

Snow Blind

By Doc II



The story took four long years to write and for that you can blame LER, military advisor for Tour of Duty and many other television shows, films and stage productions. I just wanted to write half of it, what happened to Kirby and Doc. He forced me, at gunpoint, or rather IM-point, to write the rest of it. He said, "consider it a 2-parter." 2-parter, indeed! The story ran away with me, and then real life ran away with me, and then the story... You get the idea. Oh, and then LER died, taking with him a friendship that I continue to miss every day. I can't read this story without seeing his comments and suggestions in every scene.

Also, my undying gratitude to readers (beta and otherwise) – Jester, KT, Maq, Mel and Syl Francis, who kept me going during the long darkness of part 4. And also to Skye and Druid Wolf, whose powerful beta skills rocked my world. And also to all the members of my very own splinter group, you know who you are.

To Flyboy and the kids – it's finally done and I swear I'll get crackin' on that novel. Love ya!

Note: Dialog in foreign languages has been demarked with "<>". Whether the words are French or German should be obvious.

France – winter 1944

Warmth rolled off the kerosene heaters in oily insidious waves, curling around the scattered tables and chairs and pooling in the corners of the tiny room. It was too hot, really. The men working there had immediately shed parkas and overcoats at the door, shoving gloves and damp wool hats into bulging pockets not quite large enough to hold them. Wet boot prints sketched a crazy design over the rough wooden boards and rapidly melting ice soaked the small threadbare rugs scattered around. The low murmuring of voices belied the tense atmosphere of the place. Only the occasional radio squawk, quickly squelched by nimble fingers, seemed to broadcast the seriousness of the work at hand.

Saunders lit a cigarette, his hands cupped around the match as if some stray air current might suddenly whip up and kill the flame. He squinted through the wispy smoke, watching the S2 man as he carefully folded back the cloth covering the easel, smoothing its edges until it hung perfectly perpendicular to the floor. The sergeant noted the man's clean uniform, the deep green tailor-made shirt with perfect creases. And the paratroop boots, shined to a high gloss. Saunders knew that particular pair of footwear had never waited inside the freezing fuselage of an airplane, never hurtled through the darkness to an abrupt landing in some farmer's frozen field. The boots alone told him more than he needed to know about the guy.

He shook his head, stifling a yawn against his knuckles. He'd heard a rumor or two about this mission and didn't want to hear another blessed word. Not one blessed word. The men were tired. HE was tired. And outside the snow was falling heavily.

"Where did you say your officer was, Sergeant?" The major picked up a briefcase from the floor, setting it carefully on the table and scowling at the ice-covered locks. He ran a thumb over the hardware, still not looking directly at Saunders.

"Lieutenant Hanley's in the hospital, sir. I have the platoon."

The major frowned. "Unfortunate. Well, I assume you have experience in patrolling these mountains. I asked for the most experienced platoon for a special mission, I was assured..." His voice trailed off.

Saunders suppressed a sigh, coughing lightly around his cigarette. He recognized the man's discomfort and felt no great desire to set him at ease, preferring to focus on the job at hand. *I ain't got time to hold nobody's hand.*

"Well, Sergeant, I am Major Quinn, Acting Division Intelligence S-2. What I am about to show you is Top Secret." He reached into the briefcase, pulling out several grease pencils neatly rubber-banded together and a slim sheaf of charts. Selecting a map, Quinn smoothed it flat against the easel and pinned it with thumbtacks.

"Okay, Sergeant, let's get started then."

Slowly coming to his feet, Saunders stretched expansively, stifling the yawn he knew would annoy Quinn. He edged around the table to stand next to the major, the cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. He grimaced inwardly at the explosion of colored lines he glimpsed on the map but managed to maintain an outward expression of appropriate interest.

Quinn leaned onto his hands, gaze roaming over the map. He seemed uncertain for a moment, unsure where to start. Straightening, the major removed his glasses, pulling a clean white handkerchief from his pocket, and began to polish the already sparkling lenses.

"You know, Sergeant, that our contact with the Maquis in this area has been sporadic at best?" He squinted at Saunders, dark eyes wide and slightly unfocused.

Saunders nodded. "We've been all over that slope for weeks now, Major. Haven't seen any sign of 'em." He took a final drag on his cigarette, reluctantly stubbing out the butt in an overflowing makeshift ashtray.

Settling his glasses into place, Quinn once again eyed the map. "This was once an area of very high resistance population. But the Germans have been hunting them down for years now, hunting them down and killing them. Them AND their families. The Maquis had no

defense other than to run and hide. They keep on the move, taking everything with them.” Quinn ran the back of one hand across his forehead, swiping at the thin sheen of sweat glistening there. He reached for a ceramic mug, carefully placed at a distance from his grease pencils and case. Staring down into its empty depths, he sighed and looked again at Saunders. “Coffee, Sergeant?”

Saunders frowned, trying to remember the last time he’d had anything out of a mug and not a canteen cup either blisteringly hot or icy cold. “Yessir, coffee would be fine.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, as Quinn gestured to a young private who had obviously been hovering for just such an opportunity. Two steaming mugs of muddy brown liquid appeared and Saunders took one, grimacing at the musty odor.

The major took a swift mouthful and swallowed hastily, his eyes watering. “Okay. We had brief radio contact with the leader of one of the remaining groups. His information has been good before, he can be trusted.” Quinn glanced at Saunders, then back to the map. “He goes by the name of Aramis, I guess he read *The Three Musketeers*, I don’t know. But he’s got numbers for us, on German positions, movements. And we need it now.”

Saunders frowned. “Why now, Major? This storm could last for days. Gonna be hard gettin’ up there, let alone gettin’ back.” He reached into his pocket for another cigarette and then thought better of it. “If we can get back.”

A fleeting smile ghosted across Quinn’s lips.

“It’s because of the storm, Sergeant. It’s perfect for you and your squad to slip unnoticed through the German lines and meet up with Aramis. I had to come up and see the ground myself, of course, to be sure. In two days the weather should be clearing up just in time for Operation Left Hook.”

Saunders blinked. “Operation Left Hook, sir?”

Quinn picked up his markers in his left hand, selecting one with such careful deliberation that Saunders wanted to grab them all and throw them on the floor.

“Yes, Left Hook. Here’s our lines.” He traced a thin blue line, ignoring Saunders’ obvious impatience. Exchanging the blue pencil for a red, Quinn drew another line, almost parallel to the other. “And there’s the German’s. With only a river and a mile or two of disputed territory between us. Now-” The major flinched at an especially loud burst of static from one of the radios. Taking advantage of the distraction, he picked up his mug and took another quick sip.

“There’s an old road, more of a goat trail really, that heads due east, up and across the front of the slope. We’ve had you avoiding it deliberately in your patrols, just to keep the Germans from thinking we had any interest in it. Left Hook will bring a huge force of Allied troops up that mountain, along that trail and behind the Kraut lines, cutting them off and giving us total control of the valley. And whoever has control of the valley has complete access to easy supply routes, troop movement, you name it!” Quinn’s voice held an edge of excitement.

Saunders stared at the map, knowing full well that Quinn saw only colored lines and not the reality of the terrain. He thought briefly of the men and wondered how they’d take this new assignment. The squad had been out on the mountain almost daily for the last three weeks. They’d spent more than one night out in the cold, avoiding and engaging German units. They needed a break. And they weren’t about to get one now.

“When do we leave, Major?” He kept his voice carefully neutral. Had it been Hanley, Saunders would have spoken up, defended his men’s need for rest. But he wasn’t about to let this squeaky clean, bespectacled rear echelon eager beaver... He let his thoughts trail off and crossed his arms across his chest, turning to face the major.

Quinn stared back, blowing gently across the surface of his coffee.

“Tonight. You need to draw parkas, shoepacs and climbing ropes. Also compasses. In this case is your map, passwords, countersigns. Make sure all your men know them in case

you get separated.” He handed the sergeant an officer’s canvas map case. “Oh, and you have a French-speaking man, yes?”

“Well, yes, Cajé, but—” Sudden, crushing fatigue swept through Saunders. He’d had enough trouble just walking down the bomb-pocked street from the storefront in which his squad was holed up to the candy store OP. The snow was a dark curtain, muffling sounds and swallowing up any light. Crossing the river in this weather without losing half the men would be a miracle.

Quinn straightened. “I know, Saunders.”

The sergeant’s head came up, aware that Quinn had used his name for the first time since their introduction.

“It’s imperative that you and your men get up that trail before the Germans know you’re there. This weather is actually a stroke of luck. Your trail should be covered by morning.”

Along with the frozen bodies of the men who fall through the ice. Saunders swallowed down his anger, long used to the unwavering stares of fresh-faced officers who’d never faced combat. He shrugged into his overcoat, shoving his hands deep into the pockets to retrieve his gloves.

“Yessir.”

The fierce biting wind hit Saunders in the face like a blow as he cracked the door open and wedged himself outside. Before closing it, Saunders looked back in, the heat of the place almost shimmering.

Quinn stood there, staring back at him, his expression unreadable behind the flames dancing in reflection on the lenses of his spotless glasses.

“Good luck, Sergeant.”

“Right. Sir.”

The door closed.

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The storefront had been opulent once, with several rows of deep shelves for displaying merchandise. The shelves were long gone, burned in the brick fireplace which was inexplicably intact after weeks of German shelling. Glass from the windows had littered the grimy wood floor and also the street outside. In the weeks since first squad had take up residence, the shards had been swept neatly away and the broken panes boarded up. As a result, the room was rather dim during the day. At night, though, it was filled with the flickering light, homey if not home and dry if not exactly warm.

Kirby huddled closer to the hearth, stretching his sock-clad feet toward the pile of broken-up furniture that made up the base of the fire. He leaned forward in his chair, reaching down with one hand to absently massage the toes of his right foot. His ankles were aching from the constant patrols up and down the lower slopes of the mountain and it felt good to be out of his blasted boots. His lids grew heavy as the warmth spread through him, his head lolling over and over as his body begged for sleep.

“Kirby, you’d better watch it or you’re gonna fall right in that fire.” Billy stood and brushed the crumbs from his shirtfront onto the floor as he sidled up behind the BAR man. He ducked his head to grin at Littlejohn who was cross-legged on the floor, mindlessly cleaning his weapon.

“Maybe I wanna fall in the fire. Be a damn sight warmer than I am now, that’s for sure.” Shivering dramatically, Kirby shrank down inside his jacket then suddenly turned to grab Billy’s wrist just as the kid moved to yank the chair out from under him. They tussled good-naturedly for a few moments, Billy lackadaisically attempting to wrest him from the chair and Kirby bellowing at the top of his lungs, his legs stuck straight out for leverage.

“Kirby?” The medic’s laconic voice failed to catch the warring squad mates’ attention. “Kirby?” He put a little more volume into it, picking up his canteen and slowly unscrewing the cap. “Kirby, mind if I put your feet out?” Doc poured a steady stream of water over the BAR man’s smoking socks, eliciting a yelp from Kirby and shouts of laughter from the other men.

“Warm enough now, Kirby?” Littlejohn slammed the trigger housing into the stock of his M1, locking it all into place with an audible click, and laid it gently across his knees.

The door flew open, slamming back on its broken frame before the man outside could catch it. A torrent of snowflakes followed him in, racing ahead of a fierce northerly wind. Caje leapt from his seat and seized the flapping door before it could tear itself from its hinges, leaning his shoulder against the rough, uneven boards and shoving them back into the open doorway.

Saunders threw his hood back, scattering snow everywhere. In the short walk from the OP, he’d accumulated a fine dusting of granular ice across his eyebrows and his lower face where his five o’clock stubble trapped the glittering particles. He stared in numb disbelief at Kirby capering before the roaring fire, a smoking sock in each hand. The laughter had died rapidly away at the sudden appearance of the sergeant and the men were watching him warily with the exception of Kirby, still dancing and muttering to himself.

Doc nudged him, almost overbalancing him into the fire. “Uh, Kirby?” He met Kirby’s gaze and indicated Saunders with one cocked eyebrow.

“Oh, hiya, Sarge! Just a little accident here, no problem.” He glared darkly at Nelson and shoved the socks behind his back.

Saunders finished unbuttoning his overcoat and slid it from his shoulders, turning to hang it on one of the many nails sticking out of the wall next to the door. The snow caked on it was already melting and sliding down the garment to drip on the floor. He jammed his gloves into one of the pockets and then moved across the room to the three-legged table, careful not to dislodge the boxes piled under the fourth corner. He dropped the map case on the uneven surface, ignoring the momentary wobble of the table underneath its slight weight.

“We’ve got a mission. Tonight.” Saunders shoved the fingers of one hand through his tangled blonde hair. He knew the men would take it hard. He also knew that after any initial complaints they’d do anything he asked. Knowing that didn’t make his job any easier, though.

Kirby stood stock still, socks dangling dangerously close to the flames, his mouth hanging open. “You gotta be kiddin’, Sarge! We just got back this morning from a patrol! I’m not even thawed out yet!” He waved the socks for emphasis.

Doc ducked away, narrowly avoiding the dingy, damp and smoking wool sock. He picked up his medical bag, flipping it open with practiced ease, and began to paw through it. “I’m gonna need to requisition a few things, Sarge.” He glanced up, blue eyes anxious under his customary furrowed brow. The medic thought he’d had until the next morning to resupply.

Saunders nodded as he unrolled the map case. “I know, Doc. We’ll get to that. Lemmee show you where an’ what we’re gonna be doin’.” He spread his hands over the map, smoothing it against the tabletop as the men gathered around him.

Kirby elbowed his way in, shoving Littlejohn to one side. After one glance at the brightly colored lines on the chart, he swore softly, dark eyes darting quickly to glance at the sergeant’s face. His fingers tightened around the socks still clutched in his hands, squeezing several droplets of water from the damp fabric that dripped onto the map.

“Kirby!” More than one voice chimed in on the hapless BAR man’s name.

He shrugged and wiped the water from the map with the side of one hand. “Hey, from the looks a’ that,” he waved his fingers over the intersecting colored lines, “a little water’s gonna be the least of our worries.”

Truer words were never spoken.

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Doc lay sprawled across the ice, head tucked hard into his elbow and his medical bag slung across his back. He could feel the thin sheen of water floating on top of the frozen river seeping into his outer layer of clothing and prayed silently that he'd be up and moving before it worked its way any further in. His arms wrapped tightly around his helmet, covering the telltale red crosses emblazoned on circular white backgrounds. Doc hoped his bag was upside down, so that its own red cross wasn't visible to the searchers. There was nothing he could do about the brassard around his left bicep. The medic hardly dared breathe and fought down the shivers that were threatening to wrack him from head to toe.

<"Do you see anything?">

The voice, young and high and tinged with frantic excitement, seemed only yards away. Doc forced himself to be still although he wanted desperately to look in the direction of the German patrol. He knew Saunders and the others were somewhere between the river and the Krauts, no doubt preparing for an encounter that would jeopardize the entire mission and bring holy hell down on their heads. The enemy line ran along the far riverbank and there were far more of them than the five Americans huddled beneath the overhanging roots and dead tree trunks. Doc hoped his overcoat, turned white side out, would be enough to hide him in the driving snowstorm. Behind him, still waiting on the opposite bank, was Kirby. *Prob'ly havin' kittens by now.* Despite the desperate situation, Doc found himself smiling against the rough fabric of his overcoat.

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Jesus, Doc, don't move, don't move, don't move. Kirby crouched at the base of a thick tree whose lower branches hung over him in a snow-covered canopy. He'd extended the legs of the BAR, setting it up in a solid firing position, but wasn't exactly sure where he should be aiming. The wind, screaming straight down the river, seemed to make odd detours through the forest, whistling about his ears and distorting the voices he knew had to be on the other side of the water. The only thing he was sure of was that the language wasn't his own. Kirby could tell Doc knew it too, as the medic had immediately prostrated himself on the ice, becoming as still as any of the random snow-covered tree limbs caught in the winter's freeze. In the starless night, the BAR man wasn't sure he knew which vague hump on the river was Doc. He fought down the desire to call to the man, forcing himself to wait. Somewhere on the other side, invisible to Kirby, the others waited, too.

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Garand at the ready, Cajé bit down hard on his lower lip, trying to control his breathing. He'd barely made the safety of the bank when he'd heard the voices of the German patrol above him in the tree line. Signaling frantically to Doc, several meters behind him, Cajé had hurled himself beneath the tangled roots of an ancient oak, shoving his back flat against the frozen earth. He glanced quickly back at the river and was rewarded by the sight of the medic dropping to the ice as if he'd been shot. *Mon dieu, as if he'd been shot!* Cajé shook his head ruefully, annoyed at his own thoughts.

A short distance to his left, the Cajun could now make out the vague outline of Nelson, the barrel of the younger man's weapon just visible pointed straight up the bank. Cajé looked up, too, his eyes following the track his ears told him the enemy patrol was taking. A sudden change in the wind drove sheets of gritty ice directly into his face and down the front of his overcoat below his upturned chin. He shivered, hunching his shoulders to lessen the gap between his skin and his clothing. Glancing out on the river, he wondered briefly how the medic was managing to stay so still lying on the ice and unprotected from the swirling air currents.

<"Just a rabbit. There is nothing here.">

<"But I swear, I thought I heard...alright.">

The disembodied voices faded into the storm, the muffled clinking of their weapons gradually dwindling until there was nothing but the howling night. Cajé scooted under the roots, duck-walking in the narrow space until he reached Billy, laying one hand on the man's shoulder to announce his presence. Nelson flinched, his gaze flickering to the scout's for a brief moment before he resumed watching the driving snow above the bank.

"Sarge?" Cajé's voice was no more than a breath in Saunders' ear. The sergeant didn't look at him, but raised one gloved hand in a northerly direction.

The Cajun scrambled silently up the slope, as lithe as any ghost and as insubstantial in the heavy snowfall. He paused for a second and then vanished in the direction of the German patrol.

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Doc fought to control his fear as he felt his body rapidly losing heat. He knew it wouldn't take long in this weather for hypothermia to set in if it hadn't already. His fingers, curled into his gloved fists, were already numb and throbbing. He wished he'd had more time to compose himself when he'd gone down on the ice. Spread-eagled as he was, the wind was finding its way under his overcoat and sending aching cold to parts of his body he'd rather stay warm. More than a dusting of snow had coated him, comforting the medic as he imagined himself becoming more and more invisible, but terrifying him all the same as he envisioned the squad looking for his frozen body but unable to find it.

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Cajé faded into the tree line above the riverbank, noting the boot prints of the meddlesome German patrol, mere meters from the Americans' hiding place. The snow swirled crazily around him, filling in the prints within minutes as if the Germans had never passed. He worked his way further into the trees, following the direction the patrol had to have taken, careful to place his own boots into natural hollows behind fallen logs and thick foliage. The pines gave him some protection from the wind and Cajé felt a quick twinge of guilt, his mind flickering momentarily to the medic trapped out on the ice. But now he had a job to do, and the sooner he did it, the sooner Doc could be thawing out by hiking straight up a mountain. *Mon dieu.*

Ten minutes slipped by, during which Cajé had caught sight of the German patrol exactly twice. Both times he'd searched what he could see of their faces for any signs that they were still looking for something. Both times the young men seemed relaxed and unperturbed, their main worry apparently the weather and how soon they would be getting out of it. Cajé waited awhile longer, his dark eyes watching them disappear into the storm, and then turned, doubling back to the squad.

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Kirby shifted his weight from one knee to the other, still sighting down the long barrel of his weapon. He blinked, suddenly aware of a shadow on the far bank, a subtle shifting in the random pattern of grey on grey. Holding his breath, he folded up the bipod legs of the BAR and floundered to his feet, painfully aware of the pins and needles that rapidly swarmed over his lower limbs. He shielded his face from the driving snow with one gloved hand and squinted, trying to force order on the dark night.

There! Kirby watched Littlejohn cock one arm and then toss something on the ice, bending to pick up another something and then tossing that, too. *What the hell was the big*

galoot doing? He reached up and pulled the hood of his overcoat tighter around his ears, shaking his head in disbelief. *What was he doing?*

Suddenly Kirby understood, as Doc rose from the river, a wraith rising from the grave, snow caked to his uniform like some mythical creature. Kirby's eyes widened as the medic slipped, going down on one knee, and he found himself moving, gliding carefully out on the ice and catching Doc's arm, guiding him to safety on the opposite bank.

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Saunders studied his map by the meager light of his flashlight, the beam dimmed by a thick wrapping of felt across the lens. He was anxious to be on the way, away from the German sentries marching up and down the river and toward their meeting with the Maquis. They'd wasted enough time already and almost lost a man. He glanced up from the map at the man in question, reassuring himself that the medic was okay and able to continue the mission. Not that there was any question of calling it off: they had to go on and they needed every warm body. *Or not so warm.* And the way back was just as risky.

Doc shivered badly, his hands tucked into his armpits, and shifted his feet on the hard packed clay of the riverbank under the roots that had originally sheltered Cajé and Nelson. Kirby and Littlejohn had brushed all the snow from his overcoat and pants, shaking a surprising amount out from underneath the parka.

"Littlejohn, ya scared the bejeebers outta me with that first rock! I thought the ice was crackin' an' I was about to go for a swim." The medic's teeth were chattering so much the others almost didn't understand him. His cheeks were frosted white and his blue eyes seemed slightly out of focus. He blinked over and over, staring at each of them in turn, as if he hadn't been sure he'd ever see any of them again. "The bejeebers outta me..." He mumbled to himself, shaking his head and dislodging another layer of snow from his hood.

Kirby adjusted the strap of his BAR, pulling it out from under the heavier padding of the backpack he carried. He snorted, looking first at the trembling medic and then at Littlejohn. "I thought you were throwin' a grenade, I swear to God, a grenade. That same sorta motion, you know?" Miming the action, Kirby found himself prodded in the chest by an irate Littlejohn.

"Now why would I be throwing a grenade at Doc?" The big man began rising to his feet, only stopping when his helmet impacted with the earthen roof over his head. He winced, sinking back to a crouch. "We had to get his attention without calling those Krauts back." Littlejohn frowned, suddenly realizing that Kirby was pulling his already rather lengthy leg. "Well, it worked didn't it?" He looked at Billy, who nodded and smiled a toothy grin.

Kirby rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to deliver another scathing comment on Littlejohn's actions but Saunders beat him to it.

"Okay, we've been here long enough. Move out, Cajé, you take the point. Kirby? You—" Kirby sighed, shouldering up the BAR. "Bring up the rear. Yeah, Sarge, I know." He rose to one knee, grunting under the weight of the weapon.

Saunders nodded, glad he was able to forestall a Kirby/Littlejohn altercation for once and shifted his attention to the shivering medic. "Doc? You ready?"

It wasn't really a question and Doc knew it. He laid one hand over his medical bag and nodded, hoping that the climbing would warm him up. *Warm me up or kill me, one or the other!* He let Cajé fuss over him one more time and nodded again as he looked up and into Saunders' appraising gaze. "I'm okay, Sarge, let's git goin'."

The men silently gathered the rest of their gear and slipped out into the storm, pausing one by one before vanishing in the falling snow.

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Caje stood at the edge of the trees, gaze resting uneasily on the wide expanse of snow before him. They'd been working steadily upward all morning, climbing through the thick forest into the rarified mountain air. The going had been rough but not impassible as the closely spaced firs channeled the snow, mounds of the stuff piled against the uphill side of the trunks and bare ground on the downhill. The scout had easily led the squad along the natural pathways, winding their way ever upward across the slope. *Well, maybe not so easy.*

Dropping to one knee, Caje cradled his rifle loosely against his chest and immediately felt the complaints of a dozen aching muscles. A quick glance at the sky confirmed what his nose had been telling him for hours – more snow on the way. Heavy grey clouds scudded across the faint yellow wash of the sun and the late morning grew rapidly darker. Caje glanced once more across the snowfield, a cold finger of anxiety tracing its way down his back. Shivering, he hugged his M1 closer and turned back to the trail.

Behind him stretched a line of men, all panting with exertion, mouths open and gulping oxygen. Caje could see Kirby about halfway along, jaw flapping as usual. Just ahead of him, Doc trudged, a resigned grin on his face. Caje smiled as he watched them, knowing Kirby was bitching about something and Doc was humoring him, jollying him along so the squad kept moving. Kirby was probably complaining about his feet but this time with a grain of truth to his standard litany of problems. The medic had discovered a small patch of frostbite on one of Kirby's toes, a small area, but frostbite for sure. Doc had wanted to send him to the aid station, didn't want the private to risk losing a toe. Kirby, with his own brand of nonsensical logic had declined the easy out and insisted on coming along on this mission. *But it didn't stop him complaining.*

"We gotta problem here, Caje?" Sergeant Saunders leaned over the Cajun's shoulder, looking past him at the open ground. Almost fifty yards of unprotected slogging through deep snow with no cover, especially since the snowfall had tapered off to almost nothing. *Not good.* He crouched down and edged closer to the tree line, curling the fingers of one gloved hand around the scaly bark of a fir.

The path ahead was barely visible beneath the thick layer of new snow. A rock ledge on the uphill side held the worst of it back, but almost eighteen inches had settled on the narrow trail, making the footing treacherous. One slip would send a man tumbling down the face of the mountain without hope of recovery. As the two soldiers stared at the seemingly impossible situation, the snowfall recommenced with light airy flakes that rapidly became a dense curtain of white.

Saunders shook his head, gently gnawing on his lower lip. "Great. Just great." He tapped Caje on one knee. "How 'bout roping 'em together?" Patting his pockets down, the blond sergeant removed one glove and retrieved a cigarette and his lighter. He eased his back against a tree, stretching his tired legs and crossing them at the ankle. Smoke escaped his pursed lips, rapidly whipped away by the growing wind.

Caje shrugged, his dark eyes betraying a hint of worry. "I dunno, Sarge. Somebody's gotta take a rope across." He wouldn't meet Saunders' gaze, instead turning his head to stare at the snowfield, his mind already working out the best route, the *safest* route.

The sergeant watched him a few moments more, taking long slow drags from the cigarette. At last he stood, slinging his Tommy over his shoulder, and flicked the butt out into the snow where it vanished promptly with a soft fizzle. Pulling his glove back on, Saunders left Caje to his thoughts and walked back to the rest of the men.

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"Jeez, Doc, ain't there somethin' you can put on it, somethin' to thaw it out?" Kirby held his booted foot in both hands, forcing the toes to bend up and down. "I can't feel a thing. You

hear me?" He leaned over toward Littlejohn. "Not a thing." He dropped the foot to the dirt, staring at it as if it didn't belong to him.

The men on either side ignored him, Littlejohn rolling his eyes behind the smaller man's back. They'd heard it before, a *hundred* times before and knew that to acknowledge Kirby's complaints would only multiply them tenfold. Hershey bars and canteens appeared as the squad shifted their weary bodies on the cold ground.

Doc closed the flap on his rucksack and carefully reattached it to his webbing. He'd not needed any of his medical supplies yet, but couldn't resist checking to make sure all was in order. The canteens were gradually freezing over despite their thick canvas covers, he noted with a grimace, tucking one beneath his parka in the vain hope that it might stay liquid. His blue eyes grew wide at the shock of cold against his belly and he wrapped his arms tightly around himself, hoping his body heat would thaw the ice before he froze to death. *Twice in one day, this can't be good.*

"Kirby." Shivering hard, Doc couldn't control the tremor in his voice. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Kirby, I tole ya. Ya gotta get the area warm an' keep it warm. Walkin' up an' down mountains in the snow ain't good for frostbite."

Nelson laughed, nudging Littlejohn with his elbow. "Walking DOWN mountains, Doc? Seems like all we've been doing is going up." A grin spread across his boyish face, his chapped lips cracking into tiny fissures. Billy winced and rubbed the back of one gloved hand across his mouth.

The men all laughed, nodding their heads in agreement.

Doc smiled, scooting across to Kirby, and grabbed the man's boot. "Lemmee take a look." Sticking the end of one glove in his mouth, he pulled it off and reached for the shoepac covering Kirby's boot.

The private yanked his foot from Doc's grasp indignantly and sat bolt upright, his face a picture of wide-eyed outrage. "What are you doin', Doc? You're gonna make it worse, you take my boot off and let this wind get to it." He pulled his legs to his chest and carefully laid the BAR across his boot tops, trying to deter the medic from making any more advances toward him. Glaring at the laughing men around him, Kirby rested his chin on his knees, muttering to himself. "Crazy medic, take my boot off up here in a freezin' cold forest full of...full of snow an' ice. Crazy..."

Kirby's voice trailed off as he became aware of someone standing behind him, someone who could only be Sergeant Saunders judging by the amused looks on his squad mates' faces. He closed his dark eyes briefly before glancing over his shoulder. "Hey, Sarge. We goin' home yet?"

