

TO THE VICTORS GO THE SPOILS

by Ricochet



Clambering up the side of a steep, grassy rise, the sergeant almost made it to safety. Then the sledgehammer blow of a rifle butt slammed into his spine. Forks of fire soldered his nerves, stole his strength. Sprawling heavily forward, Saunders felt tears flood his eyes, and his cramped fingers dug furrows in the dirt.

Momentarily paralyzed, he dimly felt a hand latch onto his leg and start to drag him downhill. Ignoring the excruciating pain of the action, Saunders twisted around and kicked as hard as he could into his captor's face. The stunned Kraut reeled backward and shook his head, but didn't release his grip. Instead, Sarge saw the flash of a bayonet in the smoky sunlight.

"Do not tempt me," the German said in a harsh, guttural voice, his bruised face streaked with blood. "I am not allowed to kill you just yet!" The Hauptmann's orders mentioned nothing about mutilation, however. Grunting, the big Kraut thrust the blade into Saunders' thigh, a cruel smile curling his lips at the American's raw bellow.

Constricting in agony at the burning stab wound, Sarge fought the enveloping darkness. "God—!" he choked. Reaching out desperately, he grasped the gnarled, exposed roots of an ancient tree. His fingers were slippery with blood, and his arms trembled under the strain. The hillside began to crumble, loose pebbles and dirt raining down upon both men.

The German glared up at his quarry through narrowed eyes. Hauptmann Jaeger's orders were to capture the noncom alive, yet in his estimation, the prize seemed hardly worth the effort. There was no film or map in his possession. Still, the German did as he was told. And after all, this part of the job held its own particular allure.

The American's fair hair was wild with travail, his blue eyes glazed with shock, but it was apparent he would not willingly submit to captivity and interrogation. He would have to be forced. And he would die of it.

He must have something very valuable to hide....

With a frustrated curse, the Kraut sheathed the bloody bayonet and climbed after the fleeing prisoner, using his free hand to grip Sarge's jacket. He watched in amazement as the American slipped out of the ragged garment and clawed clumsily uphill, collapsing frequently as his bleeding leg folded under him.

Teeth showing in heartless mirth, the German grudgingly admired this stalwart warrior. It would be a pity to kill him. "Where are you going, sweetheart?" the Kraut cooed softly, his mocking words foreign to the stumbling sergeant. "Off to pick edelweiss in the Alps?"

Gasping, Saunders responded with a phrase that needed no translation. The German's lips tightened with rage. Lunging forward, he grabbed Saunders' leg again and gave a tremendous tug. Off-balance, both men fell, bruising themselves on jagged stones as they tumbled to the base of the steep hill. Only the sound of their harsh breathing filled the silence as they lay tangled in an antagonistic heap, dazed to inaction for the moment.

Then the moment was up. Biting back a moan, the sergeant dragged himself painfully to his feet. From the corner of his eye, he saw the huge Kraut slowly recover. Looking around wildly, Saunders searched in vain for a weapon: a branch, a rock, anything!

Gripping his hemorrhaging leg, he staggered toward the river below. He knew he might not make it, but neither would he simply surrender to this maniac. His mouth went dry at the sound of the German's relentless pursuit.

With the lumbering agility of an enraged bear, the Kraut cornered Saunders, his beefy arms outstretched to crush Sarge in a lethal embrace. Dodging at the last second, the sergeant evaded the German, only to trip over a protruding root and tumble headfirst down a muddy slope into the rushing water.

The river roared in his ears, choppy waves slapped his face. The landscape was a blur as rapid currents sent him on a wild and disorienting excursion. Tossed downstream like a discarded rag doll, Saunders flailed about uselessly, unable to grasp the slick rocks. Battered by cascades of churning water, he was half-drowned by the time he became ensnared in the drooping branches of a tree.

With the last of his strength, he struggled to the riverbank and collapsed. He blacked out for a time, he wasn't sure how long. Too long....

The German Shepherd's bushy tail swept the air, and bright, unblinking eyes stared into Sarge's. A droll voice spoke from above. "It seems my hound has discovered a dogface." A richly polished pair of black boots entered the sergeant's field of vision. "What sport we shall have with him, eh, Kaiser?" As Saunders watched, the dog whined impatiently and licked it's chops in anticipation of the game to come.

Kirby scowled at the wounded guy. He felt somewhat soiled for thinking bad thoughts about a man who might die, but he couldn't help it. Limping through the woods, he wished Gerard had gotten killed instead of Sarge and the lieutenant. The dumb-ass froze when he should've been firing.

This was a bad patrol from the beginning. Kirby remembered the uneasy crawl of gooseflesh on his arms as the squad reached their objective. Glancing up, he saw the airman's remains dangling from the branches of a high tree, his tangled parachute billowing in the breeze. The flyboy's neck was turned at an odd angle, his face blue. As Cajé climbed up to cut him loose, it was obvious they were too late to save him.

They were too late, period. Drawn to the smoke of the wreckage, the Krauts were on them in a flash. With no time to spare, Saunders ripped open the pilot's flight jacket and snatched up a map case and a small cartridge of film. He turned to Hanley and tossed him the film. Snagging it out of midair, Hanley tucked it in his jacket and nodded at Saunders. "Good luck," he said shortly.

As the lieutenant took off to the rendezvous point, Sarge turned to Kirby and pressed the map into his hands. "Get this back, Kirby! You hear me?"

Before the BAR man could even acknowledge him, Saunders turned to the men and shouted: "Cover me!" Rising and dodging in the opposite direction of Hanley, Saunders scrambled across the grassy glen, drawing Kraut fire.

The last time Kirby saw the lieutenant and Sarge was just as the Krauts boiled out of the bushes behind them, their Schmeissers coughing a hail of bullets. The sounds of crazed battle rang in Kirby's ears. He dimly heard Hanley's cry of pain, and saw the tall officer fall among thick foliage, then rise unsteadily and keep running.

The BAR roared to life, mowing down the unsuspecting enemy. They turned as one, veering like a well-trained tide toward the decimated squad. Yanking his head around, Kirby saw Gerard curled in a ball, his gun silent.

"Gerard!" he shouted. "Fight, damn you—!"

The private didn't move. Rushing through the break in the hail of bullets, a Kraut raised his rifle and aimed at Hanley. Suddenly a burst of Tommy gun fire cut him down. Kirby whirled, the map crackling dryly in his pocket.

Saunders was running and firing continuously, but his ferocious glare caught Kirby's eye and his final words resounded in his ears. *Get this back... you hear me?!*

Twisting around, Kirby shouted at the squad. "We gotta fall back! Take better cover an' divide these creeps! Give Sarge and Hanley a chance to get away!"

The men vaulted over fallen logs and ducked behind hillocks, rolling and crawling for cover. Using the advantage of heavy underbrush to hide their movements, they further fragmented the German troops, ultimately catching them in a lethal crossfire. The air was foul with cordite, and the treetops trembled with gunfire.

When it ended, Littlejohn was badly hurt and Gerard was bleeding from a bullet in his back, but the squad made it to the safety of the river. Following the tumbling water to their prearranged rendezvous point and not finding the two men waiting, Kirby wordlessly watched the shadows grow longer, feeling desolation invade his heart.

Determined not to let his fear show, he waited until dark and then doggedly forged a trail

back to Allied lines. As the squad moved through the treacherous night, he kept his growing uncertainty to himself, but he knew the others felt the same way. What if Sarge and Hanley weren't dead? How could they just leave them out here without being sure?

