Hoffman to Captain Jampel."

"But he's a raving madman now. Everything he knew is useless, forgotten, buried in the shadows of his mind." Rhiannon brushed back strands of his unruly golden hair, suddenly lost in the depths of his gaze. Those blue eyes whose color was somewhere between sea and sky, so she was no longer sure whether she was floating or flying.

"That's not my decision to make. I have a duty. . ."

His words dissolved into a soft moan as her hands unbuttoned his jacket and shirt and wove tender caresses across the muscles of his shoulders and back and down his narrow waist. For a long moment he tried to resist and then looked into her eager face and swept her into his arms before placing her gently on the bed. As she reached up and drew him down beside her, he embraced her fully. Then both of them surrendered to the violent rhythms of passion, until the explosive pleasure of his release left her shuddering in ecstasy, drowned in the sweet musky smell of their joined bodies.

Wrapped in his arms, she whispered, "Don't leave. I've waited my whole life for someone like you, tender yet fierce. Risking your life to protect strangers as well as your comrades. The Wardeer needs men like you."

Propped on one elbow, Saunders ran his fingers gently down Rhiannon's face as he stared into her pleading expression, "If it was my choice, I'd never leave you, or Hanley and the Stronghold. But I'm fighting in a war, to save my country – hell, maybe even the whole world – from the forces of a madman. I can't give up now, no matter how much I might want to. I have an obligation, an oath that I swore, to protect and defend. My country and my fellow soldiers. I can't turn my back on that oath."

She reached up and smoothed back the sandy hair that had spilled across his

forehead, "I know about duty too. Cerridwen, the Warder, Myrrdin, all made vows to protect and care for the people of Avalon. Your sense of duty is admirable, but it may not be possible for you to return to your world, no matter how long Myrrdin looks for a pathway. If you are trapped here, don't grieve for what you left behind."

Briefly reassured, Saunders took a deep shuddering breath, before wrapping her in his arms once again.

"I'll remember, Rhiannon," he said in a low, husky murmur. "But if the door to our world opens again, I'll have to go back even if I want to stay."

"I know. Because it is your duty ."

#

Early the next morning, Saunders returned to Cerridwen's Grove, determined to see Littlejohn's condition for himself. He was not surprised to find Billy and Doc already at his bedside, but was caught between amusement and exasperation at Cajé's and Kirby's obvious hangovers.

But before Saunders could gather his thoughts to give them the blistering tongue-lashing and punishment they deserved, one of Jackson's troopers hurried over to Littlejohn's cot. "Sergeant. Saunders, you better get a move on. I been lookin' for you nigh on to an hour now. Myrrdin and the Warder sent for you just after sunrise. Dunno what's up, but you oughta skedaddle over there."

Doc felt a sudden surge of hope at the trooper's words, hope that Hanley and his seer just might have discovered a way for them to go home again. But as he looked over at the Sarge, there was a bleak troubled look on the noncom's face that left him wondering.

Then Saunders' expression closed down again as he turned to Cajé and Kirby, "Doc and Billy, stay here and keep Littlejohn company. The two of you – come with me. If I can't trust you outta my sight, then maybe Hanley has some ditches he needs dug or minefields to be cleared. The pair of you gotta be useful for *something*."

Cajé turned a grim look at Kirby, irritated at being on the Sarge's bad side, but Kirby gave his usual shrug and devil-may-care grin. "He'll get over it," the BAR man muttered as they struggled to keep up with Saunders' brisk jog. "Hell, once we're back at the CP, he probably won't even put us on report."

"If we make it back," Cajé muttered "Those gates may only open one way, my friend. And we could be stuck here for good." Cajé had only seen that shocked look on Kirby's face once before: when they'd discovered the battered body of his buddy and would-have-been brother-in-law, Eddie Kopacek. He hadn't thought Kirby's ties to home and family were as strong as his, but then all of them had someone or something waiting for them after the war. If they managed to survive.

He gripped his buddy's shoulder with a reassurance that he did not feel, "Hey, Kirby. The Sarge and the Lieutenant are working together and they've gotten us out of much worse spots than this."

When they reached Myrrdin's tower, Saunders gave them a grim look, "I'd leave the

two of you outside on guard duty, but Kirby would still probably find some way to get into trouble.”

As he gazed up at the rough stone walls, his voice was haunted, “Besides, you have a right to know what we’re facing here.”