"No, Kirby, not yet." Saunders sighed with longstanding patience. "I need your ropes, looks like we're gonna do some mountain climbing." He stood hipshot, arms hanging loosely at his sides. He'd addressed the men, but his eyes were constantly moving, looking beyond the perimeter, to the rear the way they'd come and finally settling on Caje's unmoving back. The uneasiness in his posture wasn't lost on his squad.

Littlejohn flipped open his ruck, digging deeply for the newly requisitioned rope. "I sure hope you're not depending on this little piece of string to keep me from falling, Sarge." He tried to laugh, but found his throat suddenly dry. His fingers located the rope, hauling it from the pack and dropping it in the dirt between his feet as he shoved everything else back in.

Shaking his knapsack with ferocious energy, Kirby managed to dump just about all his belongings to the forest floor. He cast an anxious glance at Littlejohn, his eyes dark with an unaccustomed fear. Saunders' uncompromising confidence had always been the private's support system, his rock. Now Kirby sensed a fleeting uncertainty in his sergeant and a corresponding apprehension rippled through his wiry frame. It didn't help that he saw his emotions mirrored in Littlejohn's gentle face.

Nelson took Littlejohn's rope, adding it to his own, and handed them both to Ames, the tall young replacement. He watched the kid pass the neatly bundled ropes on down the line, each man silently adding his own to the pile. Turning back to Littlejohn and Kirby, Billy started to open his mouth but found himself without anything to say. Confused by the tension in the air, he merely nodded and dropped his gaze to his boots.

Kneeling on the frozen ground, Doc watched the apprehension leap from man to man, feeling the electric jitteriness in his own body. He pulled the canteen from inside his parka, sloshing it around next to his ear before clipping it to his webbing. The weariness in his muscles sang to him as he braced his hands on his thighs and rose gracelessly, grabbing at a sapling to keep from stumbling. Snow drifted down from the branches, the increasing wind whipping the flakes into a frenzy of white haze. The medic held one arm across his face until the miniature storm subsided then worked his way over to Cajé, hunkering down next to the man.

"Cajé? Ya really think we can git over there?" Doc stared at the snow, blue eyes squinting despite the diminishing light. He couldn't quite bring himself to look at Cajé, couldn't bear to look at the scout and see the naked fear in his face.

Cajé took a moment to answer, absently scratching the dark stubble on his chin against the rough shoulder of his overcoat. He sighed. "Yeah, Doc, I think we can. But we've got to be careful." *I've got to be careful.* He looked over his shoulder for Saunders. "If we can just get the rope across and tied off." *If I can just get the rope...*

"Think this'll do it?" Saunders lay the coiled line carefully on the ground.

Cajé pulled off his gloves and ran his hands over the knots, inspecting each one and snugging them tighter. The cold stiffened his fingers and he was clumsy, ham-fisted by the time he'd gotten to the end. He gratefully allowed Doc to help him back into his gloves, feeling momentarily like a small child, fussed over by a caring parent, and drew comfort from the thought.

Saunders watched the scout through the spiraling smoke of another cigarette. The mission was too important to scrap, Hanley had made that clear. They'd come this far, they'd finish it. He just hoped the information promised by the Maquis was worth it. *Worth the lives of his men.* Saunders sighed and stubbed out the cigarette.

"All right. Here's what we're gonna do."

*** *** ***

Kirby clung to the rope, motionless halfway across the snowfield and more alone than he'd ever felt in his entire life. Nothing seemed safe anymore, especially not with the BAR slung over his back and tightly cinched down with no hope of him getting to it. Like there was any chance in hell of him letting go of the line long enough to fire the thing. Swallowing hard, Kirby slowly advanced his hands, opening his fingers just enough to allow the rope to slide between them.

Cajé had made it look easy. Almost. He'd gone twenty yards when his feet had gone out from under him, slamming the slender man hard on the rock hidden beneath the snow. The entire squad had stared with helpless anxiety, eyes wide and holding their breath as Cajé slowly raised his head and hauled himself to his knees, continuing his journey with gritty determination.



Kirby thought about that now, feeling the slick, icy surface below his boots. The wind whispered around his ears, blocking out the encouragement he knew Doc was muttering under his breath. Had been muttering, for that matter, since Cajé had made his crossing and for each subsequent man. Kirby lifted his chin an inch and chanced a glance at the medic, letting his gaze travel along the safety rope looped around his own waist at one end, the other held securely in Doc's clenched fists.

Faith. Doc has faith. Kirby allowed himself a quick look directly into Doc's concerned eyes and nodded slightly, hoping that his rising fear wasn't visible through the thick snowfall. He took another step, inching his hands along the line. Cajé's shadowy form was barely discernible at the other end of the guide rope, hunkered down just behind Doc, but Kirby knew he was waiting there. Waiting for him. *Cajé and his fierce determination.*

Doc's convictions. Cajé's confidence. Kirby shivered, aware again of the sharp wind knifing its way down the back of his neck. *What the heck do I have? Lotta quick wisecracks and a ruck full of excuses.* He sighed and put all his weight on his left leg, hauling the right through the deep snow. And slipped, just as he transferred his balance.

Doc threw himself backward, scrambling to haul in the slack before Kirby yanked them both off the side of the mountain. He jammed his heels against a stump, pulse hammering in his ears and muscles quivering. Nelson dropped his rifle in the thick loam and joined the medic, looping the rope quickly around a tree trunk. Panting hard, their frantic breath crystallized instantly in the frigid air, panic pouring adrenaline into already surging blood streams.

Cajé rose to a crouch, hands tightening painfully on the guide rope. "Sergeant!" His urgent whisper brought Saunders to his shoulder instantly. He threw a quick glance at the thick evergreen where he had tied the line, reassuring himself that the knot still held.

"Dammit Kirby! Grab the line!" Saunders shouted without thinking as he sank to one knee at the Cajun's side.

Cajé flinched, his dark eyes turning to gaze up the mountain. The unending white expanse stretched upward out of sight, unmoving and silent. *It's always like that, just before it falls.* He looked back to see Kirby's flailing arm snag the guide rope, abruptly halting the BAR man's slide. For a moment everything stopped, even the drifting snowflakes pausing in their flight. Cajé slowly let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, relief flooding through him along with the inhalation of crisp winter air.

Kirby lay unmoving in the snow, spread-eagled. His fist remained clamped around the rope, bobbing slightly up and down with the taut vibrations coursing through it. Squeezing his eyes tightly shut, he tried to force the image of tons of snow thundering down the mountain from his mind. Tons of snow crashing down on him and sweeping him off the face of the earth.

*** *** ***

"Dammit Kirby! Grab the line!"

Doc couldn't hold still any longer. Thrusting his loops of rope into Billy's hands, he staggered to his feet, floundering in the deep snow at the edge of the tree line. Without hesitation he reached for the guideline and sure-footedly began to make his way along the narrow path.

"Doc! Get back, Doc! You don't have a lifeline!" Saunders' voice was hoarse with tension, consciously aware this time of the need to keep from shouting. He rose to a crouch, his weapon clenched unaware in his hands. Eyes narrowed against the fierce wind, the sergeant watched the medic's progress, oblivious to the men gathering around him, ducking their own heads against the storm's onslaught.

Cajé looked down at the guide rope, suddenly aware that it had become Doc's only link to safety. Pulling in the slack, he looped it twice around his left arm and let his fingers circle around it as he closed his fist. It didn't seem like much, but Cajé didn't see how he could do

anything else to help the two men. He braced his knee tightly against a rock and settled his weight behind it, hoping that if the time came, he could hold both Kirby and Doc.

Five feet from Kirby, close enough to see the rapid expansion of his squad mate's rib cage under his greatcoat, Doc attempted to slow down, boots skidding wildly on the underlying ice. He managed to keep his balance, ending up on his knees at Kirby's side. Leaning over the man, he laid one mittened hand gently on the back of his neck.

"Kirby." Nothing.

"KIRBY!" Teeth clenched tightly together, Doc put as much urgent volume in his whisper as he dared. He reached across Kirby's back and slid his hand under the man's shoulder, preparing to roll him gently over. Glancing across the snowfield, his anxious gaze met with Cajé's, the scout's dark eyes full of questions that the medic couldn't answer. Doc shook his head and looked back down at Kirby.

"Doc?" Kirby's lids flickered open, the snow matted on his lashes making the job difficult. "Doc?"

Cajé straightened at the faint sound of Kirby's voice. He'd been worried that the BAR man was unconscious, remembering his own fall on the ice less than an hour before. It had surprised him, the sudden slickness underfoot and then landing not in soft, yielding snow but on cold, hard rock. His breath blown forcibly out as he'd hit, it had taken several long, frightening moments to get his lungs working again. Now he felt a shiver of relief, tempered by the knowledge that Doc and Kirby were still out there, Kirby possibly injured, their only hope the slender line he himself held in his hand.

Kirby sat up with Doc's help, hooking one elbow around the guide rope. "Thanks, Doc, I thought I was a goner there for a minute." He panted lightly, his breath puffing out in small clouds that the wind whipped away in seconds.

Doc ran practiced hands over Kirby's limbs. "Anythin' hurt, Kirby? Can ya move your arms an' legs?"

Nodding, Kirby flexed his trembling knees, unable to get his feet under him and gave up, letting the rope take his weight. "I'm okay, Doc, I think." He looked up, catching a quick glimpse of worried blue eyes before the medic glanced away. "Hey Doc, why don't you have a lifeline?"

Doc grimaced as he slid his left arm around Kirby's waist. "Didn't think about it, Kirby." He braced himself, grabbing hold of the BAR man's right wrist and pulling it across his shoulders. "Now let's us see if we can get ya movin' 'fore the Krauts come to see what all the yellin's about."

Kirby frowned as he leaned on the medic, his pale face drawn in unaccustomed lines of concentration as he tried to balance on feet numb with cold. He was all too aware that he had the only lifeline AND the only grip on the guide rope. Poor Doc was holding onto him and trusting that he wouldn't let go. Kirby bit his lip, the dry skin parting under the pressure, filling his mouth with the coppery taste of old pennies.

*** *** ***

The rest of the squad crouched on the far side of the snowfield, mute in their impotence. Saunders leaned on the butt of his Thompson, the muzzle cold against his cheek. From time to time he brought one gloved hand to his mouth, then down to his pocket wherein lay his cigarettes but he seemed to lack the wherewithal to actually remove one and light it. For now his oral fixation was satisfied by the familiar movements of his hand to his lips. That and the terrible grinding of his molars that would leave an ache for which he'd later be hard pressed to find a cause.

Caje tightened his grip on the rope, feeling the movements of the two soldiers transmitted by the cotton fibers, even through the thickness of his gloves. He imagined that they in turn, could sense his own efforts to bring them to safety and concentrated on holding the line absolutely still. He blinked, his gaze flickering up the silent white mountain, still amazed that the snow mass was holding. Swallowing hard, Caje dragged his attention back to his teammates, ignoring the growing twinges in his arms and legs.



The guide rope bowed alarmingly downhill, forcing Kirby and Doc to wallow through the deep drifts below the trail made by first squad's passing. The medic clung to Kirby, leaning into him as he supported the other man's weight, well aware of the drop-off to his right. He kept his gaze resolutely on his boots, hoping to find solid footing under the carpet of snow.

Later, Kirby couldn't remember why he'd paused, looking awkwardly out from under Doc's supporting arm. He only knew that something had tickled at the edges of his awareness, filling him with a dark fear. Peering through the increasingly heavy snowfall, Kirby saw at first Nelson's vague outline, arms outstretched in front of him as the rope passed through them. Billy lifted one hand, waving briefly before resuming his task.

*** *** ***

The shot was shockingly loud and echoed on and on between the two banks of trees. The impact of the bullet threw Kirby forward, the pain spreading instantly from his left flank up his spine and down his hip. He managed to keep his grip on the guide rope, but failed to stay upright, numb legs sliding out from under him yet again. Eyes squeezed tightly shut, Kirby fought to control his rising panic, wondering suddenly why he could no longer feel Doc's supporting arm across his back.

Doc felt the vibration of the earth beneath his body, now that he was prone in the snow. He couldn't quite remember how he'd come to be resting there, his cheek flat on the ice and arms outstretched above him on the slope. He thought he'd heard a gunshot, but *who'd be shootin' way the hell up here?* As the tremor under him increased, Doc slowly lifted his head, looking for Kirby.

Kirby's eyes flew open, searching frantically for the medic as the rumbling above him grew into a roar. His gaze met with Doc's as the surface of the snowfield began to shift about them, slow rivulets flowing along their bodies and off down the mountainside. With a start, Kirby saw that Doc was sliding away and lunged desperately with his free hand, ignoring the bright flash of pain that lanced through him with the movement.

As his gloved fingers caught the other man's webbing, Kirby's mind wandered with curious detachment, almost as though the moment was frozen forever on that icy path. Like a series of photographs, he saw each image, shadows sharply etched against the stark white snow. Doc's worried expression. Caje, a fuzzy shape crouched in the distance. Nelson's schoolboy wave. The mountain towering relentlessly over them. And the final image, Doc, blue eyes dull with fear and pain, his left arm reaching uselessly toward Kirby, a splash of crimson bright on the snow. *Blood!*

"Doc! Are you...?"

An ocean of snow crashed over the two, cutting Kirby's words off as if they'd never been.

*** *** ***

Saunders lay sprawled behind the log where he'd thrown himself at the sound of the shot. He stared at the torrent of snow racing madly past, flinching as spindly young saplings snapped off mid-trunk, his mouth slack with astonishment. It took him several seconds to comprehend that he had no idea where his men were or the location of the unknown shooter. Another few seconds brought the realization that he DID know where two of them were, or rather, were not. *Doc and Kirby*. Gone in the maelstrom.

Gripping the Thompson tightly, Saunders rolled to his belly, elbow-walking his way along the length of the ancient log. A flash of movement caught his attention and he swung his weapon to cover whatever it was, his finger already settling against the trigger as Littlejohn staggered out of the forest.

"Littlejohn!" His voice was inaudible over the roar of the avalanche. The cold had settled in, dulling the sergeant's senses and robbing him of his lightning reflexes. Pulling his helmet from his head, Saunders swallowed hard against the tightness in his throat, knowing that if he'd reacted faster he would have killed one of his own men. He signaled to the big private, calling him in.

Littlejohn ran awkwardly through the drifts, head cocked to one side as he kept one eye on the raging snowfield. He zigzagged around the maze of trees, hurdling those that had fallen and ducking under outstretched limbs. Falling to his knees next to Saunders, he struggled to draw in a breath.

"Sarge! Who's shootin'? I didn't see, I, Sarge! Where's everybody?" Littlejohn clutched his M1 closer to his heaving chest, eyes wide with anxiety. He'd been out on the perimeter, further up the mountain. He'd heard the shot but didn't know where it had originated. Now he stared fixedly at the avalanche, its fury rendering him almost speechless.

Saunders shook his head, already scanning what was left of the tree line for any sign of the rest of his patrol. He glanced back at Littlejohn, blue eyes troubled.

"I don't see Ames or Billy. Maybe one a them saw somethin', I dunno. But we can't let it go." He peered over the log again, eyebrows drawing together in a puzzled frown. "Whoever it was is gone. Could be a patrol, could be one guy." Glove-encased fingers closed over the Thompson as Saunders got his elbows under him. "We gotta find 'im."

Littlejohn turned his head slightly, his gaze still drawn to the snowfield. "What about Cajé?"

The sergeant flinched at the name, aware that he'd deliberately not mentioned the scout for reasons he didn't quite understand himself. *Cajé had been SO close to the edge of the tree line.*

Climbing to his knees and then to his feet, Saunders turned away from Littlejohn, not trusting his face to hide his feelings.

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

*** *** ***

Nelson floundered through the drifts, fighting to keep his feet moving and his eyes up and on the lookout for the shooter. He couldn't believe how quickly things had fallen apart. After the fiasco at the river the previous evening, Doc stranded on the ice and the squad pinned down by the German patrol, Billy thought they'd had their run of bad luck. He flinched as a large



pinecone bounced off his helmet. The trees crashed like dominos beside him and the private angled his descent away from the path of destruction, forcing himself not to turn and stare.

Like the young German just down the slope, standing stock still, weapon hanging loosely from his hands and forgotten in the face of the terrible fury. His eyes were shock-widened, mouth slack. Had Billy not tripped and fallen in his surprise, arms and legs flailing, the Kraut might have stood there as the American walked up and took him prisoner. As it was, the GI got to within thirty feet of him before he yanked his Mauser up, firing wildly as he took off running.

“SARGE!” Billy hauled himself up with the help of a sturdy sapling, raising his M1 and bringing it to bear on the rapidly vanishing back of the escaping man. “Dammit!” He lowered the weapon and glanced back at the others, hoping they knew what was going on before he left in pursuit. He couldn’t lose this guy, couldn’t let the Kraut warn his buddies of the Americans’ presence on the mountain.

*** *** ***

Saunders floundered through the underbrush, his boots alternately punching through the heavy layer of snow and then oddly coming to rest on some object underneath, forcing him to slow down in his pursuit of the shooter for fear of breaking a leg. He’d heard the shots, roughly pinpointing them as down slope and into the trees. The faint shout, barely heard over the tumbling snow told him Nelson’s location and the sergeant wasted no time sending Littlejohn out in a flanking direction, directly perpendicular to the fall line and then hooking downhill. Saunders chose a more direct route, angling both down and across, hoping to intersect with Billy and his quarry.

Of Ames’ whereabouts, he had no idea. Both Littlejohn and the young replacement had been out on a rough perimeter, keeping watch while the rest of the patrol crossed the snowfield. The shooter must have taken advantage of the situation, sneaking up from below where they had no coverage. Saunders could only assume that Ames was also in pursuit and somewhere ahead of him in the thick cover of the trees. *He’d better be!*

Finally away from the terrific noise of the avalanche, Saunders paused behind a tree, his frozen cheek resting on its rough bark while he tried to catch his breath long enough to listen. He coughed twice, one hand rising involuntarily to his neck as the frigid mountain air seared the back of his throat. Sucking in a huge lungful of air, he held it, straining to hear anything in the silent forest.

There!

The sharp crack of a rifle caught the sergeant’s attention and he pushed away from the pine, running directly down the incline, his Thompson held at the ready in his gloved hands.

*** *** ***

Nelson followed the German’s tracks relentlessly, a little slower than the headlong flight of the shooter, but then Billy had to watch for an ambush. He knew that there must be at least a patrol of Germans out here. He didn’t want to run into them. Squinting in the flat light left in the wake of the storm, Billy gave himself a second to stare uphill, hoping to catch a glimpse of Littlejohn, or the Sarge, or ANYBODY coming to help him. *Nothing*, he saw nothing. With a grunt of resignation, he dropped his gaze back to the running tracks of the fleeing Kraut.

A flash of dark grey against the white of the snow caught his attention and Billy turned his head just in time to see the shooter scurry out from under the low-hanging branches of a huge fir, angling away from him. He fired from the hip, cursing as the bullet failed to hit its mark. Immediately he increased his speed, now that his prey was within reach. Adrenaline poured through his bloodstream, driving him onward. A fine line of sweat began to form along the edge of his wool cap and slid haphazardly down his forehead, pooling along the margin of

his eyelashes. Nelson blinked furiously. Struggling to maintain his balance, he brought his rifle to bear between the retreating German's shoulder blades, trying desperately to draw a bead without smashing himself headfirst into a tree.

Bursting into a small clearing, Billy threw on the brakes, almost falling over backwards in his attempt to stay under cover. His unlined cheeks were red with exertion and an uncharacteristic expression of anger contorted his face as he panted, each puff of exhalation colliding with the prior one, obscuring his vision. He brandished one hand through the cloud in irritation, gaze jumping from one clump of pines to the next.

The young German stepped from behind a tree, rifle snugged against his shoulder and remarkably steady. Billy raised his M1 and pulled the trigger, his eyes widening in amazement when nothing happened, his trusty weapon inexplicably jamming at this crucial moment. He threw himself sideways, desperately scrambling for cover in the sparse foliage inside the tree line. Knowing he'd finally run out of luck, Billy found himself mumbling words he'd not realized he still knew. *Our Father, who art in heaven...* He glanced up and stared straight down the barrel of the German's Mauser.



*** *** ***

The bullet slammed into his abdomen and spun him around, his arms flying up and the rifle tumbling from his slack fingers. He landed hard, unaware of anything beyond the terrible pain in his belly. Blinking slowly, he tried to look up at his enemy, who stood over him, staring with shocked eyes and a puzzled expression. His mouth opened, a great gout of blood welling up and over his lower lip as he coughed. Muscular spasms swept through his body, twisting him in the crimson-stained snow.

Forty yards uphill, Littlejohn struggled to his feet, rifle dangling from one hand. His face was much paler than could be accounted for by the cold, his eyes wide and unblinking. Gaze fixed to the body in the snow, he slowly worked his way down the slope, placing one foot with great deliberation before moving the other. Finally only a step away, he fell to his knees, running the back of his gloved free hand across his eyes.

"I thought it was YOU! I thought you were dead!" Littlejohn's voice sounded like he'd been swallowing rocks and shook with more than a slight tremor.

Nelson looked at his friend, puzzlement pulling his eyebrows together. "Whaddya mean? That wasn't you?" He sat back on his heels, hands resting forgotten on his thighs, the dead German's Mauser clutched in one fist, his jammed M1 in the other. "But, if it wasn't you, then who...?"

They both turned, the thin mountain air abruptly menacing as it worked its way under their collars and stood the hair on the back of their necks on end. The breeze had picked up again, whipping the pine branches and scattering snow into the air and into the soldiers' eyes. Littlejohn ducked his head behind one arm, squinting into the impenetrable line of trees. At first he saw nothing. He shifted his weight from one knee to the other, feeling suddenly vulnerable in the clearing. Hefting the M1 to his shoulder, he sighted down its length.

"NO! Don't, it's Ames!" Billy grabbed the barrel of Littlejohn's rifle, shoving it skyward, as he lunged to his feet, his own weapon hanging uselessly at his side. "Ames!" He waved urgently at the replacement, spinning in place as he looked for more of the German's buddies. A flush rose in his cheeks as he realized how stupid he'd been, completely overwhelmed by the

realization that the German had him dead to rights and then had conveniently keeled over with a look of shocked amazement on his Aryan face. Nelson hadn't thought for moment about other Krauts roaming the forest as he'd started to search the body. Nor had he cleared his rifle.

Littlejohn managed to pull himself together and ran raggedly through the snow, his long body folded up like a concertina. He arrived at the tree line in time to witness Ames vomiting into a clump of bushes. Stopping short in surprise, he glanced away from the kid, unsure just what was going on. The tickle on the back of his neck wouldn't go away, sending quivers of anxiety dancing under his skin. He checked his weapon, gloved fingers sliding over the clip and slipping inside the trigger guard. Ames mumbled, coughing and gagging, and Littlejohn turned back to him.

"What?"

Ames spat again, wiping his mouth roughly. Helmet askew and tipping over one shock-widened eye, he peered up at the taller man. His voice, when he finally spoke, wasn't much more than a hoarse whisper.

"I killed him, didn't I?"

Littlejohn raised one eyebrow and stared at the replacement, sensing the kid's horror but unable to reconcile it with his own relief that it had been the German and not Nelson who lay dead in the trampled snow. He looked over one shoulder and saw Billy efficiently field stripping his M1 as he knelt next to the corpse.

"I hope to shout, kid."

*** *** ***

Nelson emptied the dead German's pockets, sorting out official papers, personal letters and photographs, and equipment into piles in the snow. He shifted his weight, stuffing the flimsy paperwork under one knee before it could blow away in the growing wind. Finally satisfied that he'd missed nothing, Billy sat back on his heels and stared at the kid's face, the last few moments running over and over in his mind until he could have sworn he was looking at his own vacant eyes staring up into the drifting snowflakes.

"Nelson?"

Billy flinched so hard he fell over in the snow, grabbing at the pay book and letters as they scattered with the breeze. Reaching quickly for one errant photo as it took flight, he rolled to his knees, arms clutching the German's possessions protectively to his chest. He looked up, panicked eyes wide and cheeks growing red with embarrassment.

Thompson cradled in his arms, Saunders took in the scene, Nelson huddled over the dead German, Littlejohn a ways off, moving slowly and purposefully through the trees. And Ames, also working his way along an improvised perimeter but stopping every few steps to look back over his shoulder at the body on the ground, his weapon hanging uselessly from his hands.

"Nelson, find anything of interest?" The sergeant stepped closer, not looking at Billy at all, his gaze shifting restlessly to the tree line behind them and then on to Littlejohn, and past him to the dark copse of trees in the middle of the clearing, finally settling on Ames with a puzzled lift of one eyebrow. He raised the Thompson's barrel to the sky and rested the stock on his right hip.

Billy shrugged, his gaze firmly fixed to the personal effects he clutched in his gloved hands. The embarrassment was fading as he realized that Saunders had no idea what had happened. A smoldering anger at his own foolishness took its place. He'd been so eager to chase down the German, so ready to play the hero. *Now Ames was the hero and look at HIM! Puking in the bushes.* He swallowed hard as resentment faded into confusion.

"Um...pay book, orders, letters from home." Nelson held them out to Saunders, finally raising his eyes above the level of the snow but staring past the sergeant at Ames. He didn't

understand the conflicted animosity he felt for the replacement, only that after several months with the squad he'd finally felt he'd gained some level of competency and now, once again, he felt like the new kid.

Closing his fist around the papers, Saunders frowned at the top of Nelson's helmet before turning to follow the private's line of sight. He shook his head, knowing that he'd have to get the story eventually, but for now other things took precedence.

"Check around, willya? I'll finish this." The sergeant slung his weapon over his shoulder, stepping back as Nelson rose to his feet, M1 at the ready.

"Yes, Sergeant."

*** *** ***

Saunders crouched in the snow, thumbing slowly through the dead man's official papers. *No maps, no orders, no nothin'*. Picking up the photographs, he gave each a cursory glance and set it aside, pausing at one in particular. *A boy and his dog*. Saunders looked from the photo to the German's face and then back again. He shook his head, tucking the photos back into the boy's jacket.

"Sarge! I got somethin'!" Nelson's voice rose above the low moan of the wind. He stepped from behind some trees, waving his arms, and called again. His cheeks were flushed red, eyes bright beneath the brim of his helmet.

"Sarge! Over here!"

Saunders placed one hand on his knee and shoved, forcing himself upright. The long cold hike up the mountain was taking its toll on him, sapping his strength and loosening his concentration. He worked his way over to Nelson, footsteps deliberate in the deep snow.

"Whatcha got?" He followed the kid into the stand of trees, automatically raising one arm to catch the springy branches as they snapped back into place behind Nelson. As Saunders passed through the fragrant caress of the pine needles, he paused briefly and glanced up into the interwoven limbs of the closely set trees, realizing that the foliage formed a dense roof that prevented the snow from accumulating.

A pile of German rucksacks lay neatly against the base of the largest tree. Saunders crouched and eyed them warily, elbows resting on his knees. He let his gaze wander over the packs and the surrounding bed of pine straw. The ground was perfectly dry and hard-packed, the outline of one single boot faintly visible in its firm surface.

"Nelson, lemme have your bayonet." He held out one hand and Nelson slapped the blade into it.

Saunders gently moved the weapon around the packs, searching for any nasty surprises the Germans may have left for them. Finding nothing, he sat back on his heels with a sigh of relief. Without turning around, he handed the knife over his shoulder and felt Billy remove it from his hand.

Littlejohn stuck his head through the foliage. "Guess this is where our guy was running, huh?"

The sergeant nodded. "Yeah, I'd say so. An' he's got a bunch of friends out here, too, from the looks of it." He reached forward and grabbed a pack, slinging it to Nelson. "Take a look in there, see whatcha can find out." Saunders handed Littlejohn a rucksack, taking another for himself.

Several minutes passed while they searched the German squad's gear, removing rations, ammo, maps and paperwork, before carefully replacing it just as it had been. Littlejohn held up a bottle of brandy, tucking it into his coat with a grin.

"This is goin' back with me. I'll head out an' help Ames, Sarge." He handed the ruck to Nelson with a smile and backed out the way he came.

Saunders glanced up as the pine branches closed over Littlejohn's grin and shook his head. He closed up the last pack and placed it back in position with a sigh.

"Only a day's worth of rations. Whoever they are, they aren't expecting to be gone from home for long."

Nelson swallowed audibly. "You think we're near a German encampment, Sarge?" He backed away from the pile of rucksacks and slid his rifle from his shoulder, cold fingers sliding over the stock and trigger guard with unconscious familiarity. Wide-eyed, Billy stared between the tree trunks, spinning slowly in place, stopping when he came face-to-face with the sergeant.