Doc's soft voice halted the squad in their tracks. Behind them, Littlejohn folded and sat heavily on a log. Blood saturated the bandages beneath his jacket. "I'm okay. Let's keep goin'..." the tall man whispered tightly. His broad face was slick with sweat, and he visibly shuddered in the cool night air.

Kirby and Cajé lowered the makeshift stretcher to the ground. Kirby's arms ached so badly he could barely lift them. It seemed they'd been walking for weeks, yet it had only been a few hours. At this painfully slow pace, it may take them until the end of the war to get back to their lines.

Winded, the BAR man braced his hands on his knees and watched the medic. "He'll be okay, won't he, Doc?"

Packing Littlejohn's wound with more gauze, Doc spared Kirby a grim glance. "He needs a hospital, not a hike." He gestured at the surrounding woods. "All this walkin' is gonna kill him."

"Gerard's dead," Cajé announced with no inflection in his voice. The men looked at him, then at the litter.

Reaching over with an arm that felt boneless, Kirby patted Littlejohn on the shoulder. "Looks like you're in luck, pal," he said hoarsely, indicating the suddenly available conveyance. "Let's saddle up."

The words choked him as they left his throat. Cajé drew a sharp breath, and the color washed from Doc's face. Littlejohn wordlessly rocked in place, but Kirby felt the lanky shoulder hunch in sorrow beneath his hand.

Lowering his head to escape their wounded gazes, Kirby cursed softly in regret. *Dumb ass....*

Hanley staggered through the deepening twilight, the bullet burning in his flesh with each step. Attempting to navigate both the unfamiliar terrain and the slippery slopes of delirium, he inevitably got lost. Coming upon a settlement, he waited as dusk fell and candlelight glowed in the windows of the buildings before approaching.

Clutching a sapling for support, Hanley wavered dizzily on the edge of the town commons. He was in desperate need of help, yet he had to see who the inhabitants were before attempting contact. He could discern voices, but not their speech; he had no idea whether the village harbored friend or foe.

"*Das Essen ist fertig!*" a voice shouted, summoning several German soldiers to dinner. Hanley felt his spirits fall. He had accidentally wandered into an enemy outpost.

His head drooped in defeat. "God..." he breathed, seeing no chance out. He could backtrack, but frankly he was astonished he'd made it this far through German lines. And he was so tired. Blood seeped down his trouser leg in a steady rivulet, filling his boot. In moments, it would stain the grass and lead the Krauts right to him, wherever he went.

Hanley scanned the grounds in the waning light. Across the weedy commons, a large gazebo lay demolished, its charred beams forming a crosshatch over the buckled deck. As shelter, it was barely adequate, but it was his only chance. If they found him unconscious in the forest, they would quickly discover the film. He clutched the canister protectively.

Lowering himself to the tall grass, the wounded lieutenant crawled to the collapsed



structure and squirmed under the splintered boards. The few troops he spotted seemed to be more interested in getting fed than in guarding the OP from intruders. Hanley wondered about their commandant; was he this lenient or oblivious, or was it a trap? Maybe he could use that knowledge to defeat him.

As the lieutenant pondered the maneuvers and machinations of war, unconsciousness came to claim him. His big frame relaxed fully, and he closed his eyes, surrendering to sleep.

The German sergeant had interrogated enough Allied soldiers to know he'd have to beat the information out of them. He could usually distinguish between those who would cooperate eventually, and those who'd die before betraying some arcane code of honor. This soldier counted among the latter.

"*Gott in Himmel!*" the Feldwebel swore, backing away from the prisoner and clutching his bleeding fist.

Behind the desk, Jaeger smiled coldly in amusement. "I told you to wear leather gloves...."

The Feldwebel kicked the wooden chair, jarring the limp prisoner roughly. "Screw him!"

In the shadows, Jaeger chuckled and rose to his feet. "Save your strength," he told the Feldwebel consolingly. "The man is insensate."

Jaeger strolled around the unconscious sergeant, studying him. With hounds, it was often true that the more mixed the breed, the more resilient and resourceful the animal. They were not as elegant as the purebreds, but they often outlasted them. "Americans..." the Hauptmann muttered scornfully. The mutts of the globe. And how ludicrously proud they were of that fact. It was infuriating that they were winning the war!

Jaeger scowled, remembering the phone call from Headquarters this morning. Film had been smuggled out of a top secret weapons laboratory two days ago and was making its way across German-occupied territory to Allied lines. The information the film contained was priceless, and the commandant of the secret compound, Colonel Esterhaus, had fallen into a state of near mania at Berlin's unwanted glare.

At the theft, the Gestapo came out of the woodwork like roaches. In an attempt to affix blame elsewhere, Esterhaus tried to tarnish the reputation of every loyal Nazi in his circle. Yet his efforts at evasion were useless. The Gestapo was poised to descend upon the colonel....

Then a suspicious plane was spotted flaming into the thick forest only miles from Captain Jaeger's outpost. Seconds before ejecting, the civilian pilot broke radio silence to report his position. He may as well have sent an engraved invitation to the Wehrmacht.

Now, desperate to redeem himself and eager to escape punishment, Esterhaus was on his way to the remote outpost with troops to either find the film or point the finger. Jaeger did not intend to be a target, nor would he let this opportunity pass. He would recover the precious film first and deliver it personally to the Fuhrer!

"Wake him up," Jaeger ordered shortly, turning his back on the unconscious prisoner. As the Feldwebel started to argue, the German captain wrenched around and snarled: "Awaken him!"

The sullen Feldwebel complied without another word. Shoving the sergeant upright in the chair with one hand, he reached for a ladle of water with the other. Flinging the cold water into the captive's face with more force than was necessary, the German sergeant straightened and threw the ladle at Saunders.

The American stirred sluggishly. Convulsions wracked his body as dense agony replaced airy limbo. If he hadn't been bound to the chair, he would've crumpled to the floor.

Cold eyes gleaming, the Hauptmann approached the bruised and bloodied man. How much longer could this mongrel American endure the Feldwebel's fists? It would be interesting to see, and part of him almost hoped the soldier wouldn't talk.

"We know about the reconnaissance plane that went down near here. We know that its

pilot parachuted in," he said in a flat tone. "We found his body in the woods. We also found evidence of a film canister and map case."

He neglected to mention the loss of two entire German squads; no need for this GI to know that only a scant half-dozen soldiers remained to protect the OP. Until the colonel arrived with troops, they were helpless in the event of an attack.

Jaeger strolled around Saunders' chair, pulling on a pair of leather gloves as he spoke. "Since you were captured nearby and we did not find the film on you, there are only two other possibilities: you hid it, or your accomplices have it. Either way, it is imperative that I know!"

Jaeger stopped directly before Saunders. His gloved fist shot out and tangled in the thick blond hair, yanking Sarge's head back viciously. "Tell me where the film is, and I promise I will select only the finest marksmen for your execution."

The unreadable look in the American's eyes reminded Jaeger of an animal, lacking horror, hatred, cunning, or judgment. The sergeant simply withstood the duress, as strong and stoic as an ox fitted to a plow.

And no doubt as stupid as one, Jaeger thought, his disdain clear in his haughty glare. "I want that film, do you understand?" he snapped. He shoved the prisoner's head forward roughly, then turned to the Feldwebel, his accent clipped with rage. "The moment he tells you where it is," he growled. "Put a bullet through his heart."