When the three of them reached the main room where Hanley had convened the council of war some three days before, Saunders was startled to see that the large wooden table where they’d made their battle plans was gone. In its place was a rough stone pedestal with a brilliant crystal bowl set atop it. Water bubbled up from the center of the bowl as though it had tapped into some hidden spring.

“Looks like they got indoor plumbing in this place after all,” Kirby muttered under his breath, before catching sight of both Saunders’ and Cajé’s quelling looks. “I know, I know. ‘Shut up, Kirby.’ “

Not having been part of the strategy meeting before, Kirby peered curiously around, taking in the brightly colored woven tapestries that covered some of the rough stone walls. Cajé seemed more interested in the sigils and glyphs painted on the sections that remained bare. They reminded him of figures he’d seen daubed on the body of the local *houngan* when he and his cousin had sneaked out one night to spy on the *voudoun* ceremony being held down on the bayou. They’d both gotten strapped the next day when their fathers found out, but the awed looks of their schoolmates had made the whippings worth it.

Hanley was standing behind the young wizard as he gazed down into the bowl. He motioned Saunders over and said in a hoarse whisper, “He’s using this pool, rather than his usual crystals to see farther. Looking for any power fluctuations within a hundred mile radius of this valley that might indicate a breach that could get you home. It drains his powers to do this, but he wanted to try it if there was the slightest chance of helping you and the rest of the squad.”

As Myrrdin looked up at Saunders and his fellow soldiers, the sergeant almost felt sorry for the boy. His deep-sunk brown eyes were swollen and bloodshot and there were lines of exhaustion carved deeply around his grimly set mouth. “I’m sorry, Sergeant. I’ve scanned for any sign of a world breach, especially since the attack on Kronos’ holding. There should have been major disturbances afterwards due to his followers seeking refuge elsewhere, if for no other reason. But look for yourself.”

As the three GI s peered over the seer’s shoulder into the basin, for a long moment they saw nothing but ripples in the water. But gradually the ripples began to shift and change, showing them mountains, valleys, rich farmlands and groves of towering trees – the landscape of Avalon.

“Just what are we supposed to be looking for?” Saunders questioned.

Myrrdin pointed to a wooded valley some distance away from the Stronghold which was covered in a golden haze of power. “That’s where your squad and your prisoners came through, Sergeant. As you can see there’s a power fluctuation there.”

“Then why can’t we just grab Littlejohn and double time it back there?” Kirby demanded, his face filled with surprising urgency.

“Because there isn’t a breach there anymore,” Hanley answered with surprising patience. “It’s only the aftereffects, like the smoke and debris from an artillery blast. And just about as deadly.”

For long moments the three timelost soldiers stared at the peaceful but strange landscape that would be their new home. Slowly the ripples faded away into nothing more than a large basin of clear water.

With Hanley’s assistance, Myrrdin walked weakly towards the door, pausing for just a moment before leaving as he spoke to the three. “I know right now it seems like a terrible hardship to be stranded so far from home, friends, and family. But my training tells me everything happens for a reason, so don’t grieve too much. The Stronghold is a haven for the lost, the oppressed, and the forsaken. You can make a good life here, if you’re willing to try.”

After Myrrdin left, Saunders and his men continued staring into the basin for a long time and Hanley realized they were seeking some last vision of their homes and the faces of their families in those rippling waters. Whether holding on to the memories or attempting to say farewell, he couldn’t be sure.

When he’d fallen through the dimensional rift that led him here, it had been a relief to escape his past and the dark future that seemed to lie ahead. Not just because of his job, but the emptiness and estrangement that had filled his life after the war. Sometimes he almost wished that he had died too in that brutal, bitter struggle. As the images from that frozen battleground began to replay, Hanley shook his head in abrupt denial, staring into Saunders’, Cajé’s, and Kirby’s features, seeing the uncertainty there.

“Come on,” he didn’t quite order them. “We’re done here and I have an office with a fireplace and some comfortable chairs on the next level.” His sharp green eyes took in Cajé’s and Kirby’s somewhat disheveled appearance this morning, along with Saunders’ ambivalent expression.

“I’ve got a bottle of what passes for Scotch in this part of the world,” he gave Saunders a brief rakish grin. “Though it’s only been aged about two weeks longer than that swill Jackson was passing around, you two look like you could use a little ‘hair of the dog,’” he nodded at Kirby and Cajé.