Saunders shook his head again. He'd been lost in thought, considering their options and calculating the odds of pulling this mission off. He looked up into Billy's anxious face and then away again, knowing now that their chances of even getting off the mountain were pretty slim.

"The Krauts must be gettin' ready for an offensive. That must be what the Maquis need to give us, the locations and strengths." The sergeant waved a gloved hand over the packs. "All this tells us is we are in deep-" His voice trailed off abruptly as Saunders stood and shoved through the pine limbs, Nelson floundering behind him.

"Okay, listen up. We gotta get rid of the body. If it snows some more-" Saunders looked up as the few errant snowflakes grew in number, falling steadily and thicker with each passing moment as if in answer to his comment. "The snow will cover our tracks but we gotta get rid of him." He gestured toward the dead German with the barrel of his Thompson.

Ames wallowed through the drifts. "Whatcha mean, Sarge? Can't we just cover him up?" The replacement couldn't bring himself to look at the body, his eyes darting every which way before finally settling on Nelson, who was staring at him with an unreadable expression.

"Too risky, Ames. We gotta put him where we know they can't look." Saunders doffed his helmet, quickly scratching his head, and then donned it again, shivering as the few flakes of snow that had managed to land on him melted through his hair. "Littlejohn, Ames. Pick him up an' let's take him back."

Littlejohn moved to the German's head, slipping his arms under the man's shoulders. "Take him back, Sarge? Take him back where?" He grunted under the burden as he stood, trying to balance the dead weight with Ames who staggered back and forth in the snow several times before finally getting his own legs under him.

Saunders waved Nelson to the point. "Back to the snowfield. We're gonna throw him down the mountain."

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The sergeant trailed after his men, keeping a close watch behind them and to their flanks. He had to trust Nelson to keep his eyes and ears open but in all honesty, Saunders knew that trust might be misplaced. He hadn't seen what happened back in the clearing but he knew that all three of his remaining men were shaken by it. *Remaining men.* He gripped the Thompson tighter, forcing himself to focus his attention on the trees. *Where the hell was Cajé?* It seemed a safer subject than, well, it was just safer. Safer still would be to concentrate on the job at hand. He whirled around, his anxiety-heightened senses pulling him in all directions. *Dammit!* He refused to admit to himself that he, too, was shaken, and that it was likely clouding his judgment.

Littlejohn stumbled over a partially buried root, almost falling over backward and taking the dead German with him. He managed to stifle the curses that threatened to tumble from his lips. He looked up at Ames, whose arms were wrapped tightly around the man's legs.

"You okay, Littlejohn?" Ames' eyes were almost perfectly round with tension, his face pale as milk. He panted heavily, tongue hanging out like an old farm dog. Risking a glance over his shoulder at the sergeant, the replacement leaned toward Littlejohn, whispering to him urgently.

“Are we really gonna throw him down the mountain. I mean, Kirby an’ Doc, they...”

He shut up as Saunders laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Keep movin’ an’ pipe down.” Saunders shoved past them, his gaze resolutely on the path ahead. He could feel the ache between his shoulders as the cold set in. At least, he thought it was the cold. It would never have crossed the sergeant’s mind that his own uncertainty, combined with the fears he refused to face, might affect his ability to make decisions. And that those decisions might end up costing them everything.

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The snowfield looked much as it had when they’d first encountered it from the other side. The surface was smooth and pristine, glistening in the watery afternoon light and causing them all to squint despite the dimness of the hour. Shuffling to a halt, Littlejohn and Ames let the dead German slump to the ground between them.

“Jeez, I’m glad he was just a kid. I’d hate to be luggin’ some big-“ Littlejohn let his voice trail off as he caught sight of Ames’ stricken face.

The young replacement didn’t seem at all glad that the German he’d killed had been just a kid. He backed away from the body, rubbing his gloved hands repeatedly up and down his thighs and inadvertently smearing the sticky blood from hip to knee. Rifle slung forgotten across his shoulders, Ames tripped over a ragged tree stump and sat down heavily in the newly drifted snow.

Saunders sighed, coughing lightly into one hand as he caught his own breath. Despite the prior weeks of traipsing around the mountainside, the cold and the altitude still got to him, leaving him exhausted and dizzy. He looked around at his men, biting his lip in consternation.

“Nelson, head upslope a little, keep an eye out.”

Billy straightened up, rolling his shoulders as he grimaced. He nodded once and then set off, shoving his way through the deep snow.

Carefully testing each tree trunk before resting his weight on it, the sergeant worked his way over to the track of the avalanche. He set his feet, bracing them as he leaned out over the drop-off, and stared down the path of destruction.

As far as the sergeant could see, the snow formed a clean ribbon of white, stretching down the mountain toward the fjord and the icy river that first squad had crossed only the night before. Broken off trees lined the way, piles of limbs and small boulders forming an almost impenetrable fence between the snowfield and the surrounding forest. The wind howled down the mountain, whipping the scarf from Saunders’ neck. He grabbed it with one hand, throwing the other out to steady himself as he teetered precariously on the slick pine trunks.

Saunders glanced over his shoulder. “Bring ‘im here, it’s as good a place as any.” He turned sideways on the log, balancing lightly on the balls of his feet.

Littlejohn crouched, sliding his numb hands under the German’s limp body. When Ames didn’t move, the big private looked up at him, one eyebrow raised.

“Ames?”

The replacement barely heard Littlejohn calling to him as he stared at the German. The kid’s eyes had edged open somehow and the visible slice of blue seemed to be looking at him, *accusing* him of something that Ames couldn’t quite get a hold of. He let his own eyes close for a moment, imagining flying through the air over the smooth expanse of snow and then somersaulting down into it, crashing through the thin crust with a palpable thump. *Except the German wouldn’t feel it. Or anything else, ever again.* Ames shivered, wrapping his arms around his chest, and tucked his gloved hands into his armpits.

“Ames!”

Saunders' voice cut across the replacement's jumbled thoughts, hauling him back into the reality of the stark forest with the force of a slap in the face. He jumped to his feet, absently dusting the sticky snow from his rear.

"Come on. Grab his feet, will ya?" Littlejohn shifted the German's weight from one arm to the other, rearranging his grip. As Ames lifted the legs, he straightened, bearing most of the dead man's bulk. Shuffling sideways toward the drop-off, they maneuvered him up and across the logs.

Saunders backed away, one hand on Ames' shoulder.

"That's good, easy, easy. Now-" He took a good hold of the replacement's webbing. "Swing him an' toss him out in the snow."

Ames looked back, eyes filled with despair. "Please, Sarge-"

"Just do it!"

Littlejohn rocked back, taking a deep breath and holding it. He leaned to the right, forcing Ames to lean with him, the dead body swinging away from them. With a mighty heave, they reversed direction, flinging the German across the snow where he landed in a graceless pile of arms and legs.

He doesn't look like he's asleep. Ames swallowed hard against the bile rising in his throat, his belly spasming and bending him double. He could feel the sergeant's knuckles through the thickness of his overcoat and jacket, dimly aware that the man was keeping him from following the body down the slide.

The snow began to churn just uphill of the corpse, tumbling and twisting. It finally fell like waves, crashing over the German and catching him up in its motion, and swept him down the mountain out of view. Within minutes the surface of the snowfield was back to its smooth, mirror-like finish, silent and beautiful and deadly.

Ames sat down suddenly on the sap-sticky pine trunk, his legs incapable of holding him any longer. He dropped his head to his hands, rubbing his gloved thumbs along his temples over and over again. How long he sat there, he didn't know.

"Ames. Saddle up." Saunders stared at the kid, completely at a loss as to how to handle him. At Normandy and countless other battles since then, he'd coaxed and cajoled and ordered young soldiers through their first experiences with death, with killing. Now he felt lost, lost as surely Doc and Kirby were, and maybe Cajé, too. He had no answers for Ames, there were none. There never had been, of course, but before he'd been able to get by on bluster and self-confidence. "Ames?"

The kid looked up at the sergeant with eyes as cold as the frigid air searing their lungs. He climbed stiffly to his feet, unslinging his rifle as he rose. Without a glance at Littlejohn, Ames trudged past him, past Saunders and on up the mountain, following Billy Nelson's boot prints.

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The main body of the avalanche had swept on down the mountain, leaving behind a smooth expanse of clean white snow, randomly dotted here and there with the bright green branches of uprooted pines. A hush had fallen in the wake of its appalling cacophony, as if the raging madness had taken all sound with it, leaving only a cold and desperate void.

Cajé lay under the rope, totally spent from his frantic efforts to untangle himself. His left arm stretched unnaturally above his head and one knee still hung suspended over the line from his last attempt at extrication. Sweat ran from his face, soaking his wool cap and the scarf wadded around his neck. He shivered, eyes closed against the pain that was spreading in rolling waves from his fingers to his aching shoulder.

He had no way of knowing how long he'd been there, caught up in his fight for survival as he was. He'd been vaguely aware of Littlejohn and Saunders conferring urgently and then there was nothing, nothing but the freight train roar of the avalanche and no other sensation but

pain. *And fear.* Cajé moaned at his own admission, his head twisting from side to side in the hard-packed snow beneath his body.

“He’s gotta be around here somewhere.”

The voice, coming as it did from the silent void, startled Cajé, and he flinched violently, causing the rope to tighten further around his arm. A ragged cry tore itself from his throat and he felt himself sinking further into dark oblivion.

“I heard something! Over here! Here he is, Sarge, he’s...oh my god!” Nelson’s boyish voice crept up another octave as he flung himself to the ground at Cajé’s side. “SARGE!” The young private stretched out one trembling hand, wanting to offer comfort, *needing* to comfort but afraid to touch the scout for fear of hurting him more.

Saunders and Littlejohn moved around Billy, shouldering him mindlessly out of the way as they dropped to their knees next to Cajé. Littlejohn grabbed the rope a foot beyond Cajé’s fingers and tugged on it experimentally. He frowned at the sergeant and shook his head imperceptibly. *Stuck fast.*

“Cajé? Cajé?” Saunders slid one arm under the man’s back, supporting him and allowing a small amount of slack to loosen the line. He glanced up at Littlejohn who shook his head again. Aware of Billy hovering behind him, Saunders turned slightly, meeting the kid’s wide eyes.

“Follow that line, find a good place to cut it, we gotta get it offa Cajé now. Ames. AMES! Watch the perimeter.”

The replacement jumped, shocked from the immobility that had frozen him to the spot as he stared at the Cajun hanging under the rope. He fumbled his rifle and almost dropped it, a flood of embarrassment coloring his face. “Yessir, Sergeant, sir, ah, Sergeant.” He scurried away, not looking back.

Nelson rose quickly to his feet, his skin impossibly pale, twin spots of scarlet standing out on the apples of his unlined cheeks. “Okay, Sarge.” He floundered off down the tree line, following the taut rope as he pulled his bayonet from its scabbard.

Cajé came suddenly to life, twisting and fighting the cord that pulled tighter with each contortion. “Don’t cut it, don’t, Kirby, Doc-“ His breath caught in his throat at the flash of steel and Cajé flailed desperately, catching Saunders hard in the belly with one booted foot.

The sergeant fell backwards in the snow, wheezing audibly as he fought to draw in a breath. Littlejohn moved in, grabbing at Cajé to keep him from hurting himself further, his long arms fending off the thrashing legs.

Finally able to speak, Saunders rolled to his knees, staring frantically down the slope at Billy, who stood there, knife at the ready.

“Nelson! Cu-“

Cajé hit the rocky ground with sufficient force to stun him momentarily, long enough for Littlejohn to uncoil the line from his arm and drag him away from the edge of the snowfield. Winded, he tried to sit up, his left arm numb from elbow to fingertips. Grabbing at Littlejohn’s parka with his good hand, Cajé stared up into the big man’s worried eyes, his own almost black with anxiety.

“He cut the rope! He killed Kirby...just let ‘im go...an’ Doc, too!” Cold air knifed its way into his lungs with each rapid breath and Cajé felt the pain spread, pain that had nothing at all to do with his injured arm and everything with the loss of his closest squad mate. *First Theo, now Kirby.* He shoved Littlejohn away and sank back onto the icy trail, oblivious to myriad sharp edges that poked and prodded their way against his body.

“I cut it, Cajé, but look.” Billy stepped into view beyond Littlejohn’s shoulder. He held the Cajun’s M1 in his arms, his own weapon slung across his back. He shrugged at the other men, holding out a short length of rope, one end cut cleanly and the other raveled and torn. “It was already busted, Cajé, caught up in a big ole tree. I just cut it away from the tree.” His normally youthful voice, so full of naïve earnestness, trailed off inaudibly.

Caje rolled over, his wild eyes fixating on Billy with such intensity that the kid took an involuntary step backwards. He spat out his words, pausing between them as his mind struggled to wrap himself around an idea that he refused to accept. Would NOT accept.

"The rope? Was already cut?" Caje gasped as a wave of pain swept up his arm, the returning blood flow bringing with it a torrent of nerve impulses. "You think- Kirby?" He winced, closing his eyes for a second before continuing. "You think Kirby- let go?" He stared into Littlejohn's face, only inches away as the big man strained to hear him.

Saunders shoved his way through the squad, resting one ice-covered boot on a rock and leaning slightly over Littlejohn and Caje where they sat in the snow. As soon as the rope had released his scout, the sergeant had worked his way down through the thick trees to a vantage point where he could see the open slope below. Now he took a brief moment to catch his breath as he cast an appraising eye over Caje.

Littlejohn gently peeled back the Cajun's glove, wincing as Caje moaned and tried to pull away from the big man.

"Caje, I'm sorry, but I gotta see your arm." He looked up at Saunders with a shrug, frowning at his own ineffectual efforts. "I wish Doc was here. He'd already have this taken care of."

His words hung in the air, accentuating the silence left in the wake of the churning snow. Saunders rolled his eyes, wishing that just this once Littlejohn could have kept his thoughts to himself. He felt the weight of the squad's collective gaze and shifted uneasily, knowing the burden was his to carry. He straightened up, patting his pockets down for his cigarettes.

"Listen. I looked down that slope an' there's no way we're gonna find Kirby an' Doc now. We've got to get to the rendezvous." He paused, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply. "Then we head back to find Doc an' Kirby."

Caje sat up awkwardly, clutching his injured arm to his chest. He let Billy support him, the younger man shouldered up against his back. Had he not found his head swimming on his shoulders, an aching pain spreading like fire from his arm through his body, Caje would have been on his feet and in the sergeant's face.

Saunders squinted through the smoke, seeing more in Caje's acceptance of Nelson's assistance than he was sure the scout was aware. The sergeant knew Caje hated to admit any weakness, physical or otherwise. And he also knew that Kirby was the man's closest friend, despite their constant bickering. He waited, knowing what was coming.

"Sarge! We can't just leave them! They might be hurt, they need us!" Now Caje pulled angrily free of Billy's help, glaring darkly over his shoulder. He held his left arm stiffly away from his body, snatching the Garand away from the younger man with his right.

Nelson sat back on his heels, bewildered. He glanced at Littlejohn and saw his helplessness mirrored in the big man's eyes.

Littlejohn leaned forward, attempting to pull back Caje's sleeve again. "Hey, let me look at this, Caje, I'll--"

Caje turned to stare at him, dark eyes simmering with fury. "I can wait until we find Doc." He levered himself to his knees, his quick intake of breath belying his words. He waved off the helping hands of the men encircling him, backing them off with a vicious sweep of the rifle, and faced Saunders. A muscle jumped in his jaw, jumped again before the Cajun clenched his teeth together in a useless effort to control his anxiety as it rapidly spun out of control.

The sergeant frowned, shaking his head. "No, Caje. Doc is gone. Kirby is gone." He took a deliberate step closer to the Cajun, the butt of his weapon snugged up against his bicep. "We have to finish the mission. And after--" Shrugging, Saunders looked directly into Caje's eyes, not backing down an inch.

"But Sarge--"

"No Caje." Saunders slung the Tommy over one shoulder, pulling his map from inside his parka. He deliberately turned his back on the squad, tracing the fingers of one gloved hand

over the grease-penciled marks on the map. Face hidden from his men, Saunders closed his eyes, the familiar tightness rising in his chest. He had no choice. His reconnaissance of the mountain had revealed a path of destruction that continued downhill as far as he could see, a mile or more. Much as he too wanted to find his wayward BAR man and medic, he knew that the situation was probably hopeless. Kirby and Doc would have to find their own way out. *If they were still alive.* He shoved the map back inside his coat. "Littlejohn, fix 'im up. We move out in five minutes."

"Yessir." Littlejohn reached once again for the Cajun's arm only to have the man yank it away, stumbling backwards over his own feet.

"Leave it. Don't...don't touch me." Face almost purple with anger, Cajé flung his M1 over his shoulder, biting back a moan as he automatically reached with his left hand for the butt. He cupped the elbow of his injured arm, hugging it. His gaze slid away from his squad mates, ignoring the pity he saw there, and turned to the snowfield where the surface of the slide had become smooth and unspoiled. *But no longer beautiful.*

All his life, Cajé had looked for just this sort of terrain. Untouched by human passage until his arrival, to be the first ever to leave his mark on wide meandering trails leading down the sides of mountains. He didn't think he'd ever find joy skiing fresh powder again, always wondering what lay beneath the icy surface. Wondering if Kirby was lying under a blanket of snow somewhere downhill, hurt and lost. *Or worse.* He blinked at the sudden moisture in his eyes, swallowing hard. And flinched badly, almost falling over when Saunders appeared right in his face.

"Cajé, we are going now. Saddle up." He turned and strode away, boots confidently placed on the icy path.

"Littlejohn, take the point."

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Two miles down the mountain, the avalanche finally played out its thunderous fury as one million tons of snow gradually lost momentum and drifted to a halt. Thousands of trees, snapped off cleanly and dragged into the maelstrom, rolled and skittered over the white carpet, sliding like toboggans and caroming into one another. A gusty wind from the west stirred the loose surface, picking up granules of ice, and swirled them into the sky, forming a momentary whiteout.

Kirby lay still, facedown in the vast drift piled against a rock ridge where the descending terrain made a sharp cut to the north. Pine needles pattered down on him from the raw and bleeding branches of a tree that had narrowly avoided skewering him as it slammed into the rock. The air fairly shimmered with rainbows as a freak slice of sunlight penetrated the clouds, briefly bouncing off the falling flakes in shards of color then vanishing again, all in the space of a heartbeat.

His first thought was that it was too light to be morning already. His second was that his feet hurt. His third, arriving at the same time as his growing consciousness was that he must be dead and that heaven was an awfully cold place. Shoving his arms under his chest, Kirby cautiously raised his head, the pine straw sliding around his ears and lodging in the upturned collar of his parka.

Spitting snow from his mouth, Kirby took a deep breath, filling his oxygen-starved lungs with painfully frigid air. He just couldn't be alive. It was too quiet. Too beautiful. Too alone...

"DOC!"

The name echoed right back at him, bouncing off the rim of the rocky crest and repeating faintly into the crevasse beyond. Kirby floundered to his knees, ignoring the bright flare of pain in his flank, and stared around him, appalled at the seamless white expanse of

smooth snow that stretched from where he'd fetched up against the mica-encrusted granite both up and down the mountain. No sign of Doc, or any other living thing, for that matter. Struggling to control his breathing, Kirby fought down the rising bile in his throat, fought the panic that surged through him like cold fire.

"Doc?" Hesitant this time.

Kirby reached for the BAR still tightly cinched to his back, forcing his head and shoulder under the strap and bringing the weapon into a more useful position. He welcomed the comfort the heft of it brought him, the courage he automatically assumed when behind its sights. The pain in his back receded, fading into the background of Kirby's thoughts as he scanned the area, wondering just when he'd lost his grip on the medic's webbing.

Kirby's gloved hand slid under Doc's suspenders, his fingers closing tightly over the strap, linking them together as the waves of snow tumbled over them. Caught in the vicious riptide, Kirby knew it was only a matter of time before he'd let go of the guideline. As the strength in his fingers slackened and his fist opened, the rope snapping away, Kirby had felt only one thing – a deep and aching sorrow. Somersaulting down the mountain, tangled up with Doc's flailing limbs, he'd inexplicably found the time to imagine the squad standing on the far side of the path, their faces drawn by shock as Kirby and Doc vanished in the tumult.

Shaking his head, Kirby forced himself to let go of those images playing unbidden in his mind. He had more immediate concerns right now. Like, *where the hell was Doc?*

With a little experimentation, Kirby managed to wallow around without sinking completely into the drifts, his movements slow and deliberate. He crushed his innate desire to hurry, knowing that for once in his life William G. Kirby was gonna have to be careful, was gonna have to think about what he was doing without rushing in like the fool he had always felt he was.

Kirby knew he'd never make it further uphill. He had so much area to search anyway, it just didn't matter. The odds of him finding Doc were so small that he stood stock still for a brief moment, wondering if he should even try. The sudden shame that slammed into his brain convinced him otherwise. He muttered to himself as he traversed the edges of the ridge, trying not to look over it into the endless abyss beyond. The thought of the medic hurtling over the bank was too horrifying to contemplate.

"I need him. My back hurts. My feet hurt. I am NOT gonna be out here alone, so help me..."

There! A slight rise in the blanket of snow caught Kirby's eye and he slid his way over the icy crust, easing his way past a scraggly pine. His breath hung in the air, drifting from his nostrils and his mouth as he struggled to control his breathing. *Please be Doc, please be Doc.*

Crimson blood pooled in the upturned palm of a disembodied hand extending through the snow, small rivulets spilling slowly between the lifeless fingers and staining the white surface. Kirby abandoned his stealthy approach and launched himself through the air, landing in the drift with all the grace of a moose on ice skates. He dug into the snow with his bare hands, only now realizing that he'd lost his gloves and not caring.



"Come on, Doc, ya gotta be alive!" Kirby scrabbled at the snow, flinging it behind him. It only took several seconds to uncover the medic; an eternity during which Kirby would later swear his heart quit beating altogether. He leaned in close, feeling Doc's warm breath on his cheek. His eyes closed briefly while he fought off the darker thoughts, pushing them to the far recesses of his mind for now.

Doc lay in the snow, arms and legs spread-eagled like a rag doll thrown to the floor by a petulant child. He could have been sleeping, save for the bloodstain spreading around his left arm and the bruise on his right temple.

Raising one hand to his own head, Kirby felt a matching knot and winced, suddenly recalling the collision that had caused him to see stars and the medic to fall limp within his grasp. He nodded ruefully, chewing on his lower lip. *THAT'S when I let go of him.*

Shifting his attention to Doc's injured arm, Kirby gently peeled back the sleeve, noting with a grimace the substantial wound that tore through the muscle, leaving raw and bleeding tissue. *Jesus Christ.* He took a deep breath and unbuttoned his parka, patting down his jacket pockets for his field dressing and sulfa packet. To his great surprise, they were right where they should be. He turned Doc's arm, not noticing the fluttering eyelids signaling the medic's slow return to consciousness.

Frowning with concentration, the wiry private slit Doc's parka with his bayonet, grimacing at the blood-slick material and the way it felt both warm and cold. He shuddered with revulsion, wondering how the medic dealt with this stuff without losing his lunch. Not that Kirby remembered lunch, or breakfast, or much of anything prior to the wild ride down the mountain. He sighed, wondering where his gloves were, where Doc's gloves were, and whatever else they may have lost in the churning snow.

The wound seemed huge, a ragged cavity midway between wrist and elbow. The blood welled from it, pulsing in time to Kirby's own heartbeat and he swallowed hard, knowing he had to stop the flow if Doc was to have any chance at all. Kirby's lower back was aching, gnawing at him with increasing fierceness. He shifted from one knee to the other, trying to ignore his own discomfort.

Sulfa, sulfa, sulfa. Kirby tore the top from the packet and sprinkled the powder liberally over the bloody gash, eyes dark with concentration. He gnawed his lower lip as he unwound the dressing and gently slid one end under Doc's arm, pulling it smoothly over the gaping wound, and prepared to tie it in a knot. He could hear his pulse in his ears now and closed his eyes briefly, wishing forlornly that he'd listened to the medic that morning and stayed in camp. Shaking his head, Kirby opened his eyes just in time to catch a flash of movement.

"HOLYMOTHEROFGODWHATTHEHELLHAPPENED?"

Doc sat up, his good arm swinging wildly and serendipitously connecting with Kirby's jaw, sending the smaller man sprawling in the snow. The medic's blue eyes were wide with panic, his pupils dilated hugely. Panting, he stared at Kirby, confusion flooding through him, feeding on the rapid influx of adrenaline.

Kirby propped himself up on his elbows, mouth hanging open. He'd never heard the medic swear, in fact had hardly ever heard him string so many words together at one time. Leaning to one side, he raised a hand to his jaw, rubbing it ruefully as he felt a smile spread across his face. Despite the biting wind driving needles of ice into his exposed skin, the knowledge that they were completely and utterly lost and despite the odds on their survival swinging closer to zero and none – William G. Kirby's day was looking up.

"Nice of you to join the party, Doc. Have a nice nap?"

One eyebrow notched itself upward a fraction as Doc struggled to understand Kirby's casual words. He shivered, finally recognizing that he was outside in the snow, helmetless, gloveless and in some considerable pain. What forces had led him here he couldn't remember, but first things first.

"You okay, Kirby?"

Kirby stared at the medic, dark eyes perfectly round with astonishment. And then he began to laugh, great snorts of laughter that grew in his belly and forced their way out of his open mouth, ringing in the clear mountain air. *Was HE okay? Doc asked if HE was okay?* He clutched at his aching back, one arm awkwardly pressed into his flank like a little old man and the other wrapped tightly around his ribs. *I feel like Granpa Kirby when his lumbago was actin'*

up. Drawing in a deep, cautious breath, the private collected himself, trying desperately to imbue the situation with the seriousness it deserved.

And failed miserably, falling over in the snow, howling with mirth.

Doc shook his head slowly, totally perplexed. He could only assume that whatever had happened to them, it must have involved a fairly severe blow to Kirby's head. And something—something about his own arm. A tidal wave of pain crashed over the medic, engulfing him suddenly and completely and he vomited in the snow, emptying his stomach of the meager K-rations he'd consumed back at the snowfield and then bile and then nothing but dry heaves. For a long time Doc huddled on his knees, eyes closed and body shaking. It took awhile for him to become aware of Kirby's supporting arm across his back, Kirby's whiny voice oddly low and soothing, inexplicably telling him that everything was okay. Even in his twilight state of consciousness, Doc knew the man was lying.

"Doc? Doc, I gotta finish this dressin' on your arm. It's bleedin' some and I gotta tighten it up." Kirby gently shoved the medic back into the snow and quickly completed the job before Doc could gain enough wherewithal to argue with him.

Aware of Kirby's ministrations but unable to summon the energy to sit up, Doc watched his squad mate's face, taking note of each grimace and puzzled frown. He couldn't remember how they had come to be there, alone and apparently lost. *Where's Caje, Littlejohn, Billy? An' that replacement, what was his name? An' the Sarge, where's the Sarge?* Doc's mind drifted, easing here and there through his fragmented memories until he suddenly connected, his blue eyes widening with shock.

"Kirby!" The sudden, burning pain lancing from his arm to his shoulder slammed him to the ground, forcing the breath from his lungs and leaving him prone in the snow, sliding inexorably towards unconsciousness and away from Kirby and the safety of the guide rope. His eyes met Kirby's as the BAR man lunged at him, his hand hooking Doc's webbing and closing tight. As the snow fell over them, he thought he heard Kirby ask him something, but the words were lost, lost forever in the thunder of the avalanche.

"What happened?" Doc rubbed his temple gently with his right hand, wincing as he encountered the swelling over his eye. "I mean, I know the mountain pretty much fell on us, but before that?" He frowned, his eyebrows pulling together unevenly and giving him an oddly lopsided expression.

Kirby blinked, pausing in his efforts to pull the tattered pieces of Doc's sleeve over the bandage. "I dunno, Doc. I just dunno." He eased the medic into a sitting position, leaning him carefully against the denuded trunk of a fir, one of hundreds piled up against the ridge in a wild tangle.

Doc cradled his left arm cautiously in his right, teeth tightly clenched together. He watched Kirby stretch cautiously, and felt his medic's intuition creeping up and niggling at the edges of his awareness. *Kirby's hurt, but hidin' it.* He sighed, letting it go for the moment. "I don't remember gettin' shot. That IS a gunshot you're wrappin' up?"

Kirby nodded, finishing his bandaging efforts by winding his scarf tightly around Doc's sleeve and knotting it securely. He swallowed hard, shoving the queasiness roiling around in his guts back where it belonged, hoping that it would stay there. "Yeah, I guess it is. There was a shot from...oh, I dunno where. Just a shot." Kirby squinted his eyes shut and pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, sending off little sparks in the darkness of his vision.