Despite his bitching and moaning, or perhaps because of it, Kirby was a superlative soldier. Literally pressed into service by the sergeant, he'd reluctantly assumed the squad leader's duties, noting everyone's confidence with distinct unease. He'd been a squad leader before, and he never liked the reasons for it, but he didn't fear it. His reticence sprang from the simple, sane fact that he didn't want to be responsible for other men's lives.

This time, as always, he had no choice. "Littlejohn, how ya feelin'? Think you can move?" he asked the wounded private, his voice soft with concern.



Doc scowled up at him. "Kirby, don't ask him to walk. He'll do it even if he can't make it."

"I'm all right..." Littlejohn gasped, holding his side as he attempted to rise. He didn't make it. Sitting down was the worst thing he could've done: now he couldn't stand.

"We need to carry him, Kirby," Cajé observed in a whisper, glancing around the rustling woods.

"I was meanin' to carry him!" Kirby said hotly, reminded again of why he'd lost his stripes in the first place. That temper never held very long. "I just don't know how far I can go, that's all!"

It was true. Littlejohn was the biggest of them all, and Kirby was at the limits of his energy reserves. If they were going to make it, they'd better plan on riding. "You know what we need?" Kirby said, glancing sideways at the scout. The uncanny Cajun seemed to read his thoughts.

"A truck?" With an upward tilt of one dark brow, Cajé aimed a thumb over his shoulder and grinned at the BAR man. "You saw those lights back there, too?"

Growing alarmed as the implication of their words hit him, Doc rose to his feet. "Wait a minute, you're not seriously considering goin' back through enemy lines, are you?"

"Aw, Doc, we don't know where enemy lines are," Kirby retorted. "Hell, we don't know where we are. We could be halfway to Churchill's house, by now!"

"You said it yourself, Doc, there's no other way," Cajé said reasonably. "You told us Littlejohn can't make it."

The medic's face was stricken as he looked down at the wounded soldier, then at Gerard's lifeless form. There was no other way, and his protests died on his lips. Yet dread settled over him like a dark shroud.

He'd become accustomed to the danger, the misery, and the fear, but he would never grow used to the vagaries of destiny. Every time Doc bid farewell to a friend, he never knew if it would be for the last time.

Kirby took a sip from his canteen, then capped it and held it out to the medic to bolster his water supply. "Don't worry, Doc, we'll be back so fast you won't have time to miss us."

Doc watched in surrender as the two men hid Gerard's body, then got to work building a shelter. Fashioning an alcove under a pile of boulders, they maneuvered Littlejohn in and made him as comfortable as they could. With Doc seated next to him inside, Cajé and Kirby camouflaged the opening with fallen branches and thorn bushes.

When it was done, Cajé leaned down and spoke through the brambles and darkness, his accent lending a touch of elegance to the fateful message. "Doc, if we're not back in a few hours..." His words trailed off. They all knew what to do in this senseless corner of the world. Survive.

"Good luck," Doc responded softly, though the two men had already gone.

Reviving sluggishly, Hanley lifted an arm that felt like a ton and squinted at his watch in the dim light. He'd succumbed to exhaustion at a crucial time; now his plans had to evolve. How much longer until daybreak? He craned his head back to look at the sky. He had to escape while he was still able. His weakness was growing hour by hour.

Rolling over onto his belly, Hanley peered through the slats of the crawlspace beneath the deck. In the gray dawn he saw a sentry patrolling the opposite side of the courtyard. Cursing softly, the lieutenant knew that meant there was a sentry on this side, as well. To try now would be suicide, but he had no choice.

Willing his trembling arms to obey, Hanley slowly gathered the strength to drag himself to freedom. The blood pounded in his head, and he felt nauseated from the pressure inside his skull, yet his unwavering stare was focused intently on the single route of escape.

A hole in the slats revealed a grassy expanse leading to the trees beyond the gazebo. How he'd traversed it last night was a mystery. The shaggy, untended commons seemed a mile wide, but if he hugged the ground, he might make it to the protection of the woods undetected.

Even as he began to move, it was too late. The clouds blushed peach with morning light, and he heard a bustle of activity in the courtyard. Halting, Gil peered through the slats. His eyes widened at what he saw, and his heart turned to heavy ice that beat coldly in his chest.

With typical efficiency, an armed German squad assembled in the courtyard while an austere captain strolled from his quarters and waited under the drooping branches of a neglected tree. As the sun's rays touched the grim courtyard with gold, a prisoner was brought before the firing squad.

"No—" Hanley choked in quiet anguish, his fists clenching involuntarily.

Shambling unsteadily across level ground, Saunders looked pulverized. A fetid bandage bound his thigh, the gauze stiff with brownish blood. Even from his distant vantage, Hanley could see the pallor of Saunders' skin and the sheen of feverish sweat across his brow. Battling torture and infection, the sergeant was losing both campaigns.

The lieutenant watched the German captain light a cigarette and stroll toward Saunders. He spoke to the dazed noncom, but received no response. Hanley couldn't tell if Saunders was ignoring him on purpose or not. Gil flinched as the massive Feldwebel strode forward, obviously unable to tell the difference himself. The captain delayed him with a few words and an idle gesture.

Saunders' impending beating was interrupted by the arrival of a large German Shepherd.

The Hauptmann walked away from the suffering man to greet the dog fondly. That one action told Hanley more about the Kraut captain than a thousand dossiers and debriefings ever could.

Hanley's worried gaze shifted back to Saunders. Somehow he had to let his friend know he was here. He had to find a way to stop his execution without getting captured as well. His fingers traveled over the film. He knew he didn't have the strength to survive their torture, but neither could he just lie here and let Sarge die!

Just as the lieutenant prepared to knock the slats out with the heel of his hand, he saw sunlight gleam in Saunders' blond hair as he raised his head slightly. Gil caught his breath and leaned as close as he dared. The sergeant was looking at him! "Saunders..." he whispered.

There was no earthly way Sarge could've heard him, yet a small smile crooked the side of his mouth, cracking open his split lip. He turned away and shook his head. Swallowing hard, Hanley read his message loud and clear. With the courageous sergeant, it was always the same: the mission came first.

The film was more important than either of their lives. Hanley knew it as well as Saunders did, but that knowledge did nothing to lessen the unbearable torment of the moment. Lying there, watching the tragedy unfold, Hanley prayed fervently for intervention, begging God to let him switch places with the sergeant.

Suddenly another voice interrupted. The Feldwebel prompted his superior to return to the task at hand. The German captain reluctantly patted his dog, then turned sharply on his heel and strode back to the shade tree. The Feldwebel tied a rag around Sarge's eyes, then retreated to his master's side, as obedient as the canine on the leash.

"Ready!" the Feldwebel shouted, his voice loud in the still morning air. Six German soldiers raised their rifles.

The Hauptmann shifted his weight, his tone oily and conniving. "Any last thoughts, Sergeant?" A cruel smile thinned his lips.

Saunders' voice was gravelly with thirst, nearly inaudible, yet Hanley heard it clearly. "Hazel liked me best..."

The German captain frowned, confused. In the crawlspace, Gil pressed his forehead to the slats and stared at Saunders with a miserable, green gaze. He'd never felt so sick and helpless in his life. Sudden tears blurred his vision, and he dragged the back of his hand over his eyes. The canister of film pressed against his ribs accusingly.

"Aim!"

A heartbeat before the final order, Lieutenant Hanley turned his face away, unable to bear the sight of his best friend's death.

"Fire!"

A sob tore from Gil's throat as the sharp report of six rifles shattered the dismal dawn.