“It’s a bit early,” Saunders said, turning his three-striper glare on the two privates.

“Has to be after five somewhere,” Hanley shrugged.

Saunders made a last feeble protest, “We should go back and tell Doc, Billy, and Littlejohn the situation.”

“There’s no rush, Sergeant. Bad news will keep. Besides, I’d like to have a little discussion with you. About the future.”

Saunders could say volumes with a single look, or maintain a poker face that was totally unreadable. Though he'd agreed to the round of drinks in Hanley's office, Saunders still maintained an air of watchful suspicion. In the past, they'd walked the fine line about non-fraternization after Hanley's promotion, even though they had still managed to confide in and console one another during their bloody struggle across Northern France.



But now, years and uncertainty stood between them and Hanley had to wonder if he would be able to persuade Saunders to give him that same loyalty once again. If he could convince the sergeant to become one of his commanders, maybe even follow in his own steps as Warter of the Stronghold.

Unlike Jackson and the other commanders, Saunders was more than a leader. He'd been able to take green troops, goof-offs, cowards, and outright psychos, wear down their rough edges, shore up their weak spots and forge them into a genuine cadre. Even when their mettle was too damaged and the men he tried to save shattered in the process, he still had more successes than failures. It was that skill in building soldiers that Hanley sorely needed in the years to come. Despite its name, Avalon was not a paradise and even though it had the potential to be one, he knew that they would have to continue to defend their crops, houses, and families against the hostile forces that sometimes found their way into this world. With Saunders' help, he knew he had a much better chance of succeeding.

After pouring a generous splash of whiskey for each of the three men, Hanley sat back against his oversized desk and asked, "Now that you've had a chance to see more of the people and countryside, what do you think? Even if your arrival wasn't voluntary, this is not a bad place to settle down and make a home. It's certainly better than slogging through the mud and snow, fighting your way across the German heartland."

Kirby tossed back his drink in one gulp, then muttered, "You can say that again."

But Caje and Saunders sipped theirs more slowly, keeping their eyes and ears open, wondering what was on the lieutenant's mind.

"I don't have to tell you how the war ends," Hanley said bluntly. "Even before your squad stumbled into Avalon, it was clear that the German War Machine was on the ropes. They didn't have the troops, the equipment, or the leadership to hold out against the Allied advance."

He took a long sip of his own whiskey, "But it's a hard, bloody road to Berlin, with thousands more Allied troops dying or being maimed during those last months. I can't, I *won't* tell you about the battles ahead for King Company. All I can say is that you've already earned a warm welcome in the Stronghold and we can use your skills as soldiers, or in whatever other field of work you might choose."

There was a prolonged silence as Saunders and his men pondered their supposed good fortune at escaping those last bitter conflicts, then wondered if this place was really as idyllic as Hanley was trying to portray it. Did they really want to spend the rest of their lives here, forever cut off from friends, family, and the world they had known.

“What about taxi drivers?” There was a hard edge to Kirby’s voice that drew Saunders’ attention to his one-time goldbrick and troublemaker. This might be an idyllic place to get drunk and chase the girls, but Kirby was no farmer or shopkeeper.

Even Cajé seemed dubious about the golden fields and meadows, so very different from the creeks and bayous of his Louisiana home. “Will we ever be able to see our families again?”

Abruptly Hanley realized that he might have made a critical misjudgment, trying to win Saunders’ cooperation so soon. He should have waited and let the squad start to come to terms with the fact that they might not be returning home. He should have asked them to help in the fields or had them take part in training his troops in modern infantry tactics. He should have asked for advice from Rhiannon on how to fit them into the community, so they didn’t feel so much like outsiders.

Only Saunders was not as troubled as his two squad members. In fact, there was almost a look of relief on his face. But then Saunders had been in this war since North Africa and even if he did have family and friends to go home to, they had changed, as he had changed, more than he probably realized. Home might not be as welcoming as he once had hoped, and he was damned tired of fighting, more tired than any man should be who wasn’t that far past his 25th birthday.

Saunders put his glass aside, the whiskey barely touched, “Thanks for the drink, sir.”

He gave a jerk of his head that signaled Cajé and Kirby to follow him and as they left Hanley’s office, Saunders turned to his former CO. His face was in shadow, but Hanley could see the burning intensity of his gaze. “You *know* who made it home. . .and who didn’t, don’t you?”