"Kirby? Kirby, where are Sarge an' the others? Do ya think they got clear of the avalanche? On the other side, I mean?" His voice was full of both hope and skepticism, not quite the generous measure of confidence he usually managed to project. *You'll be all right. Naw, it's just a scratch. Sarge, this man needs a real doctor now!* Doc cleared his throat, more a cough really, and swallowed hard against the sudden lump he found there.

Kirby looked up, dark eyes full of resigned misery. He glanced away, pretending to be interested in the jumble of tree trunks strewn across the snowy mountainside. "I dunno. I hope

so.” He scratched his cheek, frowning at the numbness in his fingers, and waggled them idly in front of his eyes, staring at the bloodstains he hadn’t been able to completely scrub away in the snow. He’d not let himself think about the rest of the squad, *safe, please let them be safe!* on the far side of the snow field. Kirby wasn’t sure if he should be jealous or relieved. On the one hand, he and Doc were out of the mission. On the other, he and Doc were both hurt and lost and cold and a long way from camp. *And Sarge is down two men.*

The silence wrapped itself around them as each considered what was becoming an increasingly dire situation. The light was changing as the clouds tumbled in the sky, shadows lengthening and new snow threatening in the form of tiny flakes carried almost sideways in the wind.

“Kirby?”

Kirby turned to look at the corpsman. Something in Doc’s voice lulled him from his own desperate thoughts, something quiet and reassuring. He realized for maybe the first time how much he depended on Doc’s calm, supportive manner, how much they all did. Somewhere in his gambler’s heart of hearts, he’d always acknowledged the man for the steadfast anchor that he was, but Kirby had never given it a moment’s conscious thought.

Doc reached with his good hand for Kirby’s elbow. “Lemme take a look at your back, okay?” He struggled to his knees, pausing for a moment as pain washed over him. A wave of dizziness blurred his vision and Doc felt himself falling, tumbling in the white emptiness of the avalanche. He shook his head and the feeling lifted, leaving him crouched there in the snow, staring stupidly into Kirby’s dark eyes.

“It’s nothin’, Doc. I thought I got shot, but now-“ He gestured vaguely at Doc’s arm, shrugging his shoulders. And wincing at the pain that movement generated in his flank. He let the medic turn him, blowing out a brief burst of pent up air that he’d held in his lungs as Doc’s capable right hand pressed lightly over his lower back.

A smear of blood on the back of Kirby’s parka drew Doc’s attention to the small hole, centered just under the man’s left-side ribs. He leaned closer, shaking his head. The red stain surrounded the neat puncture, but didn’t intrude into the opening at all.

“Not much blood here, Kirby an’ it don’t look like it came from *inside* your coat. But there’s definitely a bullet hole. Let’s slip your gear off an’ take a look.” He reached for the buckles on Kirby’s suspenders, blue eyes widening with astonishment as Kirby lurched backwards, falling over sideways in the snow.

“The hell you will, Doc! It’s freezin’ out here, in case you didn’t notice!” He clutched his parka tighter around himself, glaring at Doc darkly. His voice squeaked up an octave or so, giving him the outward demeanor of a teenage girl in defense of her honor.

He couldn’t help himself. Doc laughed, and once he started, Kirby couldn’t help but join in. The medic knew it wasn’t necessarily a good thing, that the two of them were probably just this side of hysteria, but gosh if it didn’t feel great. After a few minutes, breathless, red-faced and wiping tears from his eyes, Doc managed to convince Kirby to peel back just enough of his layers to examine the man’s back.

“Well. Ya got a bruise here. A pretty good one, right over your kidney. But no bullet hole. No bleedin’. Hey wait!”

He stretched out his right hand for Kirby to see. A slug of lead lay there, misshapen and slick with blood. Kirby picked it up, frowning.

“Where’d you find this?”

“Fell out between your coat an’ your jacket. Damnedest thing. It went through your coat but just bruised ya. Figure that one out!” Doc raised an eyebrow, shrugging awkwardly with one shoulder. The snow was already settling thickly on the hood of his parka and it fell across his face as he ducked his head.

Kirby stood, wrapping his own parka around himself. He looked down at Doc, surprised that for once he’d already figured it out and the corpsman hadn’t. “Doc. This bullet, it’s, it’s the

one that went through your arm.” He looked down at the slug, poking at it with one finger. “Guess it slowed down enough, well-“ His voice trailed off, embarrassment creeping across his cheekbones in a red wash.

Doc sat back on his heels, his face suddenly grey. He fought down the desire to vomit again, aware that he had absolutely nothing in his stomach and that his abdominal muscles were already aching. Staring at the thing in Kirby’s hand, he managed to get his guts under control, reminding himself that he’d seen hundreds of bullets, hundreds of bullet wounds and just because this particular piece of ammo had taken a detour through his own body was no reason that he should view it any differently. Spitting a mouthful of bitter saliva into the snow, Doc pulled himself together, trying desperately to smile up at Kirby.

“Hey.” His throat felt thick, gravelly. “Kirby, it’s your lucky charm.”

Kirby snorted. “Lucky? I don’t feel too lucky. I feel like I’ve been ballet dancin’ in a cement mixer.” He palmed the bullet, shoving his hand deeply into his pocket. For a moment, he stood there, letting his fingers enjoy a slight respite from the wind. The BAR was slung over his shoulder and Kirby was starting to feel itchy, exposed. Whoever fired that shot might consider hiking down the path of the avalanche, looking for survivors. He thought it unlikely, but then again, everything that had happened this day had been outside what Kirby considered normal.

He stretched out a hand, pulling Doc shakily to his feet. He held him by the elbow a moment while the medic wobbled, getting his legs under him. With a gentleness that surprised even himself, Kirby carefully tucked Doc’s injured arm into his coat. After using the only scarf they had left as a makeshift bandage, there’d been nothing for a sling. Kirby made a quick mental inventory of the things they’d lost. Helmets. Gloves. Doc’s scarf. Their wool caps. Doc’s medical pouch and canteens. What they did have was more important. The BAR and all his ammunition, the magazines still inexplicably tucked in pouches on his ammo belt. *Well, if we get cold enough we can always shoot each other.*

Doc stared over the ridge a moment, fighting vertigo as his gaze dropped lower and lower without finding the bottom of the crevasse. He closed his eyes briefly and turned away, careful not to open them again until his back was to the abyss. *So close, so close.* Why they’d not plummeted over the edge Doc would never understand.

Dark eyes met with blue. Kirby nodded once and turned toward the trees on the downhill side of the slide. He glanced over his shoulder to see the medic following carefully in his footsteps, wounded arm held tightly to his chest. *Hope someone’s lookin’ out for us, Doc, ‘cause we ain’t got a snowball’s chance in Hell.* He gripped the BAR tighter, cocking his head back to catch Doc’s muttered words.

“Kirby? I never knew you were a ballet dancer.”

*** *** ***

Littlejohn shifted his rifle restlessly, squeezing the fingers of his right hand into a tight fist in a futile attempt to relieve the numbness brought on by the cold. The snow had finally stopped, but the temperature had dropped another ten degrees, leaching the heat out of bodies already pushed beyond their limits. The big private shrugged his parka higher on his shoulders and continued slogging through the knee-high drifts some twenty yards downhill of the path.

The squad had been moving steadily for the last several hours, stopping only for a few short breaks to drink the scant water not yet frozen in their canteens and to allow Caje to rest. The scout still refused to let anyone look at his arm. His face, pale and drawn under the bill of his wool cap and helmet, confirmed the pain he denied. His useless Garand hung over his shoulder, slapping at the backs of his thighs with each step. Clutching his injured arm, the Cajun doggedly trudged on.

Saunders called another halt, moving away from the little group and pulling the map from inside his overcoat. By his reckoning, they had to be almost at the rendezvous site. He could only pray the Maquis were still there, waiting for their tardy American amis and not captured by the roving Germans. Saunders was well aware of the patrol they'd left behind and the fact that the young Kraut's body must have been discovered by now. He had to assume they were being pursued and that the actions of first squad might bring down the wrath of the Third Reich on the beleaguered resistance band.

Stuffing the map back into his coat, Saunders turned to look at his men, his gaze falling on each of them in turn. Littlejohn, still trying to cajole Cajé into letting him bandage the obviously injured arm. Nelson, M1 at the ready and watching the perimeter without being told. His innocence lost at the moment his gun jammed, Billy wasn't about to let anything else happen to them if he had any say in it.

Saunders shook his head, sorrow warring with relief in his heart. Billy had kept his boyish exuberance far longer than anyone had a right to expect. Why did it hurt so now to see him assume the posture of a seasoned soldier?

He turned his attention to Ames, crouched in the snow, shoulders rounded as he wrapped his arms around himself, warding off the cold. Ames had changed, too, no longer the chatterbox Saunders had to continually shush. The circles under his eyes only accentuated the distance in his gaze as the replacement stared off into the trees.

And Cajé, his wounded arm hanging limply at his side. The most reliable member of the squad, stalwart and taciturn, Cajé was the man Saunders knew he could always depend on, no matter what the situation. Now Cajé was the wild card, his dark eyes blank and unseeing.

The sergeant sighed, watching the thin needle of the compass swing wildly back and forth before settling into a steady direction. They had no choice but to move on. The avalanche had decided that. Saunders shoved the compass into his pocket and readjusted his gloves, his right hand coming to rest on the barrel of the Thompson. Rejoining his men, he got them to their feet without a word, indicating to Nelson to take the point. They moved out, five silent shadows in the darkening forest.

*** *** ***

an hour later...

Cajé shivered in the small hollow he'd made for himself at the base of an enormous pine tree. Taking advantage of the steep pitch of the terrain at the rendezvous point, he'd managed to kick a hole in a snowdrift large enough to hide his entire body. As he was incapable of using his weapon, there was no need for him to clear a field of fire. All Cajé had to do was lie low. And it weighed on him heavily.

The waning afternoon light turned the snow flat grey, leaving no visual clues to aid in depth perception. The scout idly stared at a low-hanging limb, its needles encased in crystal sheaths of ice. For a moment he felt he could stretch out and grab the branch, shaking it free of its burden and sending it snapping skyward. With a start, Cajé realized that the tree was more than twenty feet away and far out of reach. He blinked, fatigue washing over him in numbing waves.

Kirby. *Kirby!* Hugging his injured arm gently across his chest, Cajé fought the memories that kept forcing themselves to the forefront of his attention. The image of Kirby's face, eyes wide and mouth a silent "o" as he'd looked up into the oncoming wall of snow, played over and over behind Cajé's dark eyes. The scout had risen to his feet, still clutching the guide rope, rising as if to affect some sort of rescue and make a difference to what was already an inevitable event. He'd known from the start what a risk the crossing would be. They'd all known. But the knowledge didn't offer him any comfort.

A small metallic clink drew him from his thoughts, jangling his nerves and slamming white-hot shards of pain from shoulder to fingers. Biting his lip to keep from moaning aloud, Cajé pressed himself further into his icy hideout, turning in the direction of the noise but not revealing so much as the top of his helmet.

“Cajé?”

Saunders’ voice seemed to directly address his left ear, so soft that the Cajun wasn’t quite sure at first if he’d conjured up the sergeant or if the man was really there. He flinched away, turning to find Saunders curled tightly over one bent knee, camo helmet squarely on his head for once. Cajé regarded him levelly, dark eyes boring into the sergeant’s. He was embarrassed to have been caught unaware in his musings. More so, Cajé was mortified to have been caught, period. Especially by Saunders, a man Cajé had learned to trust and depend on. *And whose approval he still sought, despite having proved himself over and over in the deadly French countryside.*

The sergeant moved closer to Cajé, turning his body so that he faced out of the little snow cave. His wary gaze slid from shadow to shadow, the barrel of the Tommy following each potential target. Satisfied for the moment, Saunders glanced at the Cajun, swallowing down the anger and irritation he’d felt toward the man earlier. He knew only too well how Cajé was feeling. After all, he’d stood at the edge of the snowfield and watched two of his men vanish in the thundering violence of an avalanche. *Bullets, grenades, mines...* Saunders had seen all manner of ways in which a man’s life could be summarily ended. This cruel act of nature seemed somehow more horrific by its very randomness. Any of them could have been out there, clinging to the guide rope. *Or none of them.* He shook his head, reaching out one gloved hand to pat Cajé’s uninjured shoulder.

“Keep your head down.”

Saunders left the shelter at a crouch, gliding in and out of the trees, not looking back at the scout.

*** *** ***

Where was Aramis?

The sergeant paused next to a particularly dense copse of bushes and hunkered down, his aching ankles complaining about the additional strain. He felt the snow slowly give under his boots, forcing him to shift from one leg to the other. Finally Saunders dropped to his knees, the icy cold penetrating the thick wool of his trousers and settling into joints already numb and sore from the relentless pace of the day.

Glancing back over his shoulder toward Cajé’s position, Saunders absently patted his pockets, his stiff and gloved fingers finding the cigarettes and then dropping again to the Thompson. *I’d kill for a smoke.* He blinked, realizing that that was exactly what he was going to have to do to get one. *Kill somebody.* Some kid, like the one they’d thrown down the mountain.

Saunders wasn’t a particularly sentimental man. He wasn’t given to thinking too much about what he’d done in the course of a day, rarely if ever second-guessing himself. It was a quality that allowed him to sleep at night, knowing that he’d done what he had to do, to protect his men and the mission. It was also the thing that made his men so loyal to him, a fact that scared Saunders beyond any torture dreamed up by the Nazis. HE’D sent each man across that snowfield today. Doc and Kirby wouldn’t have been out there had he not given the order to cross. The sole responsibility for what had happened rested squarely on his exhausted shoulders.

Saunders wasn’t sure if he’d ever sleep again.

Climbing wearily to his feet, the sergeant forced his way further downhill, wallowing through drifts higher than his shoulders. He knew he was in the right place, the landmarks matched up perfectly. Despite the avalanche and the detour to track down the German shooter,

they were on time for the rendezvous. Saunders shoved back his sleeve to peer at his watch again.

Where was Aramis?

And more importantly, *where was that German patrol?*

*** *** ***

Littlejohn looked at his watch, tapping gently on the crystal with his index finger. Holding the timepiece up to his ear, he impatiently tugged the hood of his overcoat back so he could ascertain that it was, indeed, ticking. He shrugged, raising one eyebrow in answer to Ames' unspoken question. Flattening out again in the snow, Littlejohn returned his attention to the empty trail below him and tried not to notice the numbness creeping into his nether regions.

Ames coughed lightly into his gloves, his M1 balanced across the tops of his wrists. His head turned slowly from left to right, looking for any sign of movement, either Resistance or enemy. At this point, he wasn't sure which scared him the most.

"How long?" The replacement's hoarse whisper was startlingly loud. He flinched at Littlejohn's grimace, ducking his head down so low he could barely see over the dead pine trunk he'd chosen to shelter behind.

Littlejohn started to answer him, holding out a couple of fingers when his head whipped around, wide eyes staring into the depths of the forest. A long moment passed as the big man listened intently, straining to hear over the pounding of his own heart.

He turned suddenly, looking straight into Ames' startled face. His lips moved, but no sound accompanied the words.

They're coming.

Ames swallowed hard, nodding without realizing he'd done so. He rolled over in the snow, away from Littlejohn and past the end of the dead tree. From this vantage point he could see Billy some thirty yards away on the other side of the path. More importantly, Ames could see the kid watching him closely. He signaled him, keeping his hands low.

Nelson nodded and turned away from the path, melting into the pattern of the trees, and disappeared from view.

*** *** ***

Caje gingerly rolled back his sleeve from his left hand. He hadn't looked at the injury before, knowing full well that if he did, Saunders or Littlejohn would be right there, sticking their noses in his business. *Well, DOC'S business if the truth be told, but Doc wasn't here and...* The scout forced his thoughts to trail off. He just couldn't believe it. Kirby and Doc, both gone. Kirby, one of the few men he'd allowed close enough to become a friend. Doc, the most honest and compassionate man he'd ever met. *Gone.*

With a sigh, Caje studied his swollen wrist, frowning at the purpled flesh. Gently tugging his glove off, he stared at the streaks that extended well down his bloated fingers where the skin had been peeled back like a ripe banana. Oddly, the wound hadn't bled. He tried to move his hand and almost fainted with the agony that burst from his fingers and shot like a rocket straight to his shoulder. Leaning his head back into the snowy bark of the pine, Caje closed his eyes, willing himself to stay conscious and alert. He may not be able to fire a rifle, but...

"MERDE!"

The sudden volley of M1 fire crashed against his eardrums, reverberating over and over. Caje found himself on his knees, desperately trying to pull his glove back over the maimed fingers. Bile rose in the back of his throat and his vision greyed as the pain tore its way into his head. He clenched his teeth, his jaw aching with the effort he imposed on himself.

Clawing at his back with his good hand for the Garand, Caje slipped in the icy snow, rolling over and over as he tried to free the weapon. It took several moments for him to realize that he could hear answering German fire and voices shouting in two languages in what seemed to be complete chaos. The rifle remained strapped firmly to his back, despite his one-handed efforts to haul it around into firing position. He crawled back to his shelter, now knowing that no amount of resolve would enable him to join in the fight.

*** *** ***

Nelson leveled his M1, blinking furiously against the sheen of tears brought on by the biting wind. So far, he'd not fired a single shot, biding his time until the Germans were totally focused on Littlejohn and Ames who were maintaining a solid wall of lead against the advancing enemy. The German scout had fallen immediately, arms flung wide as he flopped backward into the crimson-stained snow. Behind him, another man had staggered, grabbing at his thigh and grimacing in sudden pain. He'd managed to crawl behind a stout tree trunk but hadn't returned any fire. Nelson edged to his left, one eye on the wounded Kraut.

...five, six, seven.....eight. Biting his lip in frustration, Billy almost missed the blur of motion just to his rear. As it was, Saunders was almost on top of him before he could swing his rifle around. Allowing himself to fall flat on his back in the snow, the young private fought to slow down his breathing, staring wildly back at his sergeant's oddly calm blue eyes. "How many?" Saunders inclined his head toward the German patrol as he slithered behind the cover of a dead fall. He checked his weapon briefly then glanced back at Nelson. He repeated his question. "How many?"

Nelson twisted his neck backwards, his eyes rolling upwards until only the whites showed. "Eight. Well, seven now, they got the point man. There's another injured, I dunno if he's okay or not. He's not firin'." He flipped over onto his stomach. "Sarge?"

The sergeant checked his field of fire, one knee drawn up under him. Glancing upslope in the general direction of Ames and Littlejohn, Saunders nodded to himself as he pulled a full magazine from his pocket and wedged it between two of the dead trees. He looked up at Nelson, only vaguely aware that the man was asking him a question. One blonde eyebrow hiked its way upward.

The younger man swallowed hard. "You think they're gonna fall for it? Come this way?" His fingers tightened on his rifle, hugging it to his chest.

Saunders nodded once, left hand waving Nelson off. "They have to. Now move off a little, just to that tree over there." He pointed and then settled into his own position, staring down the length of the submachine gun. And waited.

*** *** ***

Glancing over his shoulder at Ames to ensure that he was still firing, Littlejohn took a moment to slam a fresh clip into his M1. Scrunching down still further in his position, he recommenced his assault on the German patrol. As he peered around the end of the pile of felled trees, Littlejohn muttered a grateful prayer that they'd been the first ones there. Without the advantage of the elevation, the German patrol was initially forced into grabbing whatever cover they could and firing back blindly. Unfortunately for them, Ames and Littlejohn had them pinned down between the sheer rock face upslope and the treacherous drifts below. Littlejohn smiled grimly as he managed to pick off another of the Krauts, smoothly shifting his sights to his next target. *One less for Sarge and Billy to worry about!*

*** *** ***

Caje held himself as still as possible, straining to hear above the ear-numbing racket of the firefight. He hadn't heard the staccato stuttering of the sergeant's Thompson yet and wondered why, the worry rising like quicksilver within him. He considered moving from his refuge and finding a better vantage point but knew it would be a useless and perhaps dangerous idea given the state of his arm. Carefully cupping his elbow with his right hand, Caje cradled his mangled fingers, his thoughts clouded by the overriding pain.

"Mon ami, my friend! America, America!"

Falling over backwards in surprise, Caje scrambled to his knees, his dark eyes wide with astonishment. He stared at the apparition that had turned up without warning on the side of a mountain during both a snowstorm AND a heated exchange of lead between the Germans and the Americans.

The man winced at a particularly loud volley of gunfire, as he leaned forward, hands on his knees, and peered at Caje, his frown accentuating the gaunt hollows in his cheeks and the multiple gaps between his badly discolored teeth. He wore a tattered greatcoat that might have been any color originally but which was now faded to an indiscriminate grey. Wrapped around his thin waist was a worn leather belt and a stained holster that contained a revolver the likes of which Caje had never seen. The remains of a pair of ancient hiking boots clung to his feet and ankles, aided with strips of torn fabric tied with elaborate knots. On his head perched a huge Russian fur hat, the flaps sticking straight out over his ears. A straggly beard covered the lower half of the man's face, unkempt and untrimmed, which only added to his general air of ill health. He leaned in further, his breath hot in Caje's face as he awkwardly embraced the Cajun, apparently not noticing the wide-eyed panic his gesture triggered.

<"I thought you weren't coming, I thought you were dead, swept away in the avalanche."> The stranger tucked himself in next to Caje, reaching up to tug down the earflaps of his enormous hat.

Caje could only shake his head, backing away from the man until the tree behind him halted his progress. The sudden burst of automatic gunfire downhill from the Cajun's position made both of them flinch, two pairs of eyes turning to stare into the shadowy forest.

The stranger fingered the worn holster, unsnapping it and allowing his hand to rest on the cold metal grip of the ancient pistol. "Vous êtes américain ?" His voice shook slightly, more than could be accounted for by the cold. Swallowing hard, he curled up in the limited space afforded him and winced at the next prolonged barrage.

Glancing at the man, Caje suddenly realized that he'd forgotten the lost band of resistance fighters, lost as he was himself in a fog of pain and agitation over his inability to help his squad mates. He hugged his arm tighter to his chest in the close quarters, afraid the newcomer might hug him again. He nodded and cleared his throat.

<"Yes, I'm American, we're Americans. You are Aramis?"> Hearing his own words, Caje could only assume that he was going into shock from his injury. What was he thinking, giving the man the name of their contact? He hoped that his intuition wasn't wrong, that the obviously terrified Frenchman was indeed a member of the Maquis.

With an audible sigh, the man leaned his head back against the tree, eyes closed in apparent relief. <"Thank God, thank God! Yes, I am Aramis."> He scrunched down again, his neck telescoping turtlelike into the folds of his scarf as another torrent of gunfire echoed through the forest. Shivering hard, Aramis curled his mittened fingers into his palms and tucked his fists into his armpits.

Caje could only stare at him. The man had two arms and legs that appeared in working order. He had a weapon, although it looked as though it belonged in a museum rather than on a battlefield. The rattling of Saunders' Thompson tore through the chill mountain air, startling Caje. He struggled to his knees, fighting the involuntary moan that rose in his throat as he jostled his swollen hand.

<"You've got a pistol, you must help them!"> Reaching up with his good hand, Cajé snugged his helmet tighter, risking a quick glance past the edge of his snowy hideout. Despite the racket uphill, the snowy forest surrounding the two men lay in peaceful beauty. Cajé stared a moment longer, wanting desperately to join in the fight. He turned back to the resistance fighter, snarling at the man.

<"HELP THEM!">

Aramis shook his head, patting the old pistol with one hand and shoving the other into a voluminous pocket. Withdrawing it, he turned his palm up, revealing two solitary bullets. He smiled a little at Cajé, shrugging his thin shoulders.

<"I only have the two bullets, mon ami.">

Cajé stared at him, mouth hanging open in shock.

The resistance fighter poked gently at the lead slugs with his index finger, his expression inexplicably sad. He sighed, then lifted his gaze to the Cajun's, for once his faded brown eyes steady and not darting away.

<"And I believe one of them is to be saved for myself.">

*** *** ***

Billy slowly swung the M1 from left to right, dislodging the snow from the tree branch on which he rested the barrel. One eye closed, he sighted along its length, waiting for a target. Although he couldn't see him, Nelson could feel Saunders' presence, some twenty feet to his left. Knowing his sergeant was there lent him a confidence he hadn't been able to find in himself since the incident with the young German soldier. He took a deep breath, blinking rapidly to dispel the image of the kid's dead face *looking at him*, accusing him. *Oh God...*

Sporadic firing continued above them, Littlejohn and Ames apparently both still in the game. The German fire had tapered off to a token shot here and there. Saunders squinted into the gently falling snow, straining to see the shadowy figures he knew had to be there, had to be coming this way. He blinked a few times to dislodge flakes that settled heavily on his eyelashes. Leaning his head against his shoulder, he gently scratched his cheek, not taking his eyes off the interlacing trees.

Nelson saw them first, his body trembling violently as the first of the German patrol eased into view. He held the stock of his rifle tighter against his shoulder, forcing himself to control the adrenaline racing through his veins. *One, two, three...* When Billy got to six he fired, dropping the lead man and winging the one behind him. He could hear the Thompson clattering away to his left and saw another man go down, arms flung wide with the impact.

Chips flew up all around Saunders as he rolled away from his original position, snow and pine needles showering down as the remaining Germans drew a bead on him. Ducking under a deadfall, he came up firing and silenced another two of the enemy. A second M1 joined Nelson's, and Saunders took advantage of the added manpower to shove a fresh magazine into his weapon. Peering around the trunk of a sizeable pine, he counted three Krauts still firing. Drawing his knees up under him, he prepared to charge up the hill in a final assault.

*** *** ***

Littlejohn shuffled forward in the snow on his hands and knees, flattening himself out as he accidentally flushed a small nesting bird. It rose up furiously in his face, flapping its wings and squawking in indignation. He closed his eyes, expecting a storm of gunfire but was pleasantly surprised to find none directed his way. Instead, the Germans focused toward the downslope location of Saunders and Nelson. After a few moments of relative silence, the big private moved again, working his way to the bend in the trail where he and Ames had ambushed the Germans.

An arm and leg were visible under the outstretched branches of a chewed up pine tree, its needles forcefully shed by the hail of bullets fired by the Americans. Littlejohn waited a moment, unsure if the Krauts would have left someone behind to watch their backs as they attempted to outflank the assault. Just as he prepared to move in, he saw the man, crouched in the darkness beneath an evergreen canopy. Had the man not sniffed, wiping his nose with the cuff of his greatcoat and shifting his rifle from one hand to the other, Littlejohn might not have spotted him. As it was, he only barely managed to keep himself hidden.

Settling his elbows in an icy drift, Littlejohn pulled his M1 against his shoulder, carefully working his gloved index finger inside the trigger guard. He took a breath and held it, squeezing the trigger as the shadowy figure centered in the cross hairs. *A shadowy figure leveling his own weapon directly at Littlejohn.*

*** *** ***

Saunders leapt to his feet, bounding from the cover of one tree to the next in sync with the cover fire from Nelson and Ames. The enemy fire he drew was random and wild, zinging off the trees overhead. The worst he got of it was the snow down the back of his neck as it was dislodged from branches. Unfortunately, that was all the Germans got, too, as he threw himself down in a gully to avoid having his body ventilated. Automatic fire ripped through the trees above him and rained pine needles over his prone body, jabbing into the tender skin on the back of his neck. Rolling to the right, Saunders crawled his way through the drifts, aware of Nelson's continued barrage.

God, just let me get there before the Krauts realize they've got us outnumbered. He glanced up, saw the boulder he'd staked out before and forced his cold-numbered limbs to drag him there. Flipping onto his back, he pulled the two grenades from his overcoat pocket where he'd stashed them thirty minutes ago, making sure that the pins were fully inserted. Saunders' fingers were so frozen he momentarily panicked, forcing the joints fully closed and then open again. Gripping the wool fingertips in his teeth, he pulled the glove from his right hand, gasping as the icy wind found its way to unprotected skin.

Shouldering up to the huge stone, Saunders waited for his men to give him the signal, shivering madly beneath his overcoat.

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Kirby hugged his body against the pine tree, leaning as far out as he dared over the drop off. He couldn't feel the rough bark touching his skin, though his cheek and ear were pressed firmly against it. *Don't think about that, William old son. Just...don't think about it.* Far below, he could see the meandering river they'd crossed the night before, curving its way around the base of the mountain. From his vantage point, it looked just like it did on the map, a thin dark line with no more sign of danger than a child's drawing. He sighed, turning his back on the open air, and began climbing up to the winding game trail where he'd left Doc.