"October's a creepy month," Littlejohn said slowly, his voice slurred. "I never much liked it. It's beautiful, but...." He shook his head. "I don't want to die in October."

"Don't talk like that," Doc whispered tersely. "No one said you're gonna die."

Unconvinced, Littlejohn nodded accommodatingly. "Okay," he sighed. He shifted uncomfortably in the tight space. The ground was cold and his muscles hurt and, for just a moment, dying didn't sound half-bad.

His eyes drifted shut as he listened to the sounds of the awakening forest. For too long, all he'd heard was the harsh clamor of conflict. The sweet chorus of birdsong ringing through the branches felt like heaven to his ears.

"Don't go to sleep, Littlejohn," Doc nudged with his voice. "Caje and Kirby'll be back before you know it." The remark sounded just like what it was: wishful thinking. Reaching out to check Littlejohn's pulse, Doc frowned in concern at how clammy his flesh felt. "Stay awake, you hear

me?" he told the hurt soldier gently.

The big man's eyes opened and he stared at nothing, his thoughts worlds removed from this cold stone alcove. In his mind, he was striding through the tall, yellow grasses of Nebraska, talking and laughing with his Pa as they hunted pheasant for supper. At home, Ma was baking a pie in the big iron stove and humming gospel tunes....

"Littlejohn!" Doc's voice was sharp.

In the watery light, the medic's face seemed pale and worried. Littlejohn watched him shove the thorn bushes away from the hidden alcove, then climb out cautiously. "What're you doing?" the private asked in confusion.

After checking the area for Krauts, Doc knelt beside Littlejohn and helped him sit up in the sudden freedom. "We gotta get you to a doctor. You're gonna die if we wait here much longer!"

"Oh..." Littlejohn said weakly. For a moment there, he thought it was something serious.

Standing with a grunt and leaning heavily on the medic, Littlejohn stared down at his feet and concentrated on putting one big boot in front of the other. He lost count of the plodding steps long before they reached the lumber road. And he lost consciousness shortly after that.

Impeccably attired in a clean, crisp uniform, Jaeger waited in the first rays of dawn as the bedraggled prisoner was brought before the firing squad. Interrogated all day and through the night, the sergeant moved with the unsteady gait of the very old, hobbled by pain. Dried blood left a caked trail from one ear to his collar, a testament to the Feldwebel's brutal attempts at persuasion. Jaeger hoped the prisoner wasn't too brain-damaged to enjoy his own execution.

The German captain watched dispassionately as guards bound the sergeant's hands and shoved him against a bullet-scored wall. The rumpled GI didn't react at all; he seemed remote, uninvolved. Perhaps it was shock. Jaeger frowned. The prisoner must be fully aware of his impending death.

Strolling forward, he lit a confiscated Lucky. Inhaling deeply, he made a vast show of pleasure at the aromatic tobacco. "American cigarettes," he murmured, exhaling languid ribbons of smoke. "I am forced to concede their superiority to ours." With a charming smile, he leaned closer and said quietly, "Tell me where the film is, and I'll let you live."

When Saunders remained mute, the hulking Feldwebel strode across the courtyard, fist poised to strike the disrespectful prisoner. Jaeger stopped him with a small gesture, his voice soft as he examined the beaten, silent sergeant with a critical eye. "After a time, physical force becomes ineffective. Remember your training."

The gates of the courtyard swung open with a squeal. Turning, Jaeger's expression brightened and he walked away from Saunders without another thought. "Kaiser!" he called as the dog was released from its leash. Racing forward, the magnificent animal leapt and yelped like a puppy, delighted to see the Hauptmann. Man and beast collided in a happy romp. In a way, it was almost innocent.



Sickened, Saunders turned his face to the side. He couldn't reconcile what he saw with how he felt. The inhumane torture inflicted upon him had been sanctioned by that manicured hand—the hand that now patted and stroked a dumb animal with tender affection.

Across the commons, a young cat sauntered over the uneven deck of a wrecked gazebo, its fur golden in the hazy morning sun. Reaching a particular point on the boards, it sat and curled its tail around its paws and focused its unblinking gaze on Saunders. Sarge stared at it through drifting vision, envying the cat's freedom.

Suddenly a small movement caught his eye. Directly below the cat's perch, barely visible

between the lattice of woodwork, a familiar green gaze stared back at him.

Sarge felt an almost overwhelming rush of relief, and he struggled to remain strong. Until then, he'd felt utterly alone, certain his death would remain a mystery. Hanley's presence was a final, comforting reminder of home.

It hurt to smile but he did anyway, a fleeting grin easily mistaken for a grimace. Saunders' eyes stung as he looked away, not wishing to draw the Krauts' attention to the lieutenant. Knowing Hanley's gaze was locked on him, he shook his head in an almost imperceptible message of failure and regret.

"Herr Hauptmann—" the burly Feldwebel spoke shortly, reminding the German captain of his prior commitment. The prisoner awaited his attention.

"Ah, yes," Jaeger smiled regretfully, ruffling Kaiser's fur. "Duty comes first..." Straightening, he strolled back to his shady shelter and idly gestured for the Feldwebel to commence with the execution.

The German sergeant pulled a soiled handkerchief from his back pocket and tied it around Saunders' eyes. Fear built in the absence of sight; blind panic, it was called.

Yet the GI didn't seem panicked. Eyes narrowed in suspicion, the Feldwebel glanced at the captain. Jaeger nodded curtly at him to hurry with the proceedings. Stepping away from the prisoner, the German sergeant cleared his throat and called loudly, "Ready!"

Six rifle chambers rattled, the metallic sound echoing sharply off the chilly cobblestones.

"Perhaps you have some last thoughts, Sergeant?" Jaeger smirked. This was a game he enjoyed immensely.

Saunders canted his head and spoke the first thing that came to his mind—the one thing that would reveal to Hanley the fullness of their friendship, the bond they'd begun in England many lifetimes ago. The silly woman over whom they'd competed suddenly gained immense importance.

At the Hauptmann's final, impatient gesture, the German sergeant shouted, "Aim!" He gave a silent signal to his men. As they raised their rifles, the Feldwebel paused briefly, then shouted: "Fire!"

At the roaring volley, the only visible reaction from Saunders was a slight constriction of his shoulders as he braced for the expected impact of six bullets ripping into his chest. That killing blow never came.

Neither did the anticipated collapse of the American soldier, the dropping to his knees or the hysterical weeping that the Feldwebel had seen other prisoners succumb to under such treatment. The Kraut's heavy brows drew together in bewilderment.

Too furious to speak, Hauptmann Jaeger angrily dismissed the firing squad and stormed back to his office, leaving the German sergeant standing alone with the prisoner.

"You must be mad..." the Feldwebel muttered to his captive counterpart, though he knew Saunders didn't understand him.

Dragged back to his cell and literally thrown in, Saunders pressed his inflamed cheek to the cold stone floor and shuddered with pain. He'd refused to reward his torturers with moans or tears, but now he revealed his agony to the darkened cell.

Despite his own ravaged condition, he worried about Hanley. Surely the lieutenant had seen the trick, the way the Krauts had shot into the air to draw him out of hiding. Or had he looked away? Concern helped fan his fading resolve. Saunders was determined to escape, or die trying.

Hours passed and still no one came to loosen his bonds. His hands became numb, and his wrists ached with the abrasive pressure of the ropes. Unable to rise, Sarge lay still, the formerly soothing touch of cold stone growing intolerable as time crawled by. Stiff and feverish, he fell into a restive sleep, his pain following him even there.