Hanley shook his head in denial, his iron-gray hair falling across his forehead, but he would not meet that inquiring gaze. “I got transferred after recovering from those broken ribs. To another company far away from the 361st. I tried to find out what happened to my platoon afterwards, but the records were jumbled and incomplete. I’m sorry, Saunders.”

#

Over the next three weeks, the squad slowly began to resign itself to the likelihood that they would not be returning to their own world. With Billy’s reluctant assistance, Littlejohn helped Miss Polly and Miss Kate spread compost to prepare the ground for their kitchen garden. Cajé joined several of Captain Jackson’s men on the scouting parties that regularly patrolled the Stronghold’s perimeter to locate any signs of Kronus’ followers or other raiders. They usually brought back venison or other game that was butchered and dressed, then distributed among the community.

After that initial blowout, following the attack on Kronus’ fortress, Kirby had managed to stay surprisingly sober. He’d helped Billy and Littlejohn in the garden, gone on hunting parties with Cajé, even joined Saunders in training and drilling with the Stronghold’s defense forces, but had not yet found a place where he could really fit in. On the other hand, Saunders had become so much a part of the community that it felt almost like coming home.

Initially, he’d expected resentment and protests from Captain Jackson and Hanley’s other surviving leaders, but instead found an almost universal camaraderie. None of the Warder’s subordinates had any doubts about their own abilities or their place in the world. As

a result, Saunders found that he was able to take orders from Jackson, training as a cavalry officer in the morning, while giving the captain instruction in infantry tactics in the afternoon.

Then there was his relationship with Rhiannon. After their initial lovemaking, he'd been afraid that she might draw away from him, demanding some kind of formal vows or promise of commitment that he could not in good conscience make. Instead, she remained as tender and welcoming as she had on their first night together. Occasionally, she would be absent from their bed because of her training demands or other responsibilities within the Grove, but she always left a note on the pillow and a meal warming on the back of the stove.

Saunders had almost forgotten his other life, his other responsibilities.

#

It was after midnight and someone was pounding at Rhiannon's door. Saunders started up, groping for his weapon then realized where he was. Sliding out of her embrace, he groped around the room until he found his pants and after pulling them on, stumbled to the door.

"All right, all right," he muttered. "I'm comin'. Just keep your shirt on."

As he jerked open the door, he was surprised to find Billy in the tattered uniform he'd been wearing when they'd come through the gate, helmet on his head, and M-1 slung over his shoulder.

"The lieutenant sent for us. Myrrdin's found a way back into our world, but he doesn't know how long it'll stay open."

Saunders felt a cold sinking feeling in his chest as he glanced briefly back towards the bedroom where Rhiannon lay sleeping, then the combination of training and instinct that had kept him alive for so many months took over.

"Has the rest of the squad been notified? What about our prisoner? Is he able to travel? How far is the gate?" Saunders' voice held its usual cool ring of authority, so much so that for a brief moment Billy just stood there with his mouth hanging open.

Then he remembered who and what he was and passed along as much information as Hanley's runner had given him. "Kirby and Caje were out, but Littlejohn was at our quarters when we heard and he's still getting his gear together. The lieut . . . I mean the Warder. . . sent word to Doc and Cerridwen as soon as Myrrdin informed him. I guess they'll have to bring the German on a stretcher. They didn't say, but I don't think the gate is that far away."

Saunders had shrugged into his shirt and begun lacing his boots by the time Billy finished his report. Reaching for his helmet, he looked at the door to the bedroom once again, knowing that he couldn't leave Rhiannon without some kind of farewell. Billy saw a brief agonized look cross his sergeant's face, then his features settled into their usual resolved expression as he picked up the Thompson, checked by habit for ammo, even though he'd used the last of it weeks before, when they'd rescued Nelson. As he slung it over his shoulder, he gave Billy his orders, "Check the tavern and drag Kirby out whether he's sober or not. I'll locate Caje and we'll rendezvous at Myrrdin's Tower. Unless the Warder said otherwise?"

"No, Sarge," Billy shook his head, "but the runner said Caje was already with the

lieutenant, plotting the breach's coordinates on a map."

"All right," Saunders said, his voice trailing off as the door to their bedroom opened and he saw Rhiannon standing in the shadows. "Just find Kirby. I'll be there shortly."

As Billy hurried away, he cast an uncertain look back at his sergeant, wondering whether he would go with them back to the war or stay.