Doc. Oh God, please help us. Kirby hadn't prayed so much since he was an altar boy at the tender age of ten. By eleven, he'd been forcibly ejected from the church for one too many pranks during mass. His mother hadn't been amused, his dad...well, it was better not to think how his father had handled the situation. It didn't matter. Since arriving in France, Kirby wasn't too sure there actually was a God anyway. Where was He while Kirby was freezing his toes off and getting shot at and sleeping on the ground? *Or Doc was taking a bullet and left with nobody but Kirby to get him home?*

He hauled himself up onto the trail, going to his knees in exhaustion. Mouth wide open, Kirby gulped in thin mountain air, his chest heaving convulsively as he fought to oxygenate his

starving lungs. As his vision cleared, he set his hands on his knees, pushing himself back on his heels, and looked up to find Doc staring at him with anxious blue eyes.

"You okay, Kirby?"

The medic sat on a log, his wounded arm resting lightly across his thighs. Right hand curled into his sleeve, he was scooping clean snow on the back of his overcoat-covered wrist and licking it gingerly off the fabric.

Kirby watched him for a moment, noting the hard shivers that wracked Doc's body every few moments. He worried about the waxy, white areas across the medic's cheekbones where it should be flushed red from exertion. He knew his own face looked similar as numbness spread from his ears to his nose. His fingers he'd given up on long ago. He staggered to his feet, almost falling down again on the icy track.

"You're gonna freeze yourself, Doc. Don't eat too much of it." Kirby stared at a pine branch, laden with pristine mounds of snow. Shaking his head ruefully, he pulled it down to eye level and bit into the icy crystals, trying not to scream as pain shot from his incisors straight through to his brain. He shuddered, remembering suddenly a hot July when his uncle had sold strawberry ice cream down at the bowling alley. *That same stabbing ache but oh it tasted so good...* Kirby shook his head again. *This stuff tastes nothin' like strawberries.*

Doc almost grinned. "It only hurts for the first hour." He shook his sleeve so the remaining dusting of snow flew into the wind. Gathering his left arm closer to his body, he hunched over it, gritting his teeth against the relentless throbbing that threatened to overwhelm him. Any movement of his hand sent daggers of fire through his muscles and yet Doc felt an almost insane desire to wriggle his fingers. The force of will required to hold the limb still was eroding rapidly. The bleeding seemed to have stopped, though, at least for the time being. The medic peered cautiously at the scarf-wrapped wound, relieved to find no new blood in the snow at his feet.

"We gotta get movin'. I don't think there's more than a couple hours worth of light left." Kirby stared up at the grey sky, one hand pressed hard to his flank. Answering a call of nature, he'd been horrified at the bright red splash of blood. *Not that Doc needs to know.* He moved his attention to the medic with no small sense of relief. Worrying about Doc was productive. Worrying about himself was time wasted. Kirby straightened up, ignoring the ache in his back. Patting Doc gently on the head, he reached down, hooking his numb fingers under the medic's right elbow.

Doc leaned into Kirby, allowing the B.A.R. man to haul him to his feet. As Kirby slipped under his good arm, taking the medic's weight on his wiry shoulders, Doc felt a vague rising sensation in his chest, followed by the decidedly unpleasant flip-flopping of his guts in his belly. Staggering into the smaller man, Doc's vision rapidly narrowed, telescoping inwardly until all he saw before he blacked out was the languid movement of pine branches in the treetops high above them.

Kirby saw the medic's head lolling back, eyes unfocused and unseeing. He tried to catch the man with the intention of easing him carefully to the ground, but had no such luck. Doc's weight felled them both and Kirby tumbled into the snow underneath the corpsman's unconscious body.

"Cripes." Kirby managed to get his elbows under him, rolling Doc onto his side, and then wriggled his legs out from under the medic. He took a moment to catch his breath and then scrambled to his knees, ignoring the flaring pain in his back. Sliding Doc around on the slippery trail, Kirby managed to get the medic's head lower than the rest of his body and then sat down heavily next to him, panting hard.

"Okay, that's the last time we're gonna do that. I mean, the first time, well, that was pretty hairy but once you came round an' tole me what to do, ole Kirby's got it figured out. The second time, I was ready. Now it ain't funny no more."

He reached over and grabbed the front of Doc's overcoat, wincing as his frozen fingers slowly closed. Shaking the medic gently at first and then with greater agitation, Kirby fought his own anxiety, trying to imitate the calm manner he'd seen Doc use on his own patients.

"Doc? Come on, Doc, we gotta get movin', those Jerries are out here, it's cold an' my feet are killin' me! Come on, Doc? DOC!"

As Doc's eyelids fluttered, Kirby loosened his grip and reached up to awkwardly pat the medic's cheek. A few moments later, Doc opened his eyes, staring blearily at Kirby's relieved face.

The B.A.R. man sat back on his heels and rested his numb hands on his thighs. "Ya gotta stop doin' that, Doc. You're scarin' me to death." He looked up at the thick clouds scudding along, mentally cursing the promise of new snowfall. The wind suddenly picked up, whipping inside his hood and down the back of his neck.

"Sorry."

The medic's voice was so faint Kirby had to lean down to hear. Closing his eyes, the B.A.R. man let his chin fall to his chest and took a deep breath, holding it for a moment. It wasn't Doc's fault. It wasn't even his own fault for once. But try as he might, Kirby just couldn't find anybody to blame for this predicament. Turning his attention back to Doc, he very slowly sat him up, pausing for several minutes at a time to allow the medic's blood pressure to catch up to his new position.

By the time the two shivering and staggering privates got themselves underway, the snowfall had begun again, intensifying rapidly to a thick curtain and obliterating the game trail. Kirby swore under his breath as he steadied Doc, blinking to dislodge the thick snowflakes. Moving slowly off, he stared hard at the terrain, lower lip caught firmly in his incisors. They had no choice but to move forward. *Forward and down.*

Kirby glanced once over his shoulder, shaking his head at his own foolishness. *Nobody out here but us chickens.* He hiked Doc's good arm further across his shoulders, practically hauling the man through a particularly deep snowdrift. Still, he felt a growing anxiety settle in his belly and between his shoulder blades.

Looking back one more time, Kirby saw nothing amiss in the snowy late afternoon light. *Certainly not a shadow among other shadows.* Kirby shook his head at Doc's questioning glance and they moved off into the trees.

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Nelson stared hard into the distance, forcing himself to trust Saunders' plan. He knew he was at the right place, but had no idea if the timing was right. From the moment the lead started flying, Billy'd had no idea how many minutes had passed. Crouching lower in the snow, he jammed a fresh magazine into his M1, panting hard with panic. He could see Ames not twenty feet away, firing carefully spaced shots at the Germans. Of Littlejohn there was no sign, a fact that terrified the young private, filling his mind with images he wasn't prepared to deal with. A flurry of automatic fire strafed the log above his head and Billy squeezed his eyes tightly shut against the pine bark chips that flew every which way. Counting to five, he rose to position, opening fire with a vengeance, and prayed that Ames would follow suit.

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Saunders fought to control his breathing, afraid the Krauts would hear the labored wheezing of his overtaxed lungs. Pushing back the sleeve covering his left wrist, the sergeant squinted at his watch for several seconds before he realized that the crystal was smashed and only the hour hand remained. He let his hand drop to his lap, careful not to dislodge the grenade nestled in his palm.

Below and to his left, Saunders heard the staccato barking of a single M1. Just a moment before, two of the Army workhorses had been picking away at the German squad. This was either Nelson's reload before he and Ames laid down some serious cover fire or one of them had caught a bullet. Saunders flinched away from both the thought and a sudden burst of automatic fire over his head. *The Krauts are right there!* He pulled his legs up, folding himself into as small a space as he could.

With a violence Saunders wouldn't have thought possible, the two distant Americans opened up, tearing up branches and dumping snow from the treetops. Arms wrapped around his head, the sergeant heard one of the Germans grunt in pain and a rifle tumbled over the top of the rock, falling into the snow next to him. He waited a moment longer, expecting a body to join the weapon. When it didn't happen, Saunders rose to a crouch, a grenade in each hand.

*** *** ***

Littlejohn trudged slowly through the snow, M1 held at the ready. His left bicep burned where the German's bullet had creased him, but it hadn't bled long and he'd managed to get sulfa sprinkled over the wound and a dressing tied in place, if not as neatly as Doc might have done. The German hadn't fared so well. Littlejohn had found three corpses strewn in the snow.

Rifle fire echoed around him, bouncing off the banks of pines and the snow-covered boulders. The air itself, filling now with fat snowflakes, seemed to shrink from the concussion. Littlejohn felt the world narrow to just the few feet in front of his boots and the few behind where his footprints filled rapidly, erasing the evidence of his passage. He moved with slow deliberation, each step seeming to take hours when he knew it could only have been seconds. Shaking his head, Littlejohn marveled at the quiet, not realizing that it only existed inside himself.

BOOM!

The earth shuddered out from under the big private, dumping him on his rear in the snow.

BOOM!

Another explosion followed the first by only a heartbeat, trailed by a silence so complete Littlejohn could have been alone in the forest, lying flat on his back in the cold, eyes wide with shock. Blinking slowly, he became aware of his M1 digging painfully into his left hip and rolled to one side, extricating the weapon from beneath him. With a grunt, Littlejohn struggled to his feet, trying to remember just where it was he was supposed to be going. Looking down at his overcoat, he brushed off a surprisingly thick layer of snow, only now realizing that he'd been lying there for more than a few minutes.

"Hey! HEY! He's over here, Littlejohn's over here!" Nelson's unmistakable boyish voice squeaked up an octave or two as he rounded a copse of trees and stumbled headlong over his own feet. Shoving up to his elbows, he grinned at Littlejohn, eyes wide with undisguised joy.

Ames appeared, M1 held ready in his hands. Face haggard with fatigue, he continued past his squad mates for a few yards, staring into the darkening forest. Apparently satisfied that they were safe for at least the time being, he turned back to the big private, allowing his haunted gaze to rest on Littlejohn for a brief moment before returning to his scrutiny of the perimeter.

Billy hauled himself to his feet and shoved his rifle onto his back. He gripped Littlejohn's parka just below the bandage, inspecting the untidy knot. "You okay?"

As Littlejohn opened his mouth to answer, Saunders shoved his way between them, giving the injury a cursory once-over and then glancing over at Ames. "We gotta get back to Caje. Left 'im back at the rendezvous." He shoved his helmet back from his forehead, combing his fingers through his hair. Turning his attention once more to Littlejohn, he lifted his chin questioningly, blue eyes bright against his frost-bitten skin.

"You okay?"

Littlejohn nodded, wincing as he shouldered his weapon. "I'm okay, Sarge."

Saunders nodded too and turned away, staggering slightly into a deep drift before catching his balance with one hand against a tree. He took a deep breath and coughed, hacking, shoulders hunched against the cold and fatigue. Behind him the men glanced at each other, shaking their heads in confusion. Clearing his throat, Saunders spat into the snow and then set off, boots punching through the icy crust with each step.

"Ames, take the point."

*** *** ***

Caje shoved himself away from the Frenchman, flinching inwardly at the man's fetid breath, and stood, staring intently into the thick forest. The firefight seemed to be over, silenced by the double explosions of grenades whose echo had been rapidly swallowed up in the heavy snowfall. He absently massaged his elbow, the only part of his arm that could be touched without sending him into paroxysms of pain.

<"What do you see, my friend?">

The scout closed his eyes briefly, knowing that the sole reason for their being on the mountain in the first place was to meet with this man, but wishing with all his heart that Aramis would just vanish into the trees and leave him alone. As they'd waited, shoulder to shoulder in Caje's snowy cave, he'd felt every flinch of Aramis' bony body against his own, jarring his injured arm and his jangling nerves. The sound of the firefight, the only means Caje had of monitoring Saunders and the others, hadn't helped. Every shot from an enemy weapon that went unanswered by American rifles wounded him as surely as if he'd been hit. Only too aware of the Garand strapped across his back, forgotten when he'd tried to convince Aramis to join in the fight, Caje raged against his impotence, both now and before. Dark eyes snapping in anger, he glared at the Frenchman, snarling at him.

<"Nothing. There is nothing.">

Aramis shrugged, burrowing his thin shoulders deeper into his greatcoat and hunching them against the relentless chill. Hands shoved deep into his pockets, he began to whistle tunelessly, his watery gaze off somewhere in the distance. As the melody wandered, he removed the two bullets from his coat pocket, rolling them between the fingers of his right hand.

Click...click...click...

The scout shook his head once in disgust but leaned in closer all the same. He'd heard the tune before but couldn't place it, knowing only that it brought some level of stillness with its discordant notes. Unaware, Caje softly hummed along as he crouched in the snow, staring and staring, his gloved thumb idly flipping the D-ring holding the Garand to its strap.

Click...click...click...

*** *** ***

"Caje!"

Saunders shoved through the last of the drifts, shaking his boots in irritated deliberation with each step and sending shards of ice flying. He'd noticed Caje's dark shadow against the even darker pine needles and veered toward him. Keeping his voice pitched low, he called to the scout again.

"Caje!"

Head jerking in surprise, Caje held out one hand right in Aramis' face, forcing the Frenchman back into the hidey-hole and effectively shutting the man's mouth. *Twice in one day. Maybe three times.* Caje bit his lip, wondering if he was losing his edge. He held his breath, counting the moving shadows following the sergeant. *One, two, three.* He exhaled

explosively, a small cloud of condensation forming briefly before his eyes and then vanishing in the freshening wind. He raised his good arm, gave the incoming men the all clear and then signaled Aramis to stand.

“Hey Cajе, you really missed a fight, there was...” Nelson’s excited voice rang in the still mountain air and then trailed off in befuddled puzzlement. He stood there a moment, staring around Littlejohn’s bulk at the sudden appearance of the raggedy man. Ames came up from behind and shoved him none-too-gently in the back.

“Move along, Nelson, this ain’t a bus stop.” Ames glanced back over his shoulder, gaze sliding over the darkening forest. He shook his head, blinking away the shower of snow that slid off his helmet and into his eyes. Returning his attention forward, Ames skirted around Nelson and Littlejohn, coming face to face with Aramis.

“Bonjour, mon ami!”

Before Ames knew what hit him, the Frenchman had wrapped his arms around his neck and hugged him, only pausing long enough to kiss him on both reddened cheeks.

“HEY!” The private shoved Aramis hard enough to dump him in the snow, the earflaps of his giant hat bobbing up and down in hypnotic waves. Ames forced himself not to shoot the man, swallowing down his automatic indignation with one look at Cajе’s shocked expression. Jaws locked tightly together, he nodded at Saunders and moved back out into the forest.

The less-than-cordial greeting seemed to have a sobering effect on the man. He sat in the snow for a long moment, watching Ames’ back disappear into the trees and then climbed to his feet, dusting off his rear with one gloved hand and extending the other to Saunders. The hand trembled and Aramis flushed, his cheeks glowing hotly against his pale complexion and accentuating the hollows beneath his eyes.

“Bonjour, je m’appelle Aramis.” He tried to smile, lips twitching vaguely upward, but couldn’t control it and simply clamped his mouth shut. He dropped his hand when the sergeant merely stood and stared at him.

Saunders pulled his helmet off, scratching his head thru his wool cap. One eyebrow lifted in amazement, he turned to his scout.

“This our man, Cajе? Aramis?” He lifted his chin in the Frenchman’s direction as Aramis glared at Nelson and Littlejohn in turn.

Cajе nodded, dark eyes shadowed. He shivered as the adrenaline that had been pumping its way through his bloodstream began to dissipate, shrugging deeper into his overcoat and wincing as pain flared anew in his injured arm. Glancing over at Saunders but not quite meeting the man’s brilliant blue eyes, Cajе nodded again.

“Yeah, Sarge. He says he is.”

Saunders sighed, wondering if the day would ever end. Motioning for Littlejohn to join Ames on the perimeter, he reached out, finally offering his hand to the Frenchman.

“Sergeant Saunders, 361st.”

Aramis swallowed hard, clearing his throat. His adam’s apple bobbed up and down, corklike, as he fought for enough spit to speak. Brown eyes grew larger as the seconds ticked by and then...

“Bonjour, bonjour!”

Cajе sighed. “He says hello.”

“No kidding.” Saunders scowled at the Cajun, ignoring Nelson’s wide grin. Sudden fatigue washed over him, his muscles trembling and sore. Spying a log under a thick blanket of snow, Saunders kicked it clean and then sat, waving Aramis and his men down, too. He listened for a moment but heard nothing out of place, only the muffled clinking of weapons as Littlejohn and Ames patrolled the woods.

“Did he know the password?”

Stilled by the words, Cajе felt his pulse pounding in his ears and the heat rising in his face. It hadn’t occurred to him to question the man. *Who the hell else would be up on this God-*

forsaken mountain in the middle of a storm? He closed his eyes briefly, only too aware that his immediate acceptance of Aramis' identity could have spelled death for them all. *Or worse.* Not looking at Saunders, Cajé turned to the Frenchman, praying that the man knew the answer.

<"The sergeant wants to know the password.">

Aramis smiled, the creeping shadows of the worsening snowfall dipping into the gaps between his teeth. He placed one hand over his chest and took a deep breath, for once looking directly at Saunders.

<"The password is a question. I must ask what year the Yankees won their first pennant.">

Cajé translated, still turned away from Saunders.

Staring at the Cajun's sharp profile, Saunders nodded slowly. The password was correct and yet it was obvious that Cajé hadn't asked for it. *Things were getting complicated.* Kirby and Doc were gone, probably dead. A German patrol had stumbled over them, or maybe they'd stumbled over the Krauts, but either way, somebody was gonna be wondering where their missing men were. Ames had frozen up and then saved Nelson's life. Now he seemed a model soldier but Saunders knew he could crack at any moment. Littlejohn was wounded and Nelson, well, Nelson was okay for now. *But Cajé...*

Saunders blinked, suddenly aware of the fear rising in the Frenchman's face. He knew instantly what the man was thinking, *had he trusted the wrong men, was he about to die?* He forced himself to relax his grip on the Thompson and pasted a grin across his face.

"Tell him 1921, Cajé. 1921."

Shoulders rounded in relief, Aramis looped his arms loosely around his knees. His eyes didn't soften, though, watching carefully the tense interplay between Saunders and his scout.

"Ask him if he has the information."

Cajé translated.

<"Of course, of course! But you have to take me with you. The Bosch are all over the mountain. There aren't enough of us left to elude them any longer. Our families...are lost. You'll have your information. But I'm coming, too.">

Aramis glared at Saunders in hot defiance as Cajé translated. He slowly stood, brushing the snow from his greatcoat with careful deliberation.

With a snort, Saunders climbed to his feet, too, followed after a brief moment by Nelson. Cajé stayed where he was, arm cradled close to his chest and his gaze fixed in the distance. Blue eyes met brown. The snow continued to fall.

"Sarge?" Littlejohns' voice broke through the tension. "Sarge, we're losing daylight. We gotta find someplace to camp." He appeared through the trees, wiping his nose on the back of his sleeve. "Sarge?"

Saunders shook his head, dislodging a surprising amount of snow and ice from his helmet. A sudden fit of coughing overtook him, almost driving him to his knees. Bent almost double, Saunders fought for breath, each lungful of frigid air a lump of ice in his chest. *Dammit!* He looked at Littlejohn, then back at Aramis. *I've got no choice!*

"Okay. We're movin' out. Get Ames back here, Littlejohn. Cajé, find out from Aramis here if there's anyplace we can hole up. Nelson..."

Cajé hauled himself up, spitting questions at the Frenchman.

As the wind picked up and night began to fall, the weary squad dragged themselves through the drifting snow, following the bouncing earflaps of Aramis' giant hat.

*** *** ***

Kirby stumbled over his own feet, falling face-first in the drifting snow on the downhill side of the path. He shifted his weight off the B.A.R. and rolled onto his back, panting in the thin mountain air. The glimpse of sky he could see through the dense pines was bruised, variegated

hues of purple and deep blue, fading away into yellow. Kirby closed his eyes briefly, knowing now they would be spending the night on the slopes, without cover or adequate clothing.

“Doc? I’m okay, don’t worry, Kirby’s always okay.”

Kirby lay perfectly still, his pulse hammering in his ears. *Nothing.* With more energy than he realized he still possessed, the B.A.R. man shot to his knees and then his feet, staring back up the trail. *Nothing.* The deepening shadows pooling around the trees could have hidden a division or two, Kirby knew, and he churned his way through the snow, frightened eyes darting from one side to the other as he searched for the missing medic.

Not again, not again, not again...there!

Doc was down in the drifts, body curled tightly around his injured arm, his entire frame shaking with fierce tremors. His teeth chattered together, lips moving slightly as he muttered barely audible words. *Oh God, oh God, oh God...* He didn’t look up nor open his eyes as Kirby dropped into the snow beside him, calling out his name.

Reaching down to touch Doc’s shoulder, Kirby saw the fresh blood spattered over the clean white snow. “Jesus, Doc, ya gotta stick with me!” He gently rolled the medic onto his back, wincing at the sight of the man’s disheveled uniform.

Blood still seeped slowly from under the makeshift bandage, sliding down the ragged fringe of the scarf and into the snow. The front of Doc’s parka and pants was soaked and stiff with drying gore. His face was deathly pale and his eyes, showing only the barest sliver of blue, darted back and forth, his gaze not resting on anything for longer than a second.

Kirby patted down his own pockets, searching in vain for anything that might be usable as a bandage. *Nothing. Dammit!* He hesitated, cold fingers poised over the blood-sodden scarf. “Doc? I gotta look at this, just take a minute now.” He picked at the knot, biting his lip in concentration.

Doc rolled away from him, moaning in pain. “No, please, please, Kirby, no...” The medic’s voice was hoarse with desperation. His right arm pushed feebly at the B.A.R. man, fending him off. “Hurts, Kirby, it...hurts.”

Kirby sat back on his heels in exasperation, his hands curled into tight fists on his hips. He’d never felt such overwhelming frustration, the need for action pounding in his chest and yet he found himself totally unable to do anything. He reached out and set one hand on the medic’s shoulder.

“I know, Doc, I know it hurts. We gotta think, I mean, I gotta think. I mean, it’s getting’ dark. Ain’t no place up here we can hole up. No nice little farmhouse with a couple ‘a nice little farmer’s daughters waitin’ to warm us up, hey, Doc? Wouldn’t that be nice? A couple ‘a madam moyseselles an’ a couple ‘a bottles ‘a French wine? Caje wouldn’t believe it if ole Kirby an’ Doc found themselves a couple ‘a little honeys to spend the war with. No sirree, he wouldn’t. Hey Doc?”

Leaning over the medic, Kirby shook him gently by the uninjured arm.

Doc barely responded, unfocused blue eyes opening to regard Kirby briefly and then sliding shut again. His legs moved a few inches back and forth, digging down into the snow.

Kirby stared at the man a moment longer, gingerly brushing the ice from Doc’s parka and face. He’d never had to worry about an injured squad mate before. The medic had always taken care of them with competence and compassion, never complaining. Kirby shook his head, swallowing hard against the fear rising in him. It was one thing to face an enemy machinegun nest. Quite another to know that the only thing standing between Doc and bleeding to death was the speed with which Kirby could get them off the mountain. He knew that he was losing the race with every passing moment, each dropping degree signaling the oncoming night.

He stood abruptly, looking around them. Everywhere were stands of evergreens, their branches drooping heavily with snow. Kirby frowned with concentration, the growing wind filling

him with the need to hurry. He glanced down at Doc one more time, reassuring himself that the medic would be okay for the moment. *Sure he will.*

Moving clumsily uphill, Kirby investigated a particularly dense grouping of trees. Thick foliage brushed the ground, forming a cave of sorts. Dropping to his knees, Kirby crawled under and found himself in darkness. The ground was covered with shed pine needles, soft and fragrant. The private grinned suddenly, hope singing in his heart.

Shuffling back out again, Kirby began to gather windfall branches, shaking the snow from their needles and shoving them under the canopy of the little grove. He checked on the medic from time to time, anxious gaze darting from the horrendous wound to Doc's chest, watching the slow rise and fall that indicated he was still breathing.

"Not tonight, Doc! We lived through that avalanche. I'm not lettin' you die now."

Doc twitched, muttering words Kirby couldn't make out.

Finally, the hideout was ready. Kirby shoved the B.A.R. under the branches, making sure that he could get to it in a hurry if need be. He backed slowly away, staring at the trees to see if he could discern anything that would give them away. Not that he was terribly concerned about it. Darkness was falling rapidly. Kirby figured if anybody stumbled across them in the night, well, the chances had to be slim to none.

Sliding one arm under Doc's shoulders, he carefully helped him into a sitting position.

The medic moaned and clutched at Kirby with his good hand. "Kirby, ev'rythin's spinnin' 'round." He dry-heaved a few times, his body shaking and trembling. After a few moments, Doc pulled in a deep breath, consciously trying to ease the tension invading his muscles. He looked over his shoulder at Kirby.

"Sorry, I jus'..." He grimaced and doubled over again, coughing and gagging.

Kirby kept one arm across Doc's shoulders, patting his back over and over. "It's okay, Doc, it's okay." He stared off into the woods, realizing with a start just how close nightfall was. Before he'd been able to convince himself that they were following a path down the mountain. Now the towering trees pressed in on them and Kirby felt a tickle of claustrophobia dance across his nerves.

"I gotta get ya up there, Doc, up under those branches." Kirby hauled the medic to his feet, ignoring the flaring pain in his flank. He took all of Doc's weight for a second, terrified for that brief instant that they'd both overbalance and tumble further down the slope. Then Doc got his legs under him and Kirby let himself breathe again.

Doc leaned heavily on the B.A.R. man, his muscles alternately loose and then inexplicably tightening. He knew all the danger signs, all the things a good medic should be looking out for. Somehow, right now as the pain from his arm howled in his ears, Doc couldn't remember a single one. He saw his feet moving forward, side by side with Kirby's but didn't feel as though they belonged to him. He swallowed the acid bile collecting in the back of his throat, coughing it back up again almost immediately. He needed water, but the canteens were long gone, buried in the deep drifts of the avalanche, and eating snow would freeze him from the inside out.

Feeling Kirby halt at his side, Doc stumbled, almost falling. Kirby's thin face swam in front of his eyes, lips moving and saying words the medic couldn't understand. He gently cupped his left elbow with his right hand, trying without success to relieve the ache that gnawed at him incessantly. Doc had been shot before, twisted his ankle a few times, and had



accumulated the average number of cuts and bruises. But never had he experienced the continuous expansion of pain centered in his arm, spreading to his chest, his belly and legs, and threatening to explode inside his head. Not even when his appendix burst at the age of ten during a little league game.

"That ball was GONE, too..."

Puzzled by the medic's mumbled words, Kirby gripped the front of Doc's overcoat with both freezing hands. He forced his fingers to hook tightly in the rough fabric, dragging the medic to the ground and then guiding him under the branches and into the sheltered bower. Fumbling for a moment in the dark, he produced a lighter and then a small flickering flame.

"Well, here we are. Home, sweet home!" Kirby got his bearings and doused the lighter, stuffing it into one pocket to ensure he didn't lose it. He moved deeper into the pile of windfall branches, shoving them this way and that to make a protective wind break. When he was satisfied with the arrangement, he pulled out the lighter again.

Doc lay half in and half out of the shelter, his wounded arm stretched alongside his body and the other thrown awkwardly over his head from when he'd let go of Kirby along with his dwindling consciousness. Snow coated his eyelashes and brows, and the fringe of his hair where it escaped the confines of his overcoat's hood. His face was pale, the exposed skin smooth and waxy.

Kirby put the lighter away again. "Come on, Doc, ya gotta show a little more enthusiasm than that." He slid one arm under the medic, grunting as he struggled to drag the larger man further under the overhanging branches. Arms locked around Doc's chest, Kirby braced his legs against a tree trunk and shoved hard, finally managing to move the medic entirely under the pines' protective umbrella of thick needles.

He took a moment, panting heavily. If he'd been cold before, he had no sign of it now. Sweat beaded on his forehead and ran down his face into his jacket collar and under it into his uniform shirt. He knew he'd pay for it later, but Kirby wallowed in his brief respite from the unrelenting chill.

"Kirby?"

The medic's voice seemed to come from far away. Kirby got an elbow under himself and leaned over to look into Doc's face. He fumbled for the lighter and lit it once again, finding himself staring straight into the medic's confused eyes.

"Kirby? Where the heck are we?" Doc frowned, turning his head to study the wall of pine branches. He struggled to sit up, leaning heavily into Kirby's shoulder. "How in Sam Hill did we get INSIDE a tree?"