Sunset came quickly in October. As the cell grew dark and damp in the late afternoon, a

small shadow detached from the rest and darted across the stone floor. Encountering the sergeant, the cat hesitated, then approached his shirt pocket. A few crumbs of a cracker hastily eaten on the battlefield remained there, and the tawny stray reached in, braving the depths of Sarge's shirt to scavenge.

Although still a kitten, the skinny feline had a voracious appetite. When he finished with the crumbs, he went in search of more tasty morsels. Placing his paws on Sarge's arm, the cat stood and inspected the unconscious man for hidden treats. Suddenly two bloodshot blue eyes opened as the sergeant lifted his head and stared around groggily.

Darting away, the cat sat just beyond reach, its bright gaze focused intently on the sergeant. Whiskers trembled as it sniffed for food. Driven by hunger, it didn't advance and it didn't retreat, it just sat and stared at Sarge with the patience of the Sphinx.

"Sorry, pal," Saunders said in a parched whisper. "I've got nothin' for ya...."

Laying his burning forehead back down on the cold stone, he shut his eyes. He felt himself losing consciousness, and he struggled to stay awake. When he looked again, the yellow kitten was still there, but slightly closer. Could it sense his dire predicament?



Saunders didn't have time to ponder the question further. Footsteps approached, stopping before his cell. The heavy door swung open, and the Feldwebel stepped in and dragged Saunders to his feet. The sergeant saw the cat dart back into the shadows as the Kraut wordlessly severed the cords binding Sarge's hands.

The Feldwebel drew a wooden chair over with his jackboot, and Saunders winced as he was roughly shoved down onto the hard seat. Every inch of his body hurt. He felt bruised from head to heels, and his leg was aflame with infection. It wouldn't be much longer before he wouldn't be in any shape to tell the Krauts anything of value. Somehow he knew the German captain was aware of that. Nothing much seemed to escape that keen, cruel gaze.

The next sound was unmistakable, the click of claws across stone. Saunders squinted painfully as a bare light bulb suddenly illuminated the dreary cell. Through blurred vision he saw the Hauptmann enter, followed eagerly by his dog. From a dark corner behind him, Sarge heard a soft hiss of feline alarm.

"It has been two full days, Sergeant," Jaeger said without preamble. "Obviously your cohort did not escape, or we would have had Allied guests by now." Neither expecting nor receiving a response, the German captain indicated the Feldwebel. "My sergeant wagers that he is dead and the canister lost. I accepted the challenge, and I don't like to lose bets. Perhaps now you would be so kind as to inform us as to the location of the film?"

Jaeger clenched his jaw at the American's unbroken silence. Every minute brought Colonel Esterhaus closer to the outpost. Facing execution or banishment to the Eastern Front for his error, the disgraced colonel was desperate and dangerous. Calamity was on the horizon unless Jaeger found that film!

The German captain stepped closer to Saunders, crowding him. Killing the American at this point would be unwise, especially so close to achieving their goal. Yet suppressing the urge to wrap his hands tightly around the soldier's neck made his fingers tremble.

"This time it is not a ruse, Sergeant," he snapped. "This time I intend to have you dragged before a firing squad and shot! No one will ever know your fate and the film will remain lost—of no use to anyone! Your spies have failed; *you* have failed! Is this what you fought so hard to achieve?"

The GI tilted his head back at the captain's heavily-accented words. Cracked lips parted, and Saunders spoke slowly and calmly, almost his only words since his ordeal had begun. "No," he murmured. "I still have to kill you."

Jaeger stared at him for a moment, stunned to silence by the insolence. Then his face

grew ruddy with rage, and he wrenched his holster open and withdrew his Luger. Aiming it between Saunders' eyes he snarled: "Mutts like you should be drowned at birth."

Just as his finger tightened on the trigger, an abrasive hiss erupted from the corner. With a thunderous bark of outrage, the German Shepherd burst between the two men and attacked a scrawny cat attempting to escape into the shadows. Scratching and spitting, the cat's insane yowl rose to an earsplitting pitch.

Unbalanced by his dog and the sudden bedlam, Jaeger stumbled and fired, the blast of the gun and the howl of the injured animal tearing through the air in a single nasty note. "Kaiser!" the captain cried in alarm. Abandoning all pretense of superiority, Jaeger fell to his knees in shock beside the whining, wounded dog.

In the chaos, Sarge lunged from the chair like a charging lion and drove a shoulder into the Feldweibel's belly. As the big man buckled in pain and surprise, Saunders bludgeoned his fist across the Kraut's jaw with the full force of his unspent wrath. The blow broke the German sergeant's neck.

Before the body hit the ground, Sarge snatched up the wooden chair and swung it at Jaeger. The gun went off a second time, then skittered across the stone tiles, knocked painfully from the German captain's grasp.

"No!" Jaeger cried, scrambling for the weapon.

His fingers tightened over the gun and he rolled onto his back just as the chair swung again, shattering the bare light bulb and plunging the room into darkness. There was a blinding flash and a deafening roar, followed by the dry crack of splintering wood. Silence settled, broken only by the sound of ragged breathing; eventually even that ceased.

In the still, bloody cell, a young cat cried abjectly for rescue.

Kirby ran the knife in up to the hilt. The Kraut died noiselessly, and the BAR man lowered the body to the ground. In that gory moment, the oddest thought crossed his mind: he had to write to Ma and Ruthie soon, or they'd worry.

He was already working on a diversionary tale to amuse his mother and sister, some falsehood from the front meant relieve their anxiety, when Caje called to him in a low tone. The scout crept through the underbrush to his side. There wasn't a drop of blood on him, yet he'd dispatched another German just as thoroughly and quietly.

As the BAR man cleaned his knife, Caje looked down at the dead Kraut. "Just a kid," he remarked, his expression unreadable.

Kirby scowled and shoved his bayonet into his scabbard with a snap. "Yeah... I hear Hitler used to be a kid, too," he said sourly.

Bending to retrieve his rifle, Kirby inadvertently glimpsed the dead boy's face. He paused only a moment, but the image burned indelibly into his mind. The Kraut wasn't a day older than Ruthie, with the same spill of freckles across his nose.

Rising, Kirby hefted the BAR and forged on through the forest without another word. He seemed to have already forgotten the incident, yet his tread was somewhat stiffer as the awful necessity of his actions absorbed into his soul.

It was early afternoon when Caje and Kirby neared the settlement. They ambushed four more Krauts patrolling the perimeter. Two of the Germans were old enough to be grandfathers. Deafened by years of Allied ordnance falling around them, they didn't hear a thing until it was too late.

"Where the heck is everybody?" Kirby whispered, clutching his BAR to his chest as he and Caje crouched in the thick foliage. He scanned the deserted village with worried eyes. "Think it's a



trick?"

Caje shook his head; he'd already removed his beret, now he firmly snugged his helmet into place. "I dunno. But that's what we came for..." He pointed at a car half-visible beside the grandest home in the small township.

Kirby snorted at the sight, pleased by their sudden good fortune. "Now we just gotta figure out how to sneak down there and get it." When Caje didn't answer, he glanced at him. The scout's sharp gaze darted over the village commons, settling on a wrecked gazebo lying only yards from the car.

"Kirby, we encountered six Krauts on the way here, nearly all of them alone or green." Caje spoke without turning. "Doesn't that seem strange? If you were the commandant, wouldn't you have the woods crawling with crack German troops if you had them?"