Saunders was wondering that himself as he looked into Rhiannon's eyes. But to his surprise, there were no tears or pleading on her face. Rather she was clad in a dark-gray, full-length robe, her glorious hair bound up in a knot and covered by a hood which put much of her face in shadow.

"Rhiannon, you heard what Billy said. I have to go, it's my duty. . ."

"I know," she said. "Cerridwen sent word as soon as the gate was opened because I've been chosen as one of the Guardians, to keep watch until the gate is sealed. Your world is at war and those horrors must not spill into our peaceful valley again. Especially not those who carry such darkness in their souls that they can become monsters at Kronos' bidding."

Saunders stared at her for only a moment feeling an emptiness where his heart used to be. "I understand," he said huskily. "War's an ugly business and this place is a haven." He gave her a faint quirk of a smile, "Don't worry, Hanley will keep it safe."

Her stern resolve faltered for a brief second and she threw back the hood and embraced Saunders with a heated fervor, then drew away, pulling it up again so her face was in shadow. "We must hurry," she said urgently, glancing up at the stars wheeling overhead. "You and your men must go through so Myrrdin can make sure nothing follows. The patterns are already shifting."

As the squad gathered in a shadowy vale approximately five miles beyond the Stronghold, the moon was down and a heavy ground mist had begun to rise, giving all of them a ghostly appearance. To Saunders' amazement, Kirby was stone cold sober.

"I just had a couple of beers swappin' stories with that Lt. Andrews fellah. Do you know he fought at Gettysburg and he said it wasn't nothing like the history books tell it."

"Most battles aren't," Saunders answered grimly. "Maybe if more people knew how terrible war is, there'd be less of it." He knelt beside Hoffman's stretcher, his gaze taking in the wounds still covering the German's body, then he turned a questioning look at Doc, surprised at the man's condition after weeks in Cerridwen's care.

"Cerridwen and the other healers have tried their best to help him, but those wounds just won't heal. They think it has somethin' do with Kronus' effects on his mind. Shell-shock. Maybe even somethin' worse." The medic's clear blue gaze briefly darkened. "Whatever it is, even if he survives, I doubt he'll be able to pass along much information."

"It doesn't matter, Doc. We had our orders to bring a prisoner back and stop the attacks." Saunders shuddered for a moment, recalling the bestial transformation of the German raiders. "We did that." Nodding to his men, "Doc, Littlejohn, pick up that stretcher."

He noticed with amusement that the worn but intact trousers Littlejohn wore were a

shade too dark to be government issue.

As Littlejohn took in Saunders' appraising look, he tried to explain, "They belonged to Miss Polly's son and she wanted me to have them. I don't think anybody will notice, Sarge."

"Probably not," he agreed. "Just don't let the quartermaster catch sight of them or he'll want 'em back."

Hanley was standing at Myrrdin's shoulder, watching intently as the seer peered down into the large mirror clasped between his hands. The mirror did not reflect his face or even the stars shining overhead, instead it shimmered with a darkness deeper than midnight. Then as the fog grew even thicker all around, there was a shaft of lightning that seemed to set the very air in front of them ablaze.

"There, *there* is your doorway," he gasped, his knees starting to buckle. For a moment, the squad froze looking into the inferno before them and then back to their sergeant, not really certain whether this gate would lead them back to their world . . . or into Hell itself.

Saunders started to lead the way, but his Cajun scout put a restraining hand on his shoulder, "Let me go first, Sarge. Just to make sure everything's okay."

Nodding reluctantly, he ordered, "All right, take the point."

Moments later, he heard that French-accented voice out of the fog: "All clear on this side, Sarge. Just tell the guys comin' through to watch their step. There's a lot of debris – and other things – that could trip them up."

"I better go next," Kirby volunteered, his BAR in position across the front of his chest even though he didn't have a single round of ammo. "No tellin' what this stumblebum will fall over, if Caje and I aren't there to catch him."

"You just watch out for your own big feet," Littlejohn grinned as he moved forward, careful of the patient on the stretcher, even if he was a German prisoner. "C'mon, Billy, time to get back to the war."

"I guess," Billy gazed around at the hills covered with wild flowers and trees in blossom, half-wishing that they could have forgotten about the war and stayed here. Then squaring his helmet and holding his M-1 at the ready, Billy marched into the shifting fog.

Standing beside Rhiannon, it was all Saunders could do not to sweep her up in his arms and turn his back on that gateway leading back to the war. But there was the oath he had sworn to defend his country and the responsibility he had to lead his men into battle, into Germany, into hell itself if those were his orders.