Kirby had to laugh. He could just hear the one question the medic didn't voice: *How are we gonna tell Sarge?*

He reached behind Doc, rearranging the branches so they made a thick layer of insulation against the freezing snow. "Here, Doc, lean on that for a minute." He helped the medic to settle against the fragrant needles. "Lemme just check somethin'." Kirby scooted over to the B.A.R., picking it up and cradling it in the crooks of his elbows as he crawled out from underneath the shelter.

Night had fallen quickly, full dark enveloping the forest and turning it into a mishmash of shadows, each more menacing than the last. Kirby swallowed hard against the sudden dryness in his throat and forced himself to leave the safety of the shelter. He stood, leaning against a fir, its bark rough under his frostbitten fingers, and listened.

The wind, only a whisper an hour earlier, had resumed its ear-numbing shriek. Kirby turned his head, trying to listen past the air rushing over his ears, his eyes closed. He stood there almost five minutes, letting his mind tune itself to the natural sounds of the forest. Finally, satisfied that the only creatures within earshot were non-human, Kirby opened his eyes, slung the B.A.R. over his shoulder, and moved back down the slope. He carried a branch in his hand, its needles thick and numerous.

Finding the place where Doc went down, Kirby quickly buried the bloodstained snow, using the branch to smooth the surface. Backtracking several yards, he erased the evidence of their passing with long sweeps of the branch, reversing all the way back to the little grove of trees.

“Doc? It’s me.” Kirby pitched his voice low, not wanting to startle the medic.

He needn’t have bothered. When the B.A.R. man finally managed to get his freezing fingers to work the lighter, he found Doc asleep, curled up on his side, his wounded arm folded protectively somewhere in the area of his belly. Kirby leaned over the man and gently tucked the hood of the overcoat around Doc’s neck, hoping to keep drafts from working their way inside.

Kirby really wanted to light a fire. With a fire they could melt snow to drink, although in what he didn’t know, since they’d lost both their helmets. They’d be WARM, too, not shivering inside a stand of trees like a couple of chipmunks. He sighed, knowing that a fire would attract attention, probably from the wrong side. Kirby wouldn’t take that chance, not with Doc to look out for.

Doc. Jesus. Kirby carefully maneuvered around the medic’s body, stretching himself full-length against the uphill side of the windbreak. Doc was facing him now and he reached one arm over, pulling the medic against him. Having already checked the safety on the B.A.R., Kirby laid it carefully behind Doc’s back, within easy reach.

“God, Doc, what have I gotten us into?” His whispered words made him flinch, both from the fact that he had spoken aloud and also from the implied admission of guilt he felt over the situation. *If I’d only listened to Doc, if I’d stayed behind.* Kirby shifted his left arm, reaching up to pull a few branches closer around them.

If I’d listened to Doc, I’d be curled up in my blanket in front of a roaring fire. He shook his head slightly, trying to drive the image from his mind. His chin brushed the top of the medic’s canvas-covered head and Doc startled, body tensing for a few seconds before he sank back into sleep, murmuring words Kirby couldn’t catch.

Kirby stared into the darkness, memories from his childhood flooding back with a rush. The night his brother George had a bad dream, a nightmare born of carefully laid suggestions from Kirby after they’d snuck into a horror movie their mother had forbidden them to see. George had spent the movie huddled on the sticky floor, much to Kirby’s delight. All the way home, he’d regaled him with vivid replays of the scariest scenes despite the kid’s tearful protests.

George got his own back. Just after midnight he’d woken from the nightmare howling and the only way Kirby could shut him up was to haul him into his own bed, cuddling him and rocking him in his arms. *Jeez, if Mom had found out about that...*

Now Kirby took comfort from the memory, knowing that while he may be the squad’s biggest goldbrick, if not the platoon’s or indeed the entire company’s, right now he was all Doc had and he’d be damned if he was gonna let him down. He stretched his fingers over the medic’s back, just touching the barrel of the B.A.R., and then relaxed again, careful not to jar Doc’s wounded arm. The pine branch insulation seemed to be working as Kirby realized that he was no longer shivering and Doc appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

Just get us to morning. He yawned, his eyelids drooping lower and lower. *It can’t hurt to close my eyes, just for a second, I can’t see a damn thing anyway!* Within a couple of minutes, Kirby fell fast asleep, his cheek pillowed against the top of Doc’s head.

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Night slid over the face of the mountain, eclipsing the dwindling light and plunging the squad into darkness. For a few long, desperate moments, they held their positions, eyes wide and blind. The wind dropped, too, as if banished by the overwhelming shadows. They pulled

their scarves from storm-muffled ears, straining to hear any sound at all, but there was nothing. Nothing but a barely audible whistling, the Gallic tune chasing its melody underneath a faint wheeze.

Gradually, Saunders realized that he could see his men strung out in a ragged line behind him. The tune ended abruptly as Aramis took a deep breath, and the sergeant turned toward him, shifting the strap of the Thompson into a more comfortable position. Despite his slight appearance, Aramis had climbed the mountain with the ease of a goat, never slipping, never stopping. Saunders had called for every rest period, avoiding the Frenchman's impatient eyes while he checked his men. Struggling to contain a cough now, he cleared his throat.

"How much further?" Saunders shook his head at Aramis' puzzled frown and turned around, locating Cajé crouched in the lee of a huge pine. "Can you ask him, how much further?"

Cajé sighed, his breath a small cloud in the frigid air. He forced his aching muscles to stand and fought off a wave of nausea brought on by the sudden pulsing in his wounded arm. Saunders' gaze held him steady, asking silent questions the scout wouldn't answer. Shoving through the snow drifts, Cajé made his way to the two men.

<How much further?> Cajé dropped the words like marbles on a polished floor, the shadows hiding his eyes from both men staring at him.

Aramis blinked, and then turned around to face a small clearing. Smooth rock rose from the ground, vanishing upward into the night sky. A pile of boulders twenty feet high stood against the base of the cliff. Snow settled over the rocks and blanketed the stream that bubbled out from under the stone. A waterfall jetted from somewhere above, the outermost surface encased in ice that ran down the rock face like a ribbon of undulating taffy. A few areas were so thin that the racing torrent beneath threatened to break through, while other layers were so solidly frozen that it would be well into spring before they thawed and loosened their hold on the currents.

The Frenchman smiled, thin lips curling away from his rotten teeth. He stepped forward and disappeared, ear flaps and all.

"What the - ?" Ames brought his M1 to bear on the rocks, the rifle bouncing slightly with each beat of his heart.

Saunders thrust one arm under the barrel and shoved it skyward as he glared at the young private. "No shooting, Ames. Nobody knows we're here." He glanced at each of the men in turn, finally returning his attention to Ames. "I wanna keep it that way."

Waving Littlejohn and Nelson to the perimeter, the sergeant shouldered the Thompson and approached the rock fall. Even standing in Aramis' footprints, he couldn't see where the man had gone. He stretched his right arm forward, fully anticipating the feel of cold rock under his fingers, even through the thick padding of his gloves.

His hand kept right on going. Stumbling, Saunders fell to his knees on hard-packed dirt. Before he could speak, a tiny flame appeared, hovering a good ten feet away. It floated closer, followed by Aramis' disembodied head.

<"Sergeant, we must all get in quickly.">

Aramis grasped Saunders' by the elbow and hauled him into the shelter. With a not-so-gentle push, he propelled the sergeant into an area lit by several flickering lanterns, and then moved back to the entrance.

Saunders could hear him softly calling to the squad. Squinting in the darkness, he stepped slowly into what appeared to be a small room, its rough wooden walls hung with odd bits of rope and tools. A lattice-work ceiling topped the place only inches above Saunders' head. Something scurried there, dislodging dust that cascaded over him and triggered a coughing fit. He ducked away, one gloved hand protecting his eyes as he stared up into the gloom. A skinny, naked tail dropped down between two narrow boards and then vanished again as its owner retreated, the sound of tiny claws growing fainter by the second.

"What the hell?" Ames stared with frank astonishment.

The kid sure didn't have much original to say. Saunders shook his head and turned back to his men as they filed into the little room. Nelson and Ames led the way. Cajé followed, but stayed close to the entrance, his injured arm hanging loosely against his side.

A moment later, Littlejohn appeared with Aramis who carried a long branch festooned with pine straw. Clumps of snow fell to the floor as the Frenchman shook the branch, and then he stowed it just inside the opening.

Littlejohn shoved back the hood of his overcoat, shivering briefly as he looked around the place. He caught sight of Saunders and hastened to the sergeant's side. "We just smoothed out our footprints, Sarge, brushed 'em away. It's too dark for anybody to see anything anyhow."

Saunders nodded, swallowing down another cough. He sniffed cautiously at the warm air wafting through the place, grimacing at the acrid taste on the back of his tongue. While it felt good to be out of the wind, his throat felt like it was closing in on him. Another cough worked its way up from his chest, and this time Saunders was unable to contain it as he threw an arm across his mouth, almost doubled over.

"Sarge, you okay?" Nelson hovered in front of the noncom, his M1 held at port arms as though he might be able to shoot his way through the situation.

Saunders waved him away, blinking suddenly watering eyes. He turned to Aramis, who had removed his hat and greatcoat, hanging them on a bare nail protruding from the wall. "Where the hell are we?" If he realized his echoing of Ames' words, he gave no sign.

The Frenchman shrugged and looked over his shoulder at Cajé, who leaned in the entryway.

It took a moment for Cajé to realize just what Saunders and Aramis were waiting for. He straightened and the snow on his jacket slid slowly down his sleeves and dripped to the floor. For once his helmet was seated squarely on his head, cushioned by the wool jeep cap they all wore. His trademark beret rested against his chest where he'd tucked it securely inside his shirt back at the storefront. Dark eyes pinned Saunders in place while Cajé fumbled his Garand from his back with his one good hand. He leaned it against a wall, never removing his gaze from his fuming sergeant. He reached inside his parka and extracted a pack of cigarettes, the lighter rubber-banded to it. Glancing down, Cajé realized his mistake. *He'd never be able to get a smoke from the pack, let alone light it.* He turned his attention to Aramis, slipping the pack into an outer pocket.

<"He wants to know where, THE HELL, we are.">

Aramis grinned, threw his arms wide, and neatly pirouetted in the circle of American GIs. Ending up facing Saunders, he leaned closely to him. <"We are in my castle now, my friends.">

Cajé rolled his eyes and puffed his cheeks in exasperation. <"What castle?">

<"MY castle. This is my safe house, we will all be protected here for the night."> Aramis glared briefly at the scout, his blue eyes colder than any winter. Now that he was on his own turf, the resistance man seemed to have found his courage. <"You tell your sergeant THAT.">

Helmet and cap now tucked in the crook of one elbow, Saunders shoved the fingers of the other hand through his unruly hair, scratching at his scalp. Appraising blue eyes flicked from the Frenchman to the Cajun, as he wondered just how accurate Cajé's translation was likely to be. Fatigue settled over him then, almost buckling his knees. An overturned packing case beckoned to him and Saunders dropped onto it.

"Nelson, watch the door."

The young private scurried over to the opening, fumbling his rifle and slapping his helmet back on his head.

"Cajé, what did he say?"

Saunders' voice held a knife edge. The fact that he didn't even look at the scout should have been warning enough. Cajé didn't care, though, the pain pushing him past all sense of

duty. All he had to do was answer the question, and yet he couldn't find the desire to do it. He stared at the floor in sullen defiance.

Shoving Cajé hard in the shoulder as he walked past him, Aramis knelt before a shallow pit in the floor and pulled a log out of a nearby box. With quiet efficiency, he piled up kindling and wood shavings and then turned back to Cajé, his gaze clear and focused.

<"Hand me your lighter, mon ami. I know you cannot use it with only one hand. Maybe I'll even light your cigarette for you, eh? Maybe you'll tell me what happened to the rest of your men. MAYBE I'll tell you what happened to mine."> Aramis leaned into the Cajun, nose to nose. <"Tell your sergeant that you are safe. That the smoke from the fire will vent ten miles from here. That the caves surrounding us have never been found by the Bosch. Tell him tomorrow we will walk down the mountain and he can have his precious information."> The Frenchman hauled Cajé's good hand from his pocket and removed the lighter and cigarette pack from his unresisting fingers. <"But you have to take me with you.">

Cajé shivered despite the comparative warmth of the shelter. Afraid to move his injured arm, he let it hang against him, the shredded sleeve offering little in the way of protection. He looked up, found Saunders' questioning gaze, and dropped his eyes to the floor again. "He says that we are safe here, that the Germans don't know about this place. He says the smoke will go somewhere else." Cajé sighed, and scrubbed his face with his good hand. The fire, now blazing away thanks to Aramis and the plundered lighter, seemed overly hot. The smoke hung in the room and stung his eyes.

Aramis stood next to the flames, staring upward intently. After a few moments, the smoke spiraled obediently and climbed through the lattice ceiling. Frantic scrabbling sounds drifted down from the darkness, and then the creatures, whatever they were, fell silent. The Frenchman nodded once as he rounded up empty boxes, shoving them into a rough semicircle around the pit, along with an old chair that was missing its back. He herded the GIs to the seats, muttering all the while to himself in a guttural language that didn't quite seem like French.

"Hey Sarge! Look at this!" Ames' voice not only seemed to come from miles away but it was echoing, the last word hissing like some demented snake. A heavy black curtain hung on the wall behind where the replacement had been standing. It rippled gently, allowing brief puffs of cold air to enter the makeshift room, distorting the flames of the fire.

They all stared in confusion.

"Hey Sarge!"

*** *** ***

Saunders tugged at the collar of his parka, yanking open the top buttons. The cold was no longer a problem, not after hiking up and down a mile's worth of subterranean tunnels. He stood just outside the little room and looked up into the endless black that formed the ceiling of the cavern. Pinpoints of light winked at him as the flickering firelight shone through the lattice and reflected off mineral deposits in the stone walls. *Ames.* Saunders shook his head. Ames had thought he was seeing stars.

"Okay. Back inside." Saunders held the curtain aside as his men filed past.

Aramis brought up the rear, his hands shoved into the pockets of his greatcoat and his shoulders hunched against the chill. He paused as he came abreast of the sergeant, dark eyes meeting with blue. A moment passed as the two stared at each other, wolves sizing up the competition. Finally, Aramis shrugged and turned away, slipping past the curtain and into the shelter.

The sergeant waited in the darkness, holding his breath to better hear the echoes of any following footsteps, his eyes widened to catch the smallest careless flicker from an uncovered flashlight. There was nothing, they were completely alone inside the mountain.

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Caje thought he must have fallen asleep, his aching arm outstretched across one knee, and his frozen feet propped in front of the comforting fire. He watched Saunders set the perimeter, Ames shrugging back into his parka as Littlejohn struggled to insert numb fingers into wet gloves. He rubbed his burning eyes, forcing them to remain open and empty of the tumbling images Caje couldn't control: Doc scrambling over the snowfield without a lifeline, Kirby falling, the snow turning to a sea of ice, waves rising and rolling his squad mates away in an instant.

A blink later, Ames and Littlejohn perched on stools, shivering. Their overcoats hung once again on the wall, dripping onto the ice-slicked floor. Caje almost exclaimed aloud and had actually opened his mouth to speak, when Saunders' familiar camo helmet appeared in the doorway, followed by the rest of the man.

"Aramis." The sergeant's voice barely carried across the tiny room. He immediately doubled over coughing, arms wrapped tightly around his chest and one gloved hand over his mouth.

Caje straightened. Pain flared in his arm, and he stood abruptly, swaying in the light cast by the fire. He wanted nothing more than to walk away from the throbbing agony that beat in time to his heart. Irrationally - and some part of his exhausted mind recognized the convoluted logic for the folly it was - he longed to slip out the narrow opening of the cave into the snowy mountainside beyond and walk until he either found Kirby and Doc or became forever lost himself. It took him a moment to realize Saunders was calling his name.

"Caje, I need you to translate." Saunders dropped his gloves to the floor and himself onto a crate. He glanced up as the scout hesitated. "Caje?"

Aramis stepped from the shadows where he'd been leaning most of the evening, watching the fire and the comings and goings of Saunders' squad. He didn't seem to feel the chill, even without his threadbare greatcoat. The giant fur hat, however, didn't leave his head. He circled the fire pit and plonked himself into the backless chair next to the Cajun.

<"Your sergeant wishes to speak to me. Won't you sit and help us, please?">

It was the unexpected kindness that did it. Caje felt as if he'd been sucker punched, the air whooshing out of his lungs and leaving him breathless. He felt Aramis' guiding hand on his good elbow, drawing him back to his seat. A shadow crossed in front of him, coalescing into his sergeant with a concerned frown creasing his wind-chapped face.

Aramis leaned in between the two GIs, his foul breath hot on both their faces.

"Ask him...ask him the fastest way out of here, off the mountain. We got..." Saunders turned his wrist and studied his watch a moment. "...we got about two hours til there's enough light to see." He coughed deeply, taking the proffered canteen from Littlejohn's outstretched hand. He waited a moment, as the tall GI returned to his place on the other side of the fire, then drank, swallowing hard as another cough attempted to burble its way up from his chest.

Caje translated the question, staring between the two other men, seemingly mesmerized by the flames.

<"We can't go through the mountain, you saw that for yourself. The avalanche closed off the main tunnel. There might be another one...no, there's not enough time."> Aramis lifted one ear flap and scratched vigorously at the straggly gray hair escaping from underneath. As Caje finished translating, he continued on. <"There's a game trail, it traverses the eastern slope. It was the trail the Germans were using..."> He stopped, eyebrows drawn tightly together and eyes closed.

Saunders and Caje looked at each other, and then turned back to the silent Frenchman. Caje shifted his arm into a more comfortable position and cleared his throat.

<"What were the Germans using the trail for? And are they using it now?">

Aramis tilted his head, eyes still closed. <"They have no need to use it any more."> With a sigh, he relaxed his shoulders, rolling each in turn until it popped. A moment later, Aramis opened his eyes and regarded Cajé, face unreadable. <"Tell the sergeant that we can use the trail, it should get us there in about four hours, unless we run into trouble.">

Saunders nodded once at Cajé's translation, cleared his throat, and stood up. He moved away from the fire and picked up his sodden gloves, pulling them on as he slipped outside into the night.

The fire popped and a log disintegrated, sending sparks flying in all directions. Aramis kicked the pieces back into the pit and added another log, poking it with a long knife until he was satisfied with the configuration.

<"Why did the Germans use the trail?"> Cajé's voice held an edge he hadn't intended to reveal, and he looked away, busying himself with the ragged ends of the bandage on his injured arm.

The Frenchman continued staring at the fire, although one eyebrow edged upward, lending him an air of questioning indifference. Sighing, he looped his arms about his knees as he perched on the stool, the faint odor of mildew hanging around him. He glanced across the room at the slumped figures of Littlejohn and Ames, slumbering on their packing crates.

<"It's not a short story, my friend."> Aramis reached inside his raggedy sweater, removing a battered tin flask. He unscrewed the top and took a long pull, swallowing hard at the bitter taste of the alcohol. <"Not a short story, but we have time."> He handed the flask to Cajé, tapping it gently against the scout's shoulder until he turned and took it tentatively from Aramis' hand.

<"For years, my family has lived on this mountain, herding goats and cows. I remember playing in the meadows as a boy, chasing my brother up and down the slopes."> He retrieved the flask from Cajé, and swiped the top with his filthy sleeve before tossing back another swig. The flames from the fire reflected in his eyes, the pupils pinpointed lost in the muddy brown of his irises.

<"There was a dairy in the town, the town where your Army has set up its camp. Sebastian, my brother, he and I took the cans down the mountain after milking. We did the goats, our father the cows. Down the mountain, we went as fast as we could. But after, when the money was in our father's account, well...we had all afternoon to get back home.">

Cajé blinked slowly, the moonshine warming him from the inside out. It took him a few minutes to realize that Aramis had fallen silent, and then turned his head just enough to see the Frenchman. The shadows in the little room made it difficult to see but Cajé would later swear that tears glistened in Aramis' eyes, despite the crooked smile that tugged at his lips. Shifting in his seat, taking care not to jostle his wounded arm, Cajé resumed watching the fire.

<"My sister, so beautiful, she was born when I was ten. She was the apple of my father's eye and so very sweet. She learned to walk holding onto the collar of our old sheepdog. He would stand there as she tangled her fat baby fingers into his long fur and pull herself up. He never nipped her, good old Hercule.">

Aramis leaned out of his seat, a battered cigarette between his lips. He reached down and pulled a slender twig from the outer edge of the fire pit, dangling the end into the flames for a moment. It blazed brightly, popping as the single dry leaf ignited. Bringing the twig to the end of the cigarette, Aramis drew the flame into the tobacco, sighing as the pungent smoke curled upward.

He smoked a few minutes, propping his battered boots on a smooth stone. He coughed once, struggling to hold onto the smoke.

<"It's been a long time since I've tasted tobacco, my friend. Thank you."> Aramis held up the empty pack, crumbling it into a tight ball, and tossed it into the fire.

Cajé nodded. His lighter, returned to him once the fire had been lit, nestled against his chest in his shirt pocket. The pack of cigarettes Aramis had kept, lighting one for the scout and

then keeping the rest for himself. Caje hadn't seen where the pack went, but every now and then Aramis lit another one, eagerly inhaling the smoke and holding it in his thin chest as long as possible. Oddly, Caje hadn't felt the slightest urge for a cigarette. He shook his head, trying to dislodge an image of Kirby, lighting one cigarette after another, talking a mile a minute. *Kirby...*

<"He's dead now.">

The scout swung around, dropping one knee to the ground to catch his balance. Dark eyes narrowed in anger, he brought a fist as high as his chest, mouth opening ready to protest the maquis' words.

Aramis beat him to it. <"Sebby, my brother Sebastien is dead now. My sister, too."> He uncrossed his ankles, and recrossed them in the opposite direction. <"We all stayed on the mountain after we were grown, after all, what else did we know? And, after all, in what more beautiful place could we live? Sebby and I found these caverns when we were teenagers. It was in the spring after a winter season of avalanches, the rocks...they shifted..."> He smoked a moment.

Caje settled back and watched Aramis as the man methodically burned the cigarette to the very tip, holding it between two pinched fingers. These mountains were so very different from the bayous of his own youth. He well understood, though, the pull of home, the beauty of the familiar.

<"When the Bosch came, they went from village to village, from farm to farm. They ate the cows, slaughtered the chickens, the pigs."> Aramis flicked the end of the cigarette into the fire, staring until it was consumed by the flames. <"Some of us had been working for the underground, right from the beginning. Sebby and I, we used the caves and tunnels to move guns, men, ammo, move them from one place to another quickly and easily.">

Fighting a yawn, Caje turned back to the fire, holding his injured arm close to his chest. Despite the inviting snores from across the room, he didn't close his eyes, however, keeping his attention on the morose Frenchman.

<"Eventually, the Germans, they realized that we had a way of going to ground, like a fox or a hare. We would strike, destroy their communication wires, or their vehicles, or whatever."> Aramis waved his hand lazily, fanning his fingers. <"And then, when they came after us, we'd vanish like a ghost."> He smiled a bit, showing just a little of the yellowed teeth.

<"But then, they started back with the farms. No more animals to slaughter. They would wait until the men were gone, trying to find food, or...or whatever. Then they would kick in the doors, finding the women and children alone."> Aramis bent his neck slowly, lowering his head into his hands. He gently massaged his temples, while his lips moved silently a moment. Then he took a deep breath, and continued.

<"The children they killed outright, there was no sport in it. But the women. The women they took, one after another, every man in the squad. And then they made the women cook for them, feed them. And then they took them again. And then...">

Caje shifted, almost overbalancing onto the floor. He turned to find Aramis staring back at him, daring him to look away.

<"...and then they killed them. Left them lying there on the floor in a pool of blood, like garbage."> The Frenchman nodded, eliciting a faint bob of Caje's head in response. <"My sister, she was one of them. Sebby found her when he returned from a raid.">

Aramis abruptly stood, knocking over the backless chair, the clatter waking Littlejohn who came to his feet searching for his M1, long arms flailing in the dim light. <"Sebby was careless. He should have waited, but he...well, it was his little sister, after all."> The fire shifted, and a log fell through the center, sending a stream of sparks upward with the swirling smoke. Aramis stared at it a moment, and then reached for another log and tossed it in the pit.

<"Where is your sergeant? It must be close to dawn."> Grabbing his tattered greatcoat, Aramis strode from the room.

Littlejohn finally found his rifle and yawned hugely, the weapon dangling from the fingers of one hand while he knuckled the sleep from his eyes with the other. "Caje? What was that all about?"

The scout fumbled with his parka, his injured arm clumsy as he tried to thread it through the sleeve.

"Here, lemme help ya." Littlejohn took a step toward Caje, his own arms entangled in the damp knot of his oversized coat.

Caje spun away, eyes dark with pain and guilt and God-knew what else. He wouldn't meet Littlejohn's puzzled stare, instead shrugging the parka around his shoulders, and followed Aramis from the cave.

Littlejohn stood there a moment longer, before turning and kicking at the slats of Ames' packing crate. "Rise and shine, sunshine. Time to go win the war."

Ames looked up, eye ringed with the dark smudges of fatigue, but alert nonetheless. Rising, he scooped up his jacket and rifle, clutching them momentarily to his chest. "Littlejohn? I ain't got any idea what he just said, but it was terrible all the same. Tell me, just which war is it we're tryin' to win?"

*** *** ***

The sun flickered behind wispy clouds, its diluted light filtering into the shelter shared by Doc and Kirby. The BAR man stirred, blinking sleepily, as he became aware of the morning's arrival. It took him a moment to realize that he'd slept through the night, warm and cozy in his makeshift nest alongside Doc's still form.

DOC!

Kirby squirmed backwards into the pine boughs, giving him enough room to look down into the medic's face. He held his breath, staring intently.

Doc's eyelids fluttered as he muttered something too soft for Kirby to hear. He turned his head slightly, stretching his arms and legs. As his left elbow extended, Doc winced, freezing in position and moaning audibly. Rolling onto his back, he shivered as the slight breeze slid over his body.

"Doc, it's me, Kirby. I gotta see if we've got any visitors. You sit tight, okay?" Kirby slid the BAR from under the medic's shoulder, running his fingers over it and checking the safety. He gently laid one hand on Doc's chest, feeling the steady rise and fall, and drew comfort from the simple act. It crossed his mind that he was finally warm – and now he must go back out onto the mountain. With a sigh, he shoved the BAR ahead of him, under the heavy skirts of the trees, and slid out into the daylight.

The BAR vanished from his grasp with a swiftness that bordered on magical. One moment the weapon was there, the next it was not. Kirby had but a second to stare at his empty hands before he was brutally dragged from beneath the tree and tossed face first into the snow, his arms painfully wrenched behind him. He could feel the ridges of a boot against his back, squeezing the air from his lungs as he fought to breathe. Struggling to get his head up, he gasped in pain as his wrists were roughly tied together.

Several voices conferred, whispering hoarsely in a language that sounded familiar to Kirby, but one which he didn't understand. Twisting his neck slightly to the left and holding his breath, he saw something he didn't want to see. German jackboots, topped by the hem of a German greatcoat. He closed his eyes in despair as a hand roughly turned his face back to the snow.

<Hands up! Come out of there now>

This voice was speaking in German, Kirby knew. Hands up was a phrase they'd practiced and used many times both in capturing and being captured by German infantrymen. His heart sank lower as the words were repeated with no answer from the medic lying asleep or

unconscious beneath the tree limbs. Another voice said something to the first man, apparently urging him to go in after the medic. Kirby tensed, only to feel increased pressure from the boot in his back.

“HEY!”

Doc’s puzzled shout was followed by a howl of pain that tore into Kirby’s heart. The medic fell abruptly silent following a muffled thud. Kirby could only surmise that it must have been a boot or rifle butt impacting Doc’s body. He held stock still, listening for anything, anything that might mean his squad mate was still alive. After what seemed an eternity, he heard a hoarse wheezing, followed by a wracking cough. *Doc’s alive!* The adrenaline sang through his bloodstream, and he suddenly rolled to the side, unbalancing the man whose foot rested on him and dumping him on his backside.

“What the-“ Kirby stared at another man towering over him, oblivious to the bayonet hovering near his throat. “Who are-“ The bayonet pressed against his neck, drawing a thin line of blood.

The man, as thin as a shadow but impossibly tall, placed one gloved finger against his lips. “Shhhh.” He glared at Kirby’s captor, as the man regained his feet and his rifle. Withdrawing his own weapon, he shoved through the snow toward the pine where another man was dragging Doc out from under the feathery branches.

Kirby managed to turn his head enough to see as his squad mate was dumped in the snow at the tall man’s feet. The medic slowly gathered his wounded arm to his chest, teeth gritted tightly together, and breathing hard. He glanced once at Kirby, lips twitching in a ghostly semblance of a grin. Doc then looked up, blue eyes narrowing against the bright sunlight stabbing through the trees.