Kirby frowned in thought. "What are you sayin'... that's all they sent out 'cause there ain't nobody else?" He followed Caje's gaze and scanned the village square. "You think all the troops are gone?"

Caje considered Kirby's words. "I dunno, maybe. This village *is* off the beaten path..."

Kirby scoffed. "Listen, Caje, when a spy plane goes down in your neck of the woods, the whole world beats a path to *your* door!" He turned and scanned the settlement again. "Maybe there's more comin'..." he said slowly, the wheels in his mind turning. "There's gotta be."

The two men waited until dusk settled, then rose and cautiously descended the hill to the village. They were halfway to the staff car when suddenly they heard a distant gunshot. It seemed to come from inside the large dwelling. "Hit it!" Kirby hissed, diving for an opening in the bombed-out gazebo. Caje followed.

A second shot rang out. "Cripes!" Kirby yelled, nearly invisible in the deep shadows. Caje quickly shushed him.

"No!" Kirby whispered insistently. "Look!" He grabbed the scout's hand and slapped it down on something soft and yielding. "It's the lieutenant!"

The Cajun grasped Hanley's shoulder. The flesh was warm; the officer was still alive, but not responding. Twisting around, Caje caught his breath as a third shot split the air. It grew silent after that.

Waiting and watching, their suspicions were confirmed when no one ran to the building to investigate. The German OP was deserted... except for the owner of the gun, whoever that might be. Personally, Kirby didn't plan to stick around and find out.

"Let's go," he told Caje quietly. "You get the car and pull it up over here. I'll cover you in case of trouble."

Just as they prepared to break out of the crawlspace and steal the vehicle, the faint sound of racing engines echoed off the stark brick walls of the township. Up the road, a staff car and a troop truck sped toward the German OP, their headlights weaving among the trees.

"Let's get out of here," Kirby said urgently. "Caje, grab the lieutenant's arm and help me!"

There was no time for stealth. The soldiers dove through the opening and dragged the unconscious officer roughly to his feet. Staggering under their ungainly load, the two smaller men barely made it to the shelter of the tree line before the village was invaded by a shouting armada of tyrants. The German troop truck pulled up right where the Americans had been standing moments ago. It was the tightest race Kirby had run in a long time.

Hanley chose that moment to revive. Dangerously dehydrated, he moaned and raised a shaking hand to his temple. Deaf to his men's pleas to remain silent, he tried weakly to stand on his own, growing angry when that proved impossible.

"Lieutenant, sir, with all due respect... will ya shut up?" Kirby whispered desperately in his



ear. "There's about fifty Krauts right in front of us wavin' their guns in th' air!"

Grasping a tree trunk in both hands, Hanley steadied himself, but didn't speak. Clamping his eyes shut, he shook his head to clear it, then blearily focused on the Kraut-infested courtyard. "Saunders..." he rasped.

Caje fixed a hard look at Kirby over the lieutenant's shoulder. Could it be—?

Almost on cue, a voice rose above the others. "*Oberst Esterhaus... ein Amerikaner!*"

A stern-faced German colonel stepped from his staff car and crossed the courtyard quickly. Caje and Kirby exchanged amazed looks as two soldiers exited the large house, supporting a staggering prisoner between them. Saunders could barely keep his head up, and fresh blood stained the sleeve of his field jacket.

Confronting the sergeant, the German colonel barked questions at him, but to no avail. The American simply stared at him blankly. Ripping open the soldier's filthy field jacket, Colonel Esterhaus tore Saunders' shirt in his haste to find the stolen film. The colonel was nearly irrational with panic, and he bellowed for Captain Jaeger.

Several troops exited the building, four of them carrying the dead captain and Feldwebel and the fifth cradling a pitifully mewling cat. The soldiers' bodies were deposited on the cobblestones at the colonel's feet. Even from their hiding place dozens of yards away, the Americans could see the color drain from Esterhaus' face.

The colonel turned slowly in a circle, his gaze sweeping the windows and doorways. He looked down at the dead German captain and sergeant, then up at Saunders. His gaze narrowed in fury, and he shouted at his troops to ransack the buildings.

As the courtyard emptied and the sounds of breaking furniture and glassware could be heard from every house, the colonel approached Saunders, his rigid posture exuding hatred. When he was just inches from Sarge's face, he snarled, "What you felt before was only a gentle diversion compared to what I have planned for you."

The sergeant's lucent, blue eyes flickered once, yet he remained mute.

Esterhaus jerked his head toward the troop truck and brusquely ordered his soldiers to take the American there and wait. Then he stormed to the dead captain's headquarters to join the search for the film.

The three hidden GIs watched the German soldiers prod Saunders across the courtyard. The mauled sergeant trudged to the truck through the fog of shock, half-blind, his wounded leg dragging.

"God," Caje said softly.

Kirby clutched the BAR in a white-knuckled grip and cursed under his breath.

"Easy, men..." Hanley whispered weakly.

The Kraut with the cat gently carried the animal to the passenger's seat, speaking in soothing tones. Another soldier hurried ahead and dropped the tailgate with a clang while his companion shoved the prisoner forward. Unable to withstand any more abuse, Sarge collapsed halfway to the transport vehicle and mercifully passed out. The Krauts hauled him into the back of the truck and left him to join in the looting, confident that he was in no shape to run off.

"Are you kidding me?" Caje whispered incredulously as the Germans abandoned the vehicle and Sarge. He rose to get a better look, followed by Kirby and Hanley. Once more, impossibly, the courtyard was deserted.

"We can make it..." Hanley croaked, weaving on his feet. He indicated the truck with a jerk of his chin. "Caje, you drive. Kirby, gimme a hand."

Without wasting another precious second, they hobbled quickly from the forest's edge to the nearby troop truck and climbed in. Hanley crawled to the unconscious sergeant's side, doing his best to protect him from the battle to come. Caje fired up the engine, and Kirby raised and latched the tailgate as a shield.

"Stay down!" Caje yelled at the men as the truck lurched out of the village square and lethargically gathered speed.

German troops poured from the houses like rats from a disturbed nest. Foreign voices shouted in alarm, and purloined treasures were flung callously to the ground, forgotten. A thousand bullets traced hot paths through the air, peppering the tailgate and shredding the canvas roof of the escaping truck.

"Kirby!" Cajé shouted over the straining engine. "The staff car!"

German soldiers raced to the colonel's vehicle. Kirby leaned out as Cajé drove past the staff car, then pumped the elegant sedan full of blazing rounds of lead. The heat and blast of the explosion knocked the BAR man backward.



With increasing speed, Cajé took them safely away from the village. Running after the troop truck on foot, the colonel's men soon gave up. Slumping against the rails, Kirby dragged a hand down his face and turned to Hanley with a weary grin. "We made it..." he gasped.

The lieutenant didn't answer. He'd shut his eyes and sunk into unconsciousness next to his best squad leader.

Staring at Hanley and Sarge with an enormous sense of relief, the BAR man took a deep breath and released it with a whoosh. "We made it..." he repeated in vast satisfaction.

Now that the immediate danger was past, he felt fatigue turn his bones to lead. Sighing, he reclined on the hard bench and closed his eyes. A split-second later, a bullet embedded in the wooden slat where he'd recently rested.

Kirby's eyelids wrenched open, and he suddenly found himself on the floor as instinct took over. Several more shots rang out, and he winced as sharp splinters stung his neck. "Cajé!" he shouted helplessly. "Step on it!"