Embracing her tenderly one last time, he said in a voice choked with emotion, "I don't know what's ahead for me or my men, but once the war is over, I'll find a way back to you."

"I know," Rhiannon pushed the gray hood back, revealing her hair which blazed like the sun. "And I'll be waiting."

The fog thickened briefly as Saunders strode into it and through the gateway with his men and their prisoner.

For long minutes, they moved warily through the dank mists surrounding them, then the fog began to lift and abruptly they recognized the still smoldering ruins of the marauder's camp, along with the huddled bloody bodies that remained from their earlier attack. Just for a moment they stood there, staring in disbelief, before caution reasserted itself and Saunders ordered in low voice, "Caje, Kirby, fan out and see if there are any survivors." He waved Doc and Littlejohn to take the stretcher behind the wall of the half-burned cottage. "Stay down, Doc. Until we make sure that no one's gonna be taking potshots at us. Nelson, you're on me. Keep an eye out for any more of these raiders while we check the perimeter."

"But Sarge," Billy said in a whisper that could be heard halfway across the clearing. "I haven't got any ammo."

Saunders did not reply, but turned a look that would have blistered paint on the snickering Kirby.

As the four GI s scouted stealthily through the marauders' camp, there were no sounds but the distant early song of a lark as the sun began to rise and send its warmth into the mountain valley. As the squad finished their inspection of the area, having examined all of the bodies to make sure there were no other survivors and inspecting what remained of their supplies and equipment, they gathered beside the crumbling cottage walls.

Littlejohn spoke up first, having left Doc to keep watch over the prisoner, "Sarge, the ashes are still warm. That fire was blazing when everything changed. . . and we wound up in Avalon. But judging by the temperature of ashes, that can't have been more than 12, maybe 16 hours at the most."

"Same goes for the bodies, Sarge. They're dead, but it hasn't been that long." Caje informed him, with a cool, grim expression.

"Am I missin' somethin' here?" Kirby demanded. "We spend at least three weeks, maybe more in Never Never Land, sleeping on soft beds and eatin' home-cooked meals. And it never happened?"

"Oh, it happened, Kirby. No question in my mind about that." Billy shivered, remembering his captivity and the terrible wounds that Littlejohn had suffered during his rescue.

Saunders did not speak, but just fingered the pale white scar along his side, remembering how their German prisoner had slashed him during their struggle. It couldn't possibly have healed like this, even in three weeks.

What was even more confusing was that the body count matched the original number of raiders. And he was certain at least six of them had been their prisoners when the squad found themselves in Avalon. Six prisoners who'd been transformed by Steiner's *doppelganger* into bestial subordinates that he and the squad had fought and killed during their rescue of Billy.

Saunders wondered *how* the bodies could be here. And showing no signs that they'd ever been anything other than the butchers and murderers he'd been ordered to capture if possible, but stop by any means necessary.

He glanced over at their prisoner on the stretcher, wondering if his febrile mutterings

were anything more than fever-induced hallucinations. Or if the German officer was remembering his experiences under the influence of that being – Kronus – Saunders' squad had fought when they rescued Billy and re-captured him as well.

But whatever nightmares or illusions that the German officer was seeing, it was not Saunders' concern. He asked Doc, "Can he be moved? I know the rest are dead, but there may be replacements coming."

"He'll probably make it back to the CP, Sarge. But I don't think that they'll be able get any information from him." Doc's face held a mixture of pity and relief.

"Why?"

"His mind is gone. He just keeps muttering about demons and monsters, the children of Loki, surviving the destruction of the world."

Saunders looked down at their prisoner and remarked in a thoughtful voice, "Maybe that's what the fall of the Reich looks like to him, the destruction of *his* world."

The sergeant stared grimly around at the burned remnants of the cottage and the bloodied bodies surrounding it, remembering a land where cows and sheep peacefully grazed. He remembered people working in the fields, as their children played in their yards, secure and unafraid. He remembered a girl whose hair glowed like firelight and whose eyes were as deep as the sea.

He remembered too much.

"Saddle up," he said wearily. "Let's get our prisoner back to Captain Jampel."

He gestured to his scout, "Caje, take the point and keep your eyes open. Let's get back to HQ and finish the job."

And First Squad of Second platoon, King Company marched into the early morning light.



END