“Who the hell are you?”

It was an excellent question in Kirby’s opinion. The tall man wore the heavy boots of a stormtrooper and the unit’s familiar blue-gray woolen pants. On his upper half, however, a cape of pieced leather hung from his shoulders almost to his thighs. A faded red sweater poked out of the neck and at his wrists while a fur covered hat perched on his head. A beard clung to his cadaverous cheeks, making him look even more skin and bones, rather than adding bulk. Only his eyes seemed alive. Electric blue in color, they snapped back and forth between the two Americans, sizing them up.

“Sprechen Sie Deutsch?”

Kirby blinked. “Sprechen sie what? Are you nuts?” He managed to get one elbow under him and sat up, mindful of the rifle barrel hovering around his ear.

One of the others knelt next to Doc, resting the medic’s wounded arm across his knee. He studied the blood-encrusted scarf for a long moment and then looked up at the tall man.

“Il a perdu beaucoup de sang.” He pulled off a ragged mitten and placed the back of his hand against Doc’s forehead, all the while taking in the medic’s flushed cheeks and glassy eyes. “Il a une fièvre, aussi.”

Kirby looked from one man to the other, eyebrows raised in growing puzzlement. “Look, can’t you speak a language we understand?” He tried to move closer to Doc, only to have the cold steel of the bayonet shoved under his chin again. “Doc? He hurtin’ you? Hey, French guy, I wouldn’t unwrap that if I were you. Good thing you already got him lyin’ down.”

The tall man stared down at the BAR man appraisingly, his lower lip caught by a yellowed incisor. After a long moment, he spoke. “Ti tut zhto delayesh?”

Kirby stared back at the man, eyes darkening in growing anger. “Look, I don’t care how many languages you speak, I only understand one. American.”

The medic flinched as the man working on his arm wrapped a clean length of striped cloth around it. “English, Kirby, English.”

“English? I can speak English for you. Or Russkij. Or Deutsch. Or Francais. Whichever is easier for you, spy.” Crossing his arms under the cape, long barrel of his rifle sticking out one side, the man stared at Kirby.

“Spy?” Kirby spluttered, his elbows flapping on each side, heedless of the blade in his face. “I’m not a spy, he’s...we’re not spies. We’re Americans.” He glanced down at his filthy uniform. “GIs.”

Doc sat up with the help of the man in the German greatcoat. He hugged his arm against his chest, swallowing hard against the bile rising in his throat. “Hey, Kirby? You think these guys are...um...you know?” He nodded his thanks to the stranger who stood and stepped back, pulling his rifle from his back into his arms.

Kirby rolled his eyes and puffed out his cheeks in exasperation. “Doc, what’re the odds we’d get swept away by a’ avalanche an’ then run into the three musketeers? Only thing we got is three guys. With guns. You think one of ‘em’s that Aramis?” He snorted, wishing he had a cigarette. And then wished he’d been able to do what he’d crawled out from under the pine tree to do in the first place. Sitting in the snow wasn’t helping any.

The tall man looked from one GI to the other and then exchanged glances with his men. “So you are looking for a musketeer? Perhaps you are a few centuries too late?” He laughed quietly while still watching his captives, blue eyes flat and unreadable.

Shivering as the wind threaded its way through the forest, Doc hiked an eyebrow in Kirby’s direction. “I don’t think they’re Germans, do you? We’d be dead already.”

Kirby shrugged, twisting his hands against the rough twine binding them together. “Don’t know what to think anymore, Doc. I never read the stupid book.” His words died in his throat as the tall man approached, grim-faced and bayonet in hand. “Oh jeez...no...”

The blade flashed and Kirby fell backward into the snow. Doc lunged toward him, eyes white-rimmed in anxiety, only to be stopped by the butt of a rifle. His heart hammered in his chest, sending blood racing through his bloodstream and pounding in his arm. He moaned against the pain, bit down hard on his lower lip and fought a losing battle to remain conscious as the shadow of the tall man fell over him.

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Nelson stared at Littlejohn’s back, so beyond mere exhaustion that he was afraid to look elsewhere, afraid he might walk right off the side of the mountain. Two hours had passed since they’d left the cave and the terrain hadn’t changed in any discernable manner. Nelson had hoped that walking down the slopes would be easier than trudging up, but his ankles disagreed with him. Just as he opened his mouth to call out to Littlejohn, wondering just how far they’d traveled, Nelson saw Saunders raise his fist and drop to one knee in the snow. The young private gratefully fell to his own knees and promptly vanished in a snow bank.

“Idiot.” Littlejohn slid his rifle behind his back and reached for a secure handhold on a young pine. His other hand, he extended toward Nelson’s flailing limbs. “Hold still, Billy, I can’t reach ya.”

“Shhhh!” Saunders glared from ten yards away, the heat in his eyes visible from where Littlejohn crouched. He pulled his map and overlays from his overcoat and studied them for a moment before shaking his head. He squinted up at the weak sun’s pitiful attempt to penetrate the trees and then down at his compass, its unwavering needle telling him direction but not distance. Sitting back on his heels, he closed his eyes for a brief moment, his only concession so far to the numbing fatigue settling in his bones. Saunders felt Aramis slide past him, the long greatcoat brushing against his face. Shifting to his right to give the Maquis room, Saunders opened his eyes again, and found himself staring straight at his scout.

Caje knelt in the middle of the path, his back to the efforts of his squad mates as they extricated Nelson. His eyes burned with an odd light, accentuated by the dark smudges ringing

them. Left arm held stiffly against his side, he shivered, clutching at the throat of his parka, and twisted it tighter around his neck.

Saunders stifled a cough against his sleeve and cleared his throat. "Caje."

The scout blinked, but otherwise didn't acknowledge the CO's hoarse whisper.

"Caje."

Still no response.

The sergeant sighed and dropped his hands to his knees as he prepared to stand. A wracking cough worked its way up from his lungs, doubling him over. An odd whining noise buzzed in his ears as snow rained down from the tree towering overhead. He rolled to one side, still coughing madly, the Thompson automatically in his arms. In his peripheral vision, Saunders saw Littlejohn dive into the same drift hiding Nelson, the big man's body flattening the snow as he squirmed toward the base of a thick pine. Ames dove in the other direction, landing with his M1 beneath him. And Caje...

Aramis knocked Saunders' helmet flying as he flung himself back up the trail, tackling the Cajun and dragging him behind a deadfall. The forest exploded around them, pine needles spraying everywhere, while the snow dropped in great clumps from the trees above.

Scrambling for cover, Saunders realized the Germans had them cold. They had no doubt been waiting for them to arrive at this particular juncture. He cleared the ice from the Thompson's magazine and slammed it home again, firing almost immediately. He glanced back at his men, gratified to see both Littlejohn and Nelson moving further out on the flank, returning the enemy fire in a coordinated manner. Spreading his elbows wide, Saunders let himself slide a fraction downhill, gaining him a wider field of fire. He took full advantage of it, taking out one of the Krauts. He glanced again toward the squad, seeking Ames, and finally found him approximately twenty feet north of Nelson, frantically trying to clear his weapon.

Jesus! Saunders swallowed hard against the cough welling up in his chest. He couldn't get to the kid, they were all pinned in position. Craning his neck, he tried to see beyond the deadfall where Caje and Aramis were holed up, but either the angle was wrong or they were no longer there. *Dammit!* He fired a short burst, and then dropped back into the snow. He was out of grenades, out of any option other than to continue slinging hot lead back and forth until one side ran out of ammo or blood.

The sun rose higher in the clearing sky, blinding them all as the brilliant light bounced off the crystals of snow and ice blanketing the mountainside. Saunders didn't hesitate, floundering through the snow toward the Germans' flank. Panting heavily, he ignored the pain flaring in his chest with each breath, and concentrated on not tumbling down the slope or into a drift. The gunfire slacked off to a few half-hearted volleys from each side. *Dammit, everyone's on the move.* He fell to one knee and checked his bearings, squinting in all directions. His ears were so muffled by gunfire and the infernal snow, he couldn't hear much of anything.

It was the shadow that gave the man away. As Saunders wriggled under the thick cover of a snow-laden bush, he felt a sudden coldness across his calves. Rolling to one side and jackknifing his legs under him, the sergeant swung the Thompson in a quick burst, killing the German who hadn't realized until too late that Saunders was there. A sudden fierce exchange of gunfire uphill hammered his ears and drove him to his feet again. A quick look at the Kraut confirmed the kill, and Saunders ran on, backtracking along the man's trail. He was out of all communication range with his men and the knowledge tweaked the edges of his conscious thought. He had to trust them. Trust had gotten them this far, he'd have to believe it would be enough.

But, Saunders mused, aching legs forcing their way through the heavy drifts, *hadn't he always said "it would be a cold day in hell..."? If ever there was a cold day in hell, this had to be it...*

Doc clawed his way up from his latest visit to unconsciousness only to find himself curled into a ball in the snow, left arm locked protectively against his chest and his right hand clenched into a fist. He remained still for a moment, wondering just where he was this time. Never for a moment did he think he was safely off the God-forsaken mountain, but couldn't he have woken up delirious just once, with a pretty girl patting his shoulder instead of Kirby? *KIRBY?* Unmindful of his wounded arm, Doc scrabbled his way to a sitting position, his bleary blue eyes, red-rimmed with fatigue and anxiety, seeking the owner of the voice exhorting him to "please don't be dead."

"Kirby..." Doc's voice failed him and he tried again. "Kirby, I thought YOU were dead."

The BAR man sat back in the snow and ran his hands over his face, scrubbing at his eyes a little longer than was necessary. Finally, he looked back up and met Doc's level gaze. "Not this time." Kirby held up his wrists, where the ragged remains of the twine dangled, the loop between them neatly severed. "You really gotta stop doin' that, Doc, it's givin' me heart failure."

"I'm not really enjoyin' it much, myself." The medic glanced up at their captors, who were conferring a few yards away. "What the hell happened?"

Kirby shook his head and scratched one ear. "I think they decided we ain't Krauts. Not sure just who they think we are, though." He staggered to his feet in the loose snow as the man who had bound Doc's arm crossed back to the two Americans.

<"It's not much, but it's all there is."> He held out two small pieces of stale bread and a goatskin container of some sloshing liquid.

Kirby almost knocked the food from the man's hand as he grabbed it, cramming the entire chunk into his mouth at once. Chewing enthusiastically, he handed Doc his share.

"Don't suppose it's poisoned, do ya?" Doc sniffed the bread, his stomach growling despite himself.

Kirby's eyes filled with panic but he kept chewing. Finally swallowing with a huge effort, he eyed the bread in Doc's hand with a predatory interest. "I dunno, Doc, but I tell ya what, I'll eat yours, too, an' you can keep an eye on me an' see if I start twitchin' or somethin'."

The medic stared at Kirby a moment longer and then at the scrap of crust, bitter saliva flooding his mouth and nauseating him. He closed his eyes and willed his stomach to settle.

"Come on, Doc, eat it or give it." Kirby swiped at his cracked lips with the back of his hand, suddenly aware of the gnawing hunger that replaced the raw panic in his belly. Up to now, the mechanics of survival had kept his baser needs at bay. Apparently captured and at the mercy of the three strangers, Kirby had only one thing on his mind – his next meal.

*** *** ***

The tall leader watched his two captives, troubled blue eyes settling first on the wiry infantryman and then the medic. He turned to his two comrades.

<"The rest of their patrol must have been cut off by the avalanche.">

The younger of the two others pulled his threadbare coat tighter around his narrow shoulders. <"Or been swept away by it."> He shivered. <"The wound, it's a gunshot, Joachim.">

<"What?"> Joachim spun around, staring at the American medic. <"I thought...I...">

The third man spoke up, the stock of the BAR settled firmly against his hip and a thin, home-rolled cigarette in the other hand. <"They may not be the Americans."> A thin wisp of smoke escaped his lips. <"I say we shoot them now.">

Joachim shook his head slowly. <"No, Yuri. They seem too...">

<"Stupid?">

The medic finished his bread, swallowing it with difficulty. His friend reached a tentative hand around his back and helped him to his feet, steadying the man. They both looked up, identical questioning expressions on their faces. Joachim shook his head again and stubbed out his own cigarette on the icy bark of a sturdy pine. He dropped the remainder into his pocket, signaling to his men to move out.

<"No, Yuri, I was going to say...naïve."> He waited while Yuri took the point, followed by the young Frenchman, Jean-Pierre. Waving the prisoners ahead of him, Joachim brought up the rear, turning in short, twitchy arcs as he studied the undulating waves of snow piled up against the stalwart pines around them. He saw no sign of any other living thing at all on the mountain, not even the birds that had been so prevalent just at dawn. Joachim pulled his cape closer around his neck and tried to throw off a growing anxiety as he forced his way through the heavy snow. Ahead of him, the two Americans, and he hoped to God they *were* Americans, struggled through the drifts, leaning on each other. First one slewed in one direction, and then the other to the opposite. Joachim felt a little seasick watching them, and also a little envious. It had been a lifetime since he'd had anyone to lean on. He and Yuri had worked together for several years now, and Jean-Pierre had joined them after his father was killed. Trust was one thing, though, and brotherhood another.

Joachim shook off his thoughts, forcing himself to pay attention to the matters at hand. *Where were the birds?*

*** *** ***

Aramis dragged Cajé by the collar, hauling him bodily up and over the deadfall and into the scant protection provided by the rotting logs. Bullets zinged over their heads, slapping into the pines and snapping off branches that rained down on the two men, covering them in bark and ice-encased snow. Cajé struggled to get his knees under him, fending off Aramis' clumsy hands. He finally gained his balance, only to be yanked facedown in the snow again as the Frenchman pulled at his back.

<"What are you doing?"> Cajé kicked at the man, catching him hard on the thigh. Frenzied gunfire erupted to their left, approximately twenty yards away. The scout tried to remember where his squad mates had been, cursing himself for allowing his thoughts to wander.

Aramis redoubled his efforts. <"I need your rifle, my friend."> He pinned Cajé flat in the snow bank as machinegun fire swept over their heads. <"Please, let me have it!">

Blinding pain lanced its way from Cajé's injured arm directly to his brain. He howled against it, only dimly aware of Aramis pulling a knife from the depths of his parka and slicing through the strap holding the Garand to the scout's back. Falling into the snow as Aramis removed the extra clips from his pockets, Cajé curled into himself, knowing only the agony pulsing through his body and unable to claw his way above it.

Aramis slammed a fresh clip into the rifle. He pulled off the huge hat and turned his head, carefully gauging the direction of fire. Leaning down over Cajé, he patted him awkwardly on the shoulder, muttering at him, and then vanished in the brilliant morning.

<"I'll be back, brother. I'll be back."> Cajé wasn't sure if he'd heard the words correctly, but when he found the strength to look up, the Frenchman was gone.

*** *** ***

Saunders lay at the base of a rock, shoulder against its smooth surface and belly-down in a snowdrift. It had taken a couple of minutes to gain the altitude, but he hoped it would be worth it. While he climbed, he could hear the sharp crack of American M1s firing steadily away.

Unfortunately, they seemed to be answered in equal numbers by German rifles and submachine guns.

He edged closer to the brink, slipping on the smooth sheet of ice that lay just beneath the crystallized snow. Sticking out one elbow, Saunders wedged himself against a spindly tree that grew almost sideways from the cliff face. *Another inch, just another inch.* From his vantage point, he could now see muzzle flashes in the brush below. Jamming his cheek against the rock, he looked away from the positions he knew to be his own men, craning his neck in a desperate attempt to locate the enemy shooters.

And cursed at the sudden realization. He'd gotten all the way up here and still didn't have a line of sight on the Germans. Saunders shivered, the sweat pooling around his collar and sliding down his chest. The fingers of his free hand curled into a tight fist, and he bit his lower lip hard enough to draw blood. *All the way up here and no damn help at all! I can't help them!*

*** *** ***

Nelson let himself slide backward a few feet, putting him below the reach of the Germans. He reloaded, fumbling a fresh clip from his belt, and slammed it into the M1 with fingers trembling from adrenaline overload. "Littlejohn? Hey, Littlejohn?" He crawled a few yards closer to the tall private's position and tried again. "Hey, LITTLEJOHN!"

The sharp crack of an M1 answered him. A second later, so did Littlejohn.

"Yeah?"

"I'm down to one clip, how about you?" Nelson rolled on his back, gaze sweeping the snowy forest behind them.

Littlejohn shifted, his body a long shadow behind the solid protection of a newly fallen pine. He fired again. "I got one more!" Return fire zinged over his head, and he shoved his face into the snow.

"I'm gonna move out on the flank!" Nelson didn't wait for Littlejohn's acknowledgement, but dragged himself to his knees. He took one more look back the way they'd come, wondering where Ames had gotten to. A flicker of color caught his eye, and he fell again as he struggled to face the new threat, fumbling the M1 in cold-clumsy hands. He fired.

Aramis burst out of the brush, dark eyes blazing. He held a Garand, the ends of its straps flapping this way and that. Of Nelson's bullet whizzing by his ear, he gave no notice. He glanced at both Littlejohn and Billy, and then continued on, moving with surprising grace through the drifts. In seconds, he was lost to sight.

Nelson stared after him, struck dumb by the enormity of what he had almost done. Lurching to his feet again, he cleared the snow from his M1, and then set off after Aramis, his breath puffing from his pursed lips like a steam train.

Behind him, Littlejohn continued his careful targeting of the Germans, the space between each shot growing longer as he considered the dwindling ammo. He hoped that the lack of Thompson fire to his left signaled an attempt by Saunders to outflank the Krauts. *Or the Sarge is dead.* Quickly snapping off a shot, Littlejohn's eyes grew wide at his own thoughts, as if admitting to the possibility might just make it reality. He moved to the other end of the log, swimming through the snow with outstretched arms and kicking feet, and snapped off another shot. A quick glance over his shoulder assured him that Nelson was gone, no doubt flanking to the right. The image of young Nelson carrying on brought Littlejohn a small measure of resolve, and he squared his shoulders, peering into the blinding white with eyes already tearing in the wind.

*** *** ***

Caje leaned against a pine, shimmying his way upright by resting his head against the trunk and pulling with his one good arm. He felt awkward and unbalanced, accustomed as he was to the weight of the Garand in his hands or across his back. The initial outpouring of lead from both sides had subsided into a more deliberate back and forth exchange, giving Caje time to think, something he'd been avoiding at all costs for a day now.

He jammed his boots against the base of the deadfall and managed to squirm his way back to the path. Remaining behind the protective cover, Caje inched along, picturing where they'd all been when the shooting started. He knew he'd not been paying attention, knowledge that sat burning in his stomach. The overwhelming pain in his arm had consumed him, or perhaps he'd let it consume him. Now he ignored it, dark eyes squinting against the brilliant sunshine, and searched for the rest of the squad.

*** *** ***

Ames sprawled across the packed ice, his M1 within reach of his outstretched fingers but he made no effort to grasp it. Caje crabbed a few more yards sideways in the shadows and looked again. Now he could see the spreading bloodstain in the snow beneath the kid's body, and the surprised expression on his young face. *Dammit!*

At least there was no more gunfire in this direction. Caje stared a moment at the route he knew Sarge must have gone, but dismissed it for himself, knowing that the path would involve climbing and rougher terrain than he could currently handle. *Dammit!*

He looked one more time toward Ames, and then set out to the right flank, jaw clenched in determination.

*** *** ***

Kirby stumbled along the wandering path, aware of the packed earth beneath his boots but not as yet assigning any particular significance to the fact. They'd been walking for over an hour now and his back ached in waves that almost took his breath away. He was still on his feet, though, and for that he was thankful. Beside him, Doc struggled on, panting heavily but moving largely under his own steam. Kirby stole a quick glance at the medic, wondering just how much further their captors were planning on going and just how much more he and Doc would be able to take.

Ahead, the youngest of the three paused at a bend in the trail, dropping to one knee with his rifle at the ready. He held up one fist, and the Americans slewed to a stop, slipping on the icy path. The tall man shoved past them, long legs navigating the slick terrain with ease. The Russian met him at the bend, and all three crouched in the shadows, conferring in low voices.

Doc shifted his wounded arm in its makeshift sling, his brow furrowed and blue eyes frankly worried. "Kirby, you okay?"

Kirby shrugged, rotating each shoulder with exquisite care before laying his left hand flat against his flank. "I'd be better if I knew where we were goin'." He pointed his chin at the three strangers. "That Yakim, he ain't no Kraut. Sure wish I knew what he was, though." Sighing, Kirby returned his attention to the medic. "You doin' alright?"

Doc stared back at him a moment, wondering if his own cheeks had taken on that waxy sheen, eyeballs sunken into their orbits. He knew he had to look worse, but refused to consider it for now. "It don't hurt so much anymore." The lie was easy. Doc had dedicated a lifetime to patching up his buddies, and easing their worries. It didn't matter that that lifetime was only a few months long, born on D-Day. Nothing before seemed to matter anymore. *Here and now, here and now...*

Joachim returned to them, the deerskin bag in hand. He handed it to Doc first. "We have to be very quiet from here on. The Bosch are everywhere."

Kirby snorted. "So, you don't think we're Germans anymore?" He took the proffered bag from Doc, taking a huge swig of the wine. He grimaced as the fluid coated his tongue, the smell of dusty grapes under a hot sun filling his nostrils inexplicably. Swallowing, he looked up at the tall man.

Joachim retrieved the deerskin, allowing himself one small mouthful. After capping the bag, he motioned them to their feet. As he pulled Doc's good arm across his own broad shoulders, he caught Kirby's eye. "I never did, mon ami. I never did."

*** *** ***

Aramis knelt in the lee of a misshapen pine, sheltering beneath the conjoined trunk of two trees. He checked his bearings, taking note of a huge boulder that resembled a white bear with its coating of snow and an oddly straight line of trees. And, of course, the twisted trunk beneath his fingers, formed when his brother Sebastian had bent the young saplings into an eternal embrace. He leaned his cheek against the rough bark and felt Sebb's presence fill him, a strength he hadn't realized he still possessed until now.

A tree branch snapped uphill of him, and Aramis sank further into the narrow space at the base of the pine. He raised the unfamiliar Garand, snugging its butt plate against his shoulder and cradling the front guard in his left hand. He breathed in deeply, and held his breath, dark eyes unblinking. The wind whipped up a tiny snowstorm, ice crystals skittering over the drifts and settling in Aramis' hair and across his face, whitening out his view of the upper path. And then it dropped, revealing two grey-clad figures, as insubstantial as shadows.

He squeezed the trigger, immediately adjusting his aim and firing again. The rifle had bucked a little in his arms, but not as much as he'd thought it might. It felt oddly comfortable, even as the smoke from the spent gunpowder burned his eyes. Aramis held his position, gaze flicking between the motionless bodies and the trail beyond.

"Don't shoot, it's me!"

Aramis didn't turn but raised one hand in recognition of the young private. He watched Nelson approach the Germans, turning them over with his foot, the faint expression of distaste across his boyish face. "Est-ce qu'ils sont morts?"

Nelson frowned, not understanding the Maquis' words entirely, but he'd heard Cajé say someone was "more" many times. He nodded, fading back to join Aramis at the base of the twining trees. "They're dead, both of 'em." He glanced at the Frenchman, realizing that the rifle must belong to Cajé.

Aramis patted him on the shoulder, and then pointed off to the right. "<You, you must flank them, there can't be many left.>" He paused, turning his head at a flurry of gunfire back down the hill, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "<There aren't many of us left, either.>" Looking back at Nelson, dark eyes burning with renewed intensity, Aramis shoved him hard, waving him off. "<Go on, go on! You flank them, I'll...>" He flapped his hand toward the fall line and shrugged.

Nelson stared back, mouth hanging open. "I can't let you...you'll be...up the middle?"

The Frenchman got his feet under himself and slowly stood, flexing his joints one by one. He reached out one hand, its ancient glove flapping around the wrist, and patted Billy's cheek. And then shoved him hard again. "Allez!" Great coat flapping around his knees, he plunged into the drifts, Cajé's Garand held tightly in both arms.

Nelson blinked, and then turned up the flank, shaking his head furiously.

*** *** ***

Saunders lay on his side in the snow, coughing and retching. The trek off the ice shelf hadn't been easy, but he was finally back where he'd started from. He clutched his ribs, the Thompson lying useless against his back. Each breath felt like he was drawing ground glass instead of oxygen into his lungs. As the wracking cough subsided, he forced himself to breathe slower, straining his ears to pinpoint the direction of the firefight between wheezy intakes of frigid mountain air.

A single M1 barked, not more than fifty yards away. Saunders hung his head, knowing fifty yards might as well be fifty miles. Every time he stood, his vision greyed at the edges. Another American rifle sounded, even further away this time, but only two shots. As Saunders worked his way to hands and knees, he wondered why the Germans hadn't answered. *Did we win? Please, God, did we win?*

Crawling through the loose snow covering the game trail's ancient floor, Saunders dragged himself up the mountain, one painful inch at a time. He didn't even try to ready his weapon. He needed both hands just to keep moving and doubted he even had the strength to lift the Thompson in order to fire it. *Just keep moving.* Pausing, he coughed hard again, gagging on the coppery taste filling his mouth.

A shadow lay across the path ahead, a shape too regular to have been made by nature. Saunders felt his muscles tighten and shivered in the sudden wind gusting down the mountain. Forcing himself to move on, the sergeant drew closer to the body. An M1 lay just beyond the reach of one limp gloved hand. Saunders knelt beside the dead man, resting his hand on the soldier's body for a moment before turning him over.

Ames. Saunders wasn't sure if the burning pain in his stomach was grief or relief. After all, Ames had only been with the squad for a few days. Was it grief that he'd never know what sort of man the brash young kid would become? Or perhaps relief that he wouldn't have to bury yet another friend whose memory would dwell in his heart forever?

*** *** ***

Caje tracked Aramis' long strides, ignoring the pain that shot from wrist to shoulder with each of his own heavy footfalls. Just ahead he knew he'd find either Nelson or Littlejohn, judging from the slow but steady rate of M1 fire emanating from the trees. He slowed, crouching low, and paused behind a particularly stout pine, sticking his head out far enough to glimpse a pair of boots so enormous they could only belong to Littlejohn.

Dropping to his knees, Caje waited for the big private to reload, then scooted forward, beneath the enemy fire sailing by overhead. By the time he reached Littlejohn's side, he'd shoveled enough snow down the neck of his parka that any warmth he'd managed to acquire running along the track was long gone. He gripped Littlejohn's shoulder, effectively keeping the man from shooting him in his surprise at the scout's sudden appearance.

Littlejohn blinked a couple of times and then resumed his careful firing.

Caje rolled onto his back, checking both left and right for signs of his squad mates. "Where's Nelson?"

"Flanking, to the right." Littlejohn's index finger stilled over the trigger, and he turned his head enough to stare at the Cajun. "With Aramis."

"Quoi?" Caje's eyes grew wide as he met Littlejohn's level gaze. "With Aramis?"

Littlejohn nodded and settled over his rifle once again. "Yup, with Aramis."

Caje scrambled to the end of the log, timing his departure to Littlejohn's reentry into the fray. As the big private began to fire, he took off, bent in half over his injured arm, legs churning furiously in the deep snow.

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Kirby crouched in the shadows, his lower lip caught between his teeth as he fought to control his shivering. Not forty feet away, a couple of German soldiers ambled along, one pausing to light a cigarette while the other waited for him. *They're not looking for us; they don't know we're here.* Kirby turned his head a fraction of an inch and stared down the trail. He could see the youngest of his three captors, the Frenchman, huddled motionless behind a thick stand of pines. Beyond him, the man Kirby had started referring to as the Russian, at least in the privacy of his own thoughts, rose to his feet and edged away, vanishing into the snow-dappled forest.

They're not looking for us; they don't know we're here. Kirby squeezed his eyes shut, his lips moving silently as he repeated the words to himself, over and over. *They're not looking...* Doc slewed into him, and Kirby flinched but held his position. He steadied the medic, as the leader, the Gypsy, ducked out from under Doc's uninjured arm. For the last hour, the Gypsy had been supporting Doc entirely on his own, ever since Kirby's legs decided to give way just as they'd been crossing a particularly slick section of the trail. While not coming close to their spectacular tumble down the mountain in the grip of the avalanche, the two Americans had careened into the Frenchman, flattening him and leaving him gasping for air. After sorting out arms and legs, the Gypsy sent Kirby ahead, a position he was more than happy to assume.

Now the leader nodded at his teammate's hand signal. He leaned over the medic and whispered directly into Kirby's ear. "Follow Jean-Pierre." Gripping Kirby's parka, the Gypsy shook him lightly, chidingly. "And be very, very quiet."