Cursing, the BAR man rose to his knees and opened fire on the Krauts pursuing them at a breakneck pace. The truck rattled as Cajé attempted to coax more speed from the heavy machine. The lighter vehicle gained on them quickly, as nimble as a thoroughbred outracing a draft horse. The slats on the side of the truck seemed to spit sparks as bullets flew wildly over their heads.

Jostled back to consciousness by the rough ride, Hanley surmised the situation immediately. Shifting his weight with a painful grimace, he grasped the window of the cab and pulled himself up. "We need to keep the film out of their hands!" he shouted at the Cajun. "Ram them!"

Hearing this, Cajé nodded ferociously, then glanced back at the men. "Kirby, get Sarge away from the tailgate," he shouted. "Hurry—hold on!" With no time to explain, he gritted his teeth and slammed on the brakes.

Squealing, the big truck locked its wheels on a sharp downward incline. With no warning, and not expecting the fleeing soldiers to decelerate, the German car slammed into the steel bumper of the troop vehicle at full speed. At the impact, the driver of the sedan flew through the windshield and was cut to ribbons.

The two vehicles swerved wildly across the road, their frames welded together. Slapping the steering wheel as he fought centrifugal force, Cajé glanced in the rearview mirror as two of the three remaining German soldiers were ejected from the car. They hit the pavement with bone-cracking speed and tumbled, then didn't move again.

The scenery was a blur as the truck fishtailed out of control. Finally the entire frame of the vehicle jolted as the sedan struck a tree and broke away like a damaged appendage.

With a stinking, screaming screech of its tires, the big troop vehicle finally came to rest backward on the road. Through the cracked and dusty windshield, the smaller sedan could be seen wrapped around the thick trunk of a tree like a slain dragon, all gleaming yellow eyes and steaming nostrils and hissing breath.

In the dizzy aftermath of the accident, nobody moved for long moments. Then Cajé half-fell from the cab and wobbled to the wrecked car. He leaned over the unconscious officer in the front

seat, then stood and called to Hanley: "It's the German colonel! He's still alive!"

With a humorless chuckle, the lieutenant nodded. "That's good," he said hoarsely, savoring the victory. Looking down, he patted Saunders' shoulder gently, wishing the sergeant were awake to see this. "That's good...."

The medic had passed the breaking point miles ago. When Littlejohn collapsed a final time, Doc sat down next to him in the middle of the road and didn't get up again. Drained and trembling, he half-listened for approaching vehicles, wondering if he'd have the strength to drag Littlejohn off to the side before they were both struck. Somehow he had to force himself to care.

Doc glanced at Littlejohn. The private's complexion was ghastly pale, his skin icy. He was dying, and there was absolutely nothing the medic could do. Doc's chin quivered as tears of despair and frustration stung his eyes. Hugging the empty rucksack, he buried his face in its canvas folds. Exhausted, he wept as much for himself as for his lost friends.



Suddenly, a rugged noise reached his ears. Raising his head, Doc held his breath and listened intently. The noise grew quickly, becoming the unmistakable sound of a vehicle headed this way, its driver in a hurry!

Flinging the useless rucksack into the woods, Doc rose on wobbly legs. He grasped Littlejohn's wrists in an attempt to drag him to safety, but the unconscious private was dead weight and barely budged.

"C'mon, Littlejohn," the medic gasped. "Help me out!" Teeth gritted, Doc tried again, his back bowed with the effort. It was no good: Littlejohn was too big and Doc was too tired.

Listening to the vehicle race through the turns, the medic knew he was taking too long. At this rate, he would barely have time to save himself. Yet he persisted, even when he knew it was hopeless. Even when the hot headlights lanced around the final curve and caught them in their blinding beams.

The medic threw himself over the wounded private as the nerve-shredding sound of screeching brakes filled the air. Closing his eyes and turning away, Doc was grateful Littlejohn would die quickly and without panic.

The final moment came and went, and when the medic found himself still in one piece, he looked up in amazement at the figures approaching him, trying to make sense of the words he heard: "What're you tryin' to do, Doc, get yourself killed?"

Doc squinted into the headlights. "K-Kirby...?" he stammered. "Caje?" He never thought he'd be so glad to hear the BAR man's voice again, and he pushed himself to his feet and staggered into his friend's supporting arms.

The soldiers spent little time on greetings. They lifted Littlejohn and carried him to the back of the truck, sliding him in next to Sarge and Hanley. A bound and gagged German colonel glared at them from the corner. With a cursory glance at the Kraut, Doc returned his attention to the lieutenant and Saunders. The joy of seeing both men alive renewed Doc's flagging energy, and he clambered aboard.

"Home is just over that ridge." Kirby had to raise his voice to be heard above the rumbling engine. Doc looked at him, and the weariness and latent fear he felt must have been plain in his face.

"Relax, Doc," Kirby told him with a gallows grin. "I'm ridin' shotgun." The seating designation was more than figurative; they still had miles to go in uncertain territory and the BAR was their main defense.

At the medic's grateful nod, Kirby latched the dented tailgate firmly, slapping it with the palm of his hand.

Climbing into the cab with Cajé and bracing the BAR against the dashboard, he kept his gaze and the big weapon trained on the road ahead.

As the battered truck groaned into gear and headed back down the lumber trail, Doc immediately bent over the wounded men in concern. He had no supplies with which to tend their injuries. His only salve for their pain was his pity. Yet when Littlejohn revived and greeted him with a weak smile, Doc knew without doubt they'd been blessed.

Kneeling among the injured soldiers, the wind whipping through his hair, the young medic shut his eyes in silent thanks.

Hanley folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope as he heard a nurse give directions to Saunders' room. Tucking the pages into his pocket, he looked up just as three familiar faces grinned at him from the doorway.

"Heya, Lieutenant!" Kirby called cheerfully, unmindful of the man asleep on the cot. When Doc dug an elbow into his ribs and Cajé kicked his boot, he had the grace to look abashed, and he lowered his voice to a loud whisper. "How's Sarge doin'?"

Hanley gave the BAR man a flat stare. "Better," he said shortly. "Doctors say it'll be awhile before he comes around." The Germans had nearly beaten Saunders to death. One more hard blow to the skull could've crippled or killed him.

"We got something for him," Cajé grinned. "It escaped from the truck after we arrived here, tried to follow Sarge into surgery." Opening his jacket, he reached in and pulled out a skinny young cat. The animal had bandages wrapped around its head and one paw, and yellow fur stuck out at crazy angles between the gauze.

"Yeah... Doc patched him up," Kirby offered as explanation. "Looks like a dog got 'im."
"A German Shepherd," Hanley murmured, and the irony was not lost on the men. A Kraut dog.

When the cat saw Saunders, it let out a thin mewl and struggled to escape Cajé's hands. The scout lowered it to the floor, and the cat promptly hopped up next to the sleeping sergeant, moving awkwardly on its injured paw. Prowling the narrow cot like a tiny tiger, it soon curled up under Sarge's chin and shut its eyes with a contented purr.

"That's what I call a couple 'a cool cats," Doc half-whispered, a jaunty grin on his face.
"Heh... they kinda look alike!" Kirby pointed out gleefully. Next to him, Cajé grinned, noticing the ruffled resemblance. Saunders' tawny hair stuck up in tufts from his bandages, too.

After the last few terrible days, it felt wonderful to smile. Informed that Sarge and Littlejohn's injuries weren't permanent, the men quickly dissolved into hushed laughter and relieved joking. Finally Hanley broke it up. "All right, fellas, why don't you go bother Littlejohn?" he said kindly, though not quite in jest.