Kirby nodded. He glanced again at the Germans, who were moving slowly in the opposite direction to the one taken by the Russian. *They don't know we're here.* He patted Doc's knee, and crept away.

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Doc knelt on the ice, leaning forward onto his one good hand, and willed the dizziness away. His other arm was tucked firmly into his parka, held there by a series of knotted rags tied around his chest. He couldn't feel his fingers anymore, not on either hand, and couldn't bring himself to be anything other than relieved. Doc worried about Kirby, though. The BAR man's lurching gait, the twitching of his small muscles, the lack of focus in his dark eyes – all worried the medic greatly.

"Time to move."

The Gypsy's low voice cut through Doc's musings. He glanced up, realizing that Kirby was gone and the path ahead was empty. Beside him the Gypsy stared off into the woods, his dark eyes tracking something that moved slowly away from them. A moment later, he returned his attention to the medic, easing Doc slowly to his feet and ducking under his right arm. Finally balanced, the two inched along the track until they rounded the bend, then began to pick up speed again.

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Littlejohn reached for his last clip, frozen fingers groping at his ammo pouch and then through the pockets of his parka with increasing frenzy. Finally, he slid down behind the pile of dead trees and scrubbed at his eyes and face with the rough back of his glove. *Out of ammo.* He hadn't noticed the cold. Hadn't felt the icy sheen of wind-driven tears across his cheeks. Hadn't given one thought to Kirby or Doc. His neck creaked audibly as he turned his head, unfocused blue eyes staring down the trail, wondering just where Saunders had gotten to, and Ames. *Where was Ames?*

It took him several minutes to realize that nobody was shooting at him. Rolling onto hands and knees, Littlejohn forced himself to stand, taking first one step back down the trail, but

then stopping and considering the direction Cajé and Nelson had headed. He frowned at the sudden assault on his eardrums: M1 fire and a shuddering Kraut machine gun. He began to run, long legs sinking into the snow and kicking up rooster-tails of ice behind him. He'd only gone a few yards when the first grenade exploded and he threw himself into yet another drift, arms tight around his head.

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The scout dropped to the trail, moaning with pain as he trapped his wounded arm beneath his weight. Just ahead, Nelson took cover, too, one hand over his helmet and the other dragging his M1 as he slid behind a deadfall. Another grenade detonated and a shower of pine branches and needles rained down on them. A third ripped the world apart, sending boulders rolling down the mountain face and taking entire trees with them. Cajé yelled as a trio of baseball-sized rocks bounced off his helmet and back, and he struggled through the debris to shelter behind a sizeable pine.

The noise was incredible, deafening the two GIs within seconds. Cajé watched the tempest through slitted eyes, his mind careening between the scene unfolding before him now and the almost identical events of the day before. *Doc and Kirby, gone forever. Ames, caught in the open. Saunders, God knew where. And always, Theo, best friend... brother.* Despair settled over him, along with the feathery branches of the splintered trees. Finally, he closed his eyes and thought of nothing at all.

*** *** ***

The silence seemed almost as loud as the tempest.

"Cajé!" Nelson's voice boomed into the cocoon of rubble piled around the scout, and he flinched as though his own name had cut him. He straightened his legs, shoving the whiplike trunks of toppled young pines away, and stood, his good hand creeping up the huge tree that had saved him, finding handholds here and there.

"Cajé! Come here, quick!"

Cajé paused just a second, staring up the mountain to where Nelson stood, his feet braced on two fallen trees. Billy hunched forward, digging furiously, the snow flying out behind him like a dog digging for a bone. He looked up and waved both hands at Cajé.

"Come ON!"

The scout moved forward, picking his way over the alien landscape. Only moments before, the forest was thick with trees and bushes, a lush carpet of snow covering it all and drifting against the sheer rock face of a short cliff. Now rock blasted from the cliff dotted the slope, interspersed with the long, slender trunks of uprooted trees. The snow lay in irregular patches, barely covering the forest floor here, there deep enough to lose a tank. Cajé chose his footing carefully, and made it to Nelson's side.

Nelson dropped to his knees. "It's Aramis! He's under here! We gotta dig him out!" He resumed his assault on the debris.

Cajé joined him, flailing one-handed. Broken tree limbs and shards of slate flew in all directions as the two GIs dug desperately.

"Here he is! Stop, stop!" Nelson grabbed the scout's wrist, stopping Cajé from touching a precariously balanced rock. He reached down and brushed the snow from the Frenchman's face. "Aramis!"

Cajé gripped the fingertips of his glove in his teeth and uncovered his good hand. Sliding it under Aramis' collar, he pressed his fingers against the man's neck, seeking his pulse. He found it, but shook his head at the frantic rate.

"Is he...is he dead?" Nelson's voice shook, with fear or cold, Cajé couldn't be sure.

"No, no, but.."

Aramis opened his eyes, staring straight up into Cajé's dark gaze. A jagged laceration tore across his forehead and blood oozed down his cheek, pooling in one ear. He opened his mouth, moaning softly, and then swallowed hard. "Mon frere, mon frere..."

Nelson continued to uncover the man, but gently now, moving each piece of debris with infinite care. "What's he sayin'?"

"Sebby, Sebby, I'm sorry, so sorry."> Aramis coughed, a thin spray of blood coating his lips and the snow around him. <"I couldn't save you, I was too late."> As Nelson freed one arm, Aramis reached up, trailing trembling white fingers across Cajé's cheek. <"But I tracked them down, Sebby, every one of the bastards."> His lips drew back in a bitter smile, and he coughed again, harder this time. <"I killed them all, Sebastian, all of them."> His hand dropped back into the snow. <"For you and for our sister."> His eyes slowly closed, lips still moving in soundless words. <"Viva la France.">

Cajé reached down once more and gripped Aramis' wrist for a long time, finally folding the cold hand across the man's chest. He looked up at Nelson and held his gaze, dark eyes meeting warm blue.

"What happened?"

They both turned at the sound of Littlejohn's voice. The tall private wallowed through snow up to his hips, his useless rifle still clutched in his hands. He glanced from Billy to Cajé, and then back again.

Cajé looked away first, not trusting his voice to speak.

"It's Aramis, he...he had grenades and Cajé's rifle and he, he...he saved us all, Littlejohn!" Nelson's voice squeaked up into its higher registers, and he shut his mouth in embarrassment.

"Not quite all."

Littlejohn turned around so fast he fell over, almost vanishing from sight. Nelson rose to his feet, while Cajé twisted around but remained on his knees.

Sergeant Saunders stepped into the newly created clearing, his arms wrapped tightly around his chest and wheezing audibly. A flash of hectic red adorned each cheek in his otherwise chalk-white face and his shoulders heaved with each labored breath. His gaze traveled over each of his men in turn, finally resting on the prone figure in the snow.

"Ames is dead. And Kirby. And Doc."

Cajé flinched, wanting to protest the last two but not finding the fortitude within himself to do so. There was no way anyone could have survived that avalanche. He knew that, had always known it. And his denial had almost cost him his own life. He looked down at Aramis' battered face. *Too many dead brothers.*

Saunders coughed, then caught his breath.

"Okay, let's get off this mountain."

*** *** ***

The river seemed even wider in the daylight. Only thirty-six hours before, *was it REALLY only a day and a half?*, Doc would have sworn the thirty yards from shore to shore was more like half a mile. Now it looked even further. He lay on his side beneath the sheltering, snowy branches of a thick bush, Kirby to his right and Joachim the left. Kirby shivered hard, bumping against the medic's shoulder. Doc turned to look at him, his bleary blue eyes full of silent questions.

Kirby tugged the collar of his parka tighter around his neck. He could hardly feel his fingers anymore, even when they brushed against his own skin. *So close to home, so close...* They'd been lying there the better part of an hour, timing the German patrols ranging up and down the riverbank. Now Jean-Pierre was taking the point, ghosting from shrub to boulder to

tree, just one more shadow in the weak afternoon sun. Kirby shivered again and raised his eyes to meet Doc's level gaze.

Somewhere behind them, the soft clink of metal and stealthy footsteps froze the three men in place. Joachim placed an unnecessary finger across his lips, and looked back over his shoulder, staring into the forest. A full five minutes passed while they waited, hearts hammering. Finally, Yuri emerged, knife in hand. He nodded at Joachim and then faded into the trees again.

The tall Maquis leader leaned into Doc. "We must go now." He reached over to Kirby, patting him on the shoulder, and then pointed to where Jean-Pierre waited. "Keep low, musketeer, your lines lie just beyond the river. Now is not a good time for capture."

Kirby's brow furrowed in confusion. "Musketeer?" He glanced at Doc, then back at Joachim. "Wha-?"

Doc rolled to his knees, swallowing down a moan. "Just go, Kirby, I'll tell ya later." With his right hand, he shifted his wounded arm in its makeshift sling, and resecured the knot with a tug. Behind him, Joachim gripped his parka and helped him to his feet.

Kirby hesitated a moment longer, dark eyes hidden in the shifting shadows of the foliage. Finally, he turned and scuttled away.



*** *** ***

Doc lay sprawled across the ice, head tucked hard into his elbow. He could feel the thin sheen of water floating on top of the frozen river seeping into his outer layer of clothing and prayed silently that he'd be up and moving before it worked its way any further in. The medic hardly dared breathe and fought down the shivers that were threatening to wrack him from head to toe. He shook his head, wondering just how he'd come to be in the same situation only thirty-six hours apart. Kirby was no doubt nursing the kittens he'd given birth to the day before, licking their furry little bodies and picking hair off his tongue in disgust. Yesterday, Doc had still had the wherewithal to find some semblance of humor in the situation. Today, staring into Joachim's grim face, he found nothing to smile about.

The ice was softer now, no doubt about it. The second they'd put their boots to the surface, it moaned and groaned beneath them. Yuri, Jean-Pierre and Kirby slipped and slid their way precariously to the far side without incident. The latest German guard arrived early, though, almost catching Joachim and Doc as they lurched against each other in a bizarre dance. Yuri waved his arms over his head once, and then dropped from view, dragging Kirby down with him. Doc and the Gypsy fell to their knees, too, and then prostrated themselves on the ice.

The river bent here, and foliage grew right up to the banks, overhanging it in places. The bare branches cast wild shadows over the ice as the wind picked up and lashed the trees. The feathery needles of the pines undulated like rolling waves, slender trunks bending nearly in half and then rebounding upright again.

The German sentry stood for a moment in the lee of an ancient hardwood. He turned his collar up tighter about his neck and then pulled a battered pack of cigarettes from his pocket. Extracting one, he stuck it in his mouth, returning the pack to the pocket, and searched for his lighter. Three pockets later, the cigarette was lit, and the German inhaled with relief. He kept a

close eye on his watch while he smoked, giving the forest scant attention and the river itself none at all. After precisely two minutes, he stubbed out the cigarette on the rough frozen bark of the sheltering tree and returned it to the pack. He continued on his rounds.

Out on the ice, Joachim stared after the German from beneath the arm he'd tossed over his head. *Un, deux, trois...*

"Go! Allez! Allez!" Joachim hissed at the medic, bracing Doc's knee with his own elbow.

Doc shoved hard and gained his feet. Good arm flung wide for balance, he managed three steps before he felt the ice part beneath him. He glanced down and saw a jagged line appear between his feet. Staggering away, Doc glanced over his shoulder...and fell hard as his feet skated out from under him.

Joachim stared in horror, unable to command his legs to move. The ice parted, the gap widening as it reached for him, and tiny new cracks rapidly spread throughout the river's frozen surface. He moaned softly, ever mindful of the German sentry, as cold water rose over his feet. He wrenched his gaze from the ice, meeting Doc's horrified blue eyes.

"Joachim!" Doc rolled to his knees, and stretched out his good arm, knowing all the while that the man was beyond his reach. He flinched hard at the sudden touch of a hand on his shoulder. Yuri looped one arm across the medic's back and dragged him toward the riverbank, ignoring Doc's hoarse pleas that he save Joachim first. Kirby met them at the sludged edge of the ice, wary of putting his own feet in the river, but finally taking a few steps into the shallows to haul them both to safety.

Meanwhile, Jean-Pierre was slithering toward Joachim on his belly, distributing his weight as evenly as possible with arms and legs spread wide. He was halfway there when the ice finally shattered, plunging Joachim into the river. Jean-Pierre froze in place, watching his leader flip onto his back, frantically trying to stay afloat.

The rapid current, hidden until now under the ice, tugged at Joachim, turning him this way and that while he tried to haul himself out of the water. He managed to get one knee clear, and then fell back into the river, arms flailing.

Jean-Pierre remained where he was, frozen by fear and indecision. The black water snaked its way toward him, tearing off chunks of ice that whirled away to batter against Joachim's unprotected head. The tall man went under, briefly, and Jean-Pierre rose to his elbows, a harsh cry rising in his throat. The ice beneath him plunged into the water, submerging him instantly. He kicked as hard as he could, fighting to rise above the churning surface. His heavy boots dragged at him, pulling him downriver. He slammed into something solid and then something that yielded to him, Joachim's feebly waving arm. Jean-Pierre grabbed onto his leader's cold wrist, forcing his own stiff fingers to close. They clung to each other a moment more, and then the river sucked them under the ice and they were lost in the maelstrom.

On the shore, Kirby sank to his knees, oblivious to the ice forming already on his boots. Beside him, Doc stared in shock, as Yuri continued to grip his parka despite the fact that the medic was no longer fighting to return to the ice and Joachim's aid. The three remained there far longer than was safe, barely under cover and unaware of their surroundings.

*** *** ***

Blue eyes snapped open, darting here and there before settling on the tall figure sitting in a straight-backed chair at the end of the bed. Dust motes floated in the watery light slanting through windows set high in a brick wall. They fell in slow motion before rising again on the air currents from the huge heaters at each end of the room. The patient froze for a scant moment, then pawed at the mask over his mouth and nose.

"Hey, hey, leave that alone, Saunders." Lieutenant Hanley stood and moved quickly to the sergeant's side, grabbing his hand and removing it from the oxygen mask. "You've got pneumonia, you need this to help you breathe." Hanley looked around, hoping to locate

somebody official who could help. “The doctor said you’ll be fine, but you’ve got to rest.” He caught the eye of a passing nurse, who smiled warmly at him, gliding smoothly into position at the head of the bed where she fluffed Saunders’ pillow and adjusted the oxygen flow.

“Don’t want to rest.” Saunders coughed hard, surprised at how difficult it was to get the words out. His lungs felt like sponges. He glanced up at the nurse and paused a moment, caught in the warmth of her presence. “Where are the men?”

Hanley grinned. “They’re okay. Thawing out, just like you, but they’re okay.” He stepped back to let the nurse pass, admiring her trim figure as she stooped to make a notation on Saunders’ chart.

Saunders struggled up on one elbow. “How about Cajé?”

“Cajé?” Hanley’s eyes darkened, regarding his sergeant. “Cajé had to have surgery on his arm. He had something called...ah...” He looked over his shoulder as a white-coated doctor walked up. “Ah, Doctor? About Private Lemay. What did you say was wrong with his arm?”

The doctor picked up Saunders’ chart, pushing his glasses up his nose as he perused the neat rows of vital signs. “Oh, the Cajun? A compartment syndrome. Swelling causes the nerves and blood vessels to be squeezed too tightly. Have to relieve that with a fasciotomy.”

Saunders blinked. “A what?”

The doctor finally looked directly at his patient, as if he hadn’t realized until that moment that Saunders was awake. “Oh, slits in the skin, allows the muscle tissue to swell without constricting the important structures beneath.” He pulled a stethoscope from one of the multitude of pockets arrayed about his coat. “Deep breath, please.”

Hanley held up one hand to forestall Saunders’ protests. “Just let him finish, I’ll tell you the rest.” Failing to completely suppress the grin twitching at the corners of his mouth, he watched his friend struggle to comply with the doctor’s repeated orders for “another one, another one, deep now...” The lieutenant had waited hours for this moment, sitting at various First Squad members’ bedsides, and questioning every medical person he could get his hands on. Freshly discharged from the place himself, Hanley had a few contacts, mostly pretty young nurses.

The doctor stepped back. “Sounding good, Sergeant, I’m sure you’ll be back in the ranks in no time.” He made a notation on the chart and turned away. “Good day, gentlemen.”

Hanley watched him go. He massaged his left shoulder absently, easing the dull pain of his recent wound. He dreaded the conversation he knew was waiting for him.

“Cajé goin’ home?” Saunders tried for a professional nonchalance and failed, his voice edged with anxiety. He turned on his side, wrapping an arm protectively around his aching chest.

Hanley sighed, then turned to the sergeant. “Yeah, probably. They sent him to London first.”

“Oh.” Saunders’ voice trailed off and he looked away, studying the frayed edge of thin blanket covering him. “We didn’t get the information Quinn wanted.” He wiped the back of one hand across his eyes. “The Frenchman, Aramis, he died before he could tell us anything. He didn’t have any papers on him, no maps, no nothing.” He slammed his fist onto the covers.

Hanley pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat down again. “No, but we got the information anyway.”

“*What?*”

Hanley shifted in the chair, crossing his lengthy legs. “Doc had it.”

Saunders sat bolt upright, the mask falling askew on his face. “Doc? Doc’s alive?”

Hanley smiled. “Yeah, he and Kirby both. Kirby’s here in the hospital, too. Bruised kidney or something like that. And frostbite. His fingers and toes and nose, ears, all got it pretty bad. But the docs say he’ll be fine.”

Saunders digested the information. The two men he'd seen die, HAD to have died in the crushing avalanche, were alive. He felt his eyes fill again, and swiped at them. "You said Doc had the papers?"

"Yes, he and Kirby met up with the real Aramis on the mountain. Doc was shot..."

"WHAT? Doc was shot? When? Who?" Saunders coughed and coughed, his words choking him.

"The shot that caused the avalanche. Through his arm. It's pretty bad. He might lose it." He stared at the floor, letting Saunders process the information.

"Aramis and his men wrapped the wound up, and shoved the maps and troop movement information into the bandage. Doc didn't even know it until they were here. The Maquis lost two men in the river getting Doc and Kirby back. Only one of them made it." Hanley paused a moment, not wanting to continue. "The info was useless anyway. The avalanche changed the Krauts' plans."

Saunders couldn't assimilate what he was hearing. Doc and Kirby were alive; they'd survived the avalanche, found Aramis and made it home. But who then, who was *his* Aramis? The Aramis who took out the German squad so insistent on killing them. The Aramis who had unnerved Cajé with the harrowing tale of how an idyllic life on the mountain had come to an end. Aramis who died thinking Cajé was his long-dead brother. Saunders took a deep breath of the oxygen, and was rewarded with a coughing fit that flattened him on the bed.

Hanley patted the sergeant gently on the back for a moment. "Littlejohn and Nelson spoke with the surviving Maquis. Apparently the man who called himself Aramis and met up with you was left behind by the other three Maquis." He shook his head. He'd heard the story several times already but still marveled that not only had the information been passed on, but both sets of Americans were met exactly as planned. "Your Aramis was the back up plan, Saunders. Just in case you survived the avalanche. Anyway, Cajé and Doc went on the same evac plane. Captain Jampel pulled a few strings."

Saunders stared straight up at the ceiling. What a waste. He'd known right from the beginning it was a poorly planned mission. He'd told Quinn at the briefing. The weather was wrong. The intelligence iffy at best. Too many things unknown. But it wasn't his job to make those decisions. He knew that. Knew it each time he turned down an opportunity to become an officer. Saunders could understand why it had been the right move for Hanley to accept the battlefield promotion. It had never been right for Saunders. As hard as it was for him to understand what had happened on the mountain, he'd been there. Hanley had not. The weight of the losses fell squarely on Saunders' broad shoulders. The kid, Ames, Aramis, whoever he was, and the other two Maquis – all dead. And Doc and Cajé, perhaps permanently impaired. So much death. So much loss. For nothing.

"Saunders..." Hanley paused, hazel eyes intent on a spot somewhere over the sergeant's head. "Sometimes we're ordered to do things for reasons that don't seem to make sense. I don't have all the answers, either. We just have to trust that the brass know what they're doing."

Saunders turned a baleful eye on his lieutenant. "The brass know what they're doing? When they sent us into that storm, they knew what they were doing? I don't know about you, Lieutenant, but I trust my men." His fingers tightened on the edge of the rough blanket. "And for better or worse, they trust me." *Like I trust you.*

Hanley nodded, aware of the words left unspoken and unsure how to take them. Accepting the promotion after D-Day had felt like a no-brainer. Right now, he wasn't so certain. He stood, stretching his long frame for a moment, and then reached into his jacket, pulling out an envelope. He tapped it a couple times on the palm of his hand, drawing the sergeant's attention.

"What's that?" Saunders caught the envelope as Hanley dropped it.

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Kirby perched on the edge of his cot, one hand pressed tightly into his flank. The hand itself was wrapped in layers of clean white gauze. Kirby sniffed, and surreptitiously dabbed at his nose with his other hand, likewise mittened in long strips of cotton. He looked up at his visitors.

“So how long they gonna keep ya?”

Kirby sniffed again. “I dunno, Littlejohn, they said something about not peeing blood, and my ears not falling off...”

Nelson winced and reached up to touch his own ear as Littlejohn shoved a not so subtle elbow into his ribs. He dropped his hand, stuffing it into his pocket, and tried to ignore the heat blooming on his cheeks.

Laughing, Kirby leaned back on his elbow and propped his bandaged feet onto the cot. “It’s okay, kid, the doc says everything attached should stay attached.” He nodded at his gloved hands and frowned. “They sure make it difficult to do anything, though, if you get my drift.”

“I’ll bet!” Embarrassed and more than a little confused, Nelson moved to the head of the cot, edging past Littlejohn. He poured Kirby a fresh glass of water from the pitcher sitting on a little table there and tried to hand it to him, realizing at the last minute that Kirby couldn’t grasp it.

Littlejohn sighed and tried to reach past Billy. “The straw, it’s right there.”

“I got it, I got it.” He held the glass while Kirby sipped, then placed it back on the table. “Hey, what’s this?” A lump of lead sat next to Kirby’s battered watch. Nelson picked it up and turned it over several times. “Where’d you get this?”

Kirby stared at it, remembering that moment on the mountain when Doc had found the slug caught up in his greatcoat. How his amazement had given way to dismay with the knowledge that they’d both been injured by the same bullet. *And Doc’s reaction.* “I- I just found it. On the mountain.” Dark eyes suddenly shuttered, he gestured toward the table with his chin,. “Can you put it back, please?”

It was the final word that got through to Kirby’s squad mates, silencing any further questions from them. Kirby sarcastic and antsy they could deal with. Kirby polite was something altogether different.

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The airplane was cold, so cold Cajé could see his breath floating above him and ice on the ceiling. The scout turned his head, taking in his new surroundings. Last thing he remembered was a pretty nurse injecting morphine into his IV tubing back at the evac hospital. Now he was in yet another row of men, all wrapped in brown blankets, pale faces resting on once-white pillowcases. IV bottles hung above almost every stretcher, including his own, swinging gently back and forth in the dim light.

Cajé turned as much as he could onto his right side, balancing his hugely wrapped left arm along his ribcage. Eyes squeezed tightly shut against what was sure to be a tidal wave of pain, he sucked in a deep breath and held it, waiting. The pain arrived. But it was far less than he expected. He sighed in relief, assuming his morphine must have been coming right on schedule. Opening his eyes again, he saw a bandaged arm. The man’s fingers were painted a blotchy brown color, much as Cajé’s own had been right after his surgery. He grinned, guessing that this guy must not have been up to sweet-talking his nurse into cleaning the stuff off.

The plane dropped suddenly and a groan rose from the wounded, plus a few shouts from panicky men apparently not quite as sedated as the rest. Cajé watched an attractive dark-haired nurse hurry to a young man’s side, taking him by the arm and easing him back onto his stretcher.

The man next to him muttered in his drugged sleep, head turning restlessly. Cajé looked over at him, and then sat bolt upright himself, heedless of the IV in his right hand and the sudden throbbing that flared in his wounded arm.

“DOC!”

The nurse frowned at him, and placed a finger across her full lips. Cajé ignored her, dark eyes staring at the unmistakable profile of First Squad’s missing medic. Doc stirred again.

“Shut up, Kirby...”

Cajé grinned, and lay back on his stretcher. Odd flashes of light played across the curved ceiling, multiplied and magnified by the hanging IV bottles. Cajé blinked as the lights went out briefly, and then flared back to life, his fingers closing over the old bullet cupped in his good hand. The nurses kept on working, moving from bed to bed.



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Saunders traced the unfamiliar handwriting with his fingers, following the curving letters of his own name. After Hanley delivered the letter and then departed for the CP, the sergeant stared at the envelope for some time before finally opening it and removing the letter. And then, over the last few hours, read the note again and again. He knew he was looking for something behind the words, behind the neat Palmer script, but whatever it was eluded him.

Again, he slid the single page from the unsealed envelope and let his gaze fall to the bottom, alighting on the single word – “Cajé”. The letter dropped to his chest, rising and falling with each hitch of his ragged breathing. He swallowed hard, for once not noticing the spider-web of cracks in the plaster, blue eyes glittering in the dim light.

He picked up the letter again, a fine tremor running through his hands. Without thinking, Saunders drew in a deep breath to steady himself, but only succeeded in setting off a monumental coughing fit. The paper slid to the floor, just out of his reach.

A nurse stopped at the end of his bed, gracefully bending at the knees, and retrieved the letter. She handed it to the sergeant with a smile that usually caught Saunders’ attention, but not this time. She shook her head and left him there unfolding and smoothing the crumpled page.

Sarge –

It’s me, Cajé. I can’t use my writing arm, so I’m telling this nurse what to say. They tell me I’m being shipped out today, along with a bunch of other guys, so I gotta make this quick. Lt. Hanley was here, he told me you had pneumonia! No wonder you were coughing so much. I wanted to come see you, but they said you couldn’t have any visitors because of how sick you are. Something about a quarantine or something. I know you’ll be better soon, if the Krauts can’t get you, no germ can.

The docs say my arm should be okay, but they’re shipping me to England anyway, and maybe home. I still can’t move my fingers but they don’t hurt so much anymore.

Hanley told me both Doc and Kirby got off the mountain. How about that, Sarge? They’re alive after all. I’m sure you know all the details by now. The Lt. didn’t know anything much when I saw him, but I hope they’re doing just fine. I told you they were alive, didn’t I? But I know we had a mission to finish, just like you kept trying to tell me. I know you were doing what you had to do. And I know I didn’t make it easy, and I’m sorry for that.

Sarge, I'm kinda scared of going home. I don't know what it's going to be like back in the States. It's strange, but I know what I'm doing here, and who I'm doing it for. I wonder what sort of repple depple you'll get to replace me and if he'll be able to keep Kirby out of trouble. He'd have to be some sort of miracle worker, wouldn't he?

Okay, the nurse says I have to stop now. Get well soon, and come see me in New Orleans when this is all over. I'll save a bottle of nice French wine for you.

I really lucked out having you for my NCO. We all did. Thanks, Sarge, for everything.

Your friend, Cajé

Saunders slumped against his pillow, eyes tightly closed, and the letter clenched in one fist. *"We had a mission to finish..."* Cajé understood. After all those hours on the mountain, hunched over his wounded arm and snarling at everyone, Cajé not only understood but forgave. And not only forgave, but acted as if there was nothing to forgive!

Tucking the letter back inside its envelope, Saunders placed it on the bedside table along with his other personal belongings. Weariness swept over him then, along with a new emotion he couldn't quite recognize. *Absolution.* As he dropped off to sleep, Saunders felt a new lightness in his heart that all the drugs in the world couldn't extinguish.

Thanks, Sarge... No, thank YOU, Cajé, and Doc, and Kirby, and Ames, and Littlejohn...

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Doc cried out in sudden alarm, unable to sit up. Sweat beaded along his hairline, soaking into the bedding. He awoke suddenly, struggling to focus both his gaze and his thoughts. Pain crept from his fingers to his elbow, crawling rapidly to his shoulder where it was inexplicably halted by a warm hand that patted the medic awkwardly from the next stretcher.

"Doc?"

He stopped breathing a moment, lips moving soundlessly.

"Cajé?"

"Yeah, it's me."

The hand squeezed Doc's shoulder one more time and then withdrew. Doc turned his head a little, unable to see more than a vague impression of Cajé's supine form, but aware that the man must be somehow wounded to be here. Wherever *here* was.

"Cajé? Where we goin'?" Doc's voice was no more than a hoarse whisper, rough from the surgical anesthetic and disuse over the last few days.

There followed a moment of silence, which Doc's mind filled with an image of the scout lighting up a cigarette and taking a long draw deep into his lungs. Then Cajé finally spoke, his words filled with an improbable mixture of hope and regret.

"Home, Doc. We're going home."

The End