He watched in amusement as the smiling men waved and piled out into the corridors of the field hospital to track down their large buddy. A free-floating fiesta of good will, they filled the halls with their happy banter.

After they departed, Hanley reached for the cane leaning against the wall and rose gingerly on his aching leg. He crossed the few steps to the side of the cot. Saunders rested heavily against the pillow, his temple discolored with bruises beneath the stark white of the gauze. Besieged yet unbroken by a ruthless enemy, the sergeant seemed bold even in his sleep.

Taking the letter out of his pocket, Gil scanned the lines he'd written, searching for any

omission or exaggeration and finding none. To him, the Medal of Honor wasn't even good enough, but this would have to do.

Gil raised troubled eyes. He was still profoundly affected by the events of the past few days. Reaching down, his fingertips idly ruffled the cat's golden fur, then brushed the sergeant's shoulder. Staring at a man he felt privileged to know, missing the sound of his voice, a breath of pain escaped the lieutenant's lips.

He'd seen Saunders die. For a brief, horrifying moment, Hanley had believed it, and it didn't matter that it wasn't true. In the murderous echo of a firing squad, Gil had forgotten to breathe at the shock of what he had done.

He'd sacrificed Saunders for a roll of film. He'd traded the sergeant's life for a secret no one would ever know, because neither of them would get out of there alive. At the very least, Hanley should've destroyed the film. He should've stood next to Saunders before that scarred stone wall....

"Lieutenant," the voice of the doctor interrupted Gil's recriminations.

Swallowing hard, Hanley busied himself with tucking the letter back into his jacket pocket. "Yes, Captain?"

The physician was an older man, his face lean and careworn. He was as much a combat veteran as his patients were, and as he stepped closer and extended his hand, his intuitive eyes seemed to see the phantom blade buried in Hanley's heart. The doctor opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. Some wounds he could do nothing about; some wounds had to heal on their own.

Settling on small talk, he bent over Saunders to check his pupils and pulse. There was no evidence of lasting trauma, the soldier's mind had simply retreated for repair, knowing better than all the doctors in the world the proper course of therapy. Restorative rest was still the best medicine.

Straightening with a sound of satisfaction, the doctor scribbled a notation in Sarge's chart. "There's no need for you to stay, Lieutenant. Your sergeant will probably sleep through the night."

"I'd like to be here when he wakes up," Hanley said quietly. "That is, if it's permitted."

"Sure." The doctor nodded without looking up. "Of course, if you insist on beating yourself to a bloody pulp in contrition, I'll have to ask you to take it outside."

Now it was Hanley's turn to fall silent. Embarrassed by the transparency of his emotions, he looked down at the floor, but it was no use. Under the older man's piercing scrutiny, he found no place to hide.

Sighing, the doctor tucked Sarge's chart under his arm. "Look, son, we all play the hand we're dealt in this lousy war, whether we like it or not—"

Immune to the customary platitudes, Hanley interrupted. "Captain, with all due respect, I'm not in the mood for—"

"That's the best thing about being a captain," the doctor said in a pleasant tone. "You get to finish your sentences."

Properly chastised, the lieutenant clamped his mouth shut. It seemed the Army would not allow him to brood.

The doctor gestured at Saunders, indicating the multiple scars marking his body. "Your sergeant obviously doesn't need the rules of war explained to him. Do you?"

Hanley breathed out hard, feeling the embers of resentment warm his cheeks. "No, sir."

"So you don't need to be told that the enemy doesn't play fair, or that the tenets of common decency don't apply in a war zone?" The doctor's inquiring tone was suffused with flint. "Perhaps you've heard that a soldier's life is abbreviated at best?"

At Gil's stiff affirmative response, the doctor continued. His voice never rose above a personal pitch, but it staggered Hanley as though he'd shouted. "I don't know what happened to you two out there, so I won't presume to know how you feel, but you're not doing your friend any favors by piling your guilt on him. He's been through enough without taking on your problems."

Staring at the physician, Hanley felt the impact of his hard gaze. It was as though the older

man could see that cold October courtyard reflected in Gil's eyes. "I should've—" The words left Hanley's lips before he could stop them.

At the lieutenant's obvious distress, the doctor's stern expression softened, and he shook his head wearily. He'd witnessed some of the most hideous wounds ever committed by man, but among the worst was self-inflicted dishonor. It was like a grenade going off in a soldier's skull. It destroyed something vital in them, extinguished a spark. Eventually the war caught and killed them.

Sighing, the physician reached into his pocket for a cigarette, offering one to Hanley. "Lieutenant, I've walked a million miles in your shoes. I've had to let men to die in order to save the lives of a dozen others. It's never easy." Extending a light to Hanley, he admitted quietly, "However, I've never sacrificed a friend. I've been spared that."

Lighting his own cigarette, the doctor glanced at Saunders over the flame. Tough as leather, the sergeant had defiantly survived torture that would've killed most men. Some indefinable force had given him the strength to endure. Sensing the tall lieutenant's presence next to him, the doctor thought he understood what that force was.

Snapping the Zippo shut, the doctor went on thoughtfully. "After each patient's death, I told myself the same thing: the war killed them. It's a solid rationale, and it's supposed to help us sleep at night, but you and I both know better than that, don't we?"

"Yes, sir," Hanley answered, his faint response nearly lost in the soft background bustle of the hospital halls.

"I'll spare you the clichés, Lieutenant. Except for one," the doctor said in the same low, firm tone. "War is hell. Yet every once in awhile, Heaven intervenes on our behalf. You both could've died out there and you didn't, that's what you need to remember. That's what I prescribe for you: a good dose of reality, and a shot of gratitude."

Brought to his senses by the surgeon's sharp words, Hanley looked at him. For just a moment, the doctor saw in that haunted green gaze the memory of all the men the lieutenant had lost, all the times fortune hadn't favored them. But this wasn't one of those times, and the older man was relieved to see a slowly dawning appreciation of that fact.

Counting on a soldier's resilience, the doctor nodded and stubbed out his cigarette, tucking the unfinished butt in his pocket. Whatever these two men had gone through, they'd survived together, and they would recover together.

Giving Gil's shoulder a fatherly pat, he turned to leave, then paused at the door. His next words lacked the sting of reproach. "Lieutenant, that man over there is alive and it's plain he's beaten the odds many times. Somewhere along the line, you must've had something to do with that, so put down the cup of hemlock." A tired grin lifted the lined features. "Better yet, give me an hour to finish rounds, and I'll buy you a beer. Looks like we could both use one."

Cured of his pain by the doctor's deft but unrelenting aid, Hanley returned the encouraging smile and nodded. Left alone again, he glanced down at Saunders.

In all the commotion, the sergeant hadn't moved a muscle. Sleep held him in a snug embrace, smoothing the lines of stress from his brow. He looked the same as when Hanley first met him, six months and a world war ago. Feeling ancient, Gil longed to return to those uncomplicated days before France.

Using the cane, Hanley pulled a chair over to the side of the cot and sat stiffly. The young cat stirred at the movement and blinked drowsily at the officer. Gil desperately wanted to talk to Saunders, but what he had to say could wait. For now, the two soldiers possessed something rarely found on the front lines: the luxury of time.

Reaching over, Hanley gently picked up the kitten and cradled it against his chest. Stroking the soft golden fur, he smiled and cocked his head and spoke to the sleeping sergeant, his voice a warm murmur of remembrance: "What was the name of that café in England where we first met Hazel...?"

end