

UNEQUAL LAWS

By: Jestersang

Disclaimer: This story is a 'tag' to the episode 'Anatomy of a Patrol'. I do use a quote directly from the episode; most of you will spot it.

*My title is a borrowed line from Alfred Lord Tennyson's **Ulysses**.*

*...I mete and dole unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.*



Acknowledgements: Thank you, a thousand times over, to Doc II. No matter how often, during this long haul, I told her that I worked on, was working on, was going to work on, intended to work on, or even thought about working on this story, she never, ever, ever told me to shut up and get lost. She patiently listened to me, encouraged me every step of the way and gave me a wonderful, honest beta. Not to mention the great screen caps, and threats of valium to calm my stage fright.

Thank you, Doc, for everything. You're a true blue friend.

And to Ricochet. Thanks for your urgent missives, your blinding wit and the gift of your friendship. You never pull punches, and always make me strive to write that much better—and darker. Always darker.

Hanley stood and stretched—another long day that was far from over. With a wry grimace, he surveyed the piles of paperwork on his 'desk.' Today he was lucky, it was an actual piece of furniture. More often than not it was a plank across two chairs, half a broken wall or even a barrel top. He should be feeling thankful, he mused. Instead, Hanley was dreading what was to come next. He was on his way to simultaneously chew out and send out his best sergeant. And while he was at it, he intended to offer a bit of moral support—whether or not it would be accepted remained to be seen.

Hanley shook his head as he set out. A short time ago he would have had trouble with what he was about to do. He would have carefully selected his words and tone. No longer—too many similar settings had hardened him to the scene. What was bothering him this time was whom he was going to see.

After Crowley's death, Hanley wasn't all that surprised to be offered leadership of the platoon. As platoon sergeant, he had been next-in-command. What did surprise him was the lack of ceremony accompanying his promotion. Desperate to replace a large number of junior officers after D-day, the brass had been happy enough to find an actual second-in-command still alive, and waived the transfer requirement. Hanley had been given second platoon, K Company, with a pair of gold bars and a pat on the back. His official discharge and swearing in followed a week or so later, he couldn't remember exactly when.

It was Saunders who pinned those first bars on him. Hanley had wandered, dazed, outside the command tent where they had come to get their orders. Saunders, waiting outside, looked at his friend's face.

"What's wrong, Hanley?" he asked, pushing away from the tree he had been leaning against.

Mutely, Hanley extended his still-clenched fist towards Saunders.

Saunders grasped it and turned it towards himself, gently prying Hanley's fingers apart. He blinked, and then, "Congratulations, Lieutenant," was all the fanfare he gave the sudden change in their status.

"Crowley was a good man," croaked Hanley, still clutching his bars.

"A lot of good men have died in this war, Lieutenant, and a lot more will," Saunders replied, with a shake of his head.

Gently, he took the bars from his friend's hand.

"Here, let me help you." Quickly, he approximated the proper measurements on Hanley's collar tabs, then pierced the fabric through.

"Borrow your knife, Lieutenant?" he asked.

Without thinking, Hanley acquiesced, and a moment later Saunders handed him his set of stripes.

"You'll wanna save these for sure," he said.

Hanley stuffed them in his pocket and turned to face his friend. Sighing, he shed his thoughts and proceeded to issue his first set of orders as an officer to his waiting sergeant.

Hanley smiled to himself without realizing it as he stalled, lighting a cigarette. It had never occurred to him to turn down the promotion, he had been raised to take power where it was offered, and often where it wasn't. His upbringing had virtually assured him of command. All his life he had been the leader; issuing orders was second nature to him. Thus, he had stepped easily enough into the role, finding that he had been well prepared, but still a bit lacking. It wasn't until now that Hanley realized he had always enjoyed the respect and rewards of leadership, but knew very little of the work and worry that went with it.

Hanley's learning curve was immediate and steep. This wasn't a fraternity or

social club. Casual commands could—and did—result in regrettable death. The first time he realized that a decision he had made was directly responsible for someone's death, he could barely breathe. As the world had spun around him, he knew that life—and death—would never be the same again. As an officer, he understood the importance of the mission. As a leader, he understood the importance of his men. To his superiors, he was a rarity in that he was able to accomplish most of his goals. He had always been able to detach himself emotionally, and now he did so to survive. Losses were meticulously logged onto reports, while mourning and retribution were carried out in private. As private time became less and less, Hanley found himself becoming more and more automated. Every now and again, he would need to remind himself that the eight-man squad he had just left behind to cover the company's retreat was, in fact, eight individual souls, all with separate wants and needs, all hoping to get home as well. Sometimes he did this to himself to stay grounded, sometimes it was done for him, driven home in a way that would penetrate his carefully placed demeanor. He would clutch a bloody dog tag, and remember a certain laugh or smile, a letter he had censored, or a pass he had denied. Soon enough, however, he would return to his original state. He had to, it was the only way through this, the only way to function at an optimal level. He owed this to the men he still had. He knew that his men were good, and he intended to see as many of them home as he could, himself included.

Unlike Saunders, whom the men instinctively followed, Hanley found, at first, that he had the advantage of rank. Whether or not men wanted to follow him, they had to, and did. Saunders shouldered the burden of leader easily, naturally—he was born to it. Whatever it was that drew the men to him, Saunders never faltered in his role and kept the men's trust throughout. It amused Hanley to no end to hear men call Saunders 'sir,' even his own squad sometimes. But the real amusement came from the fact that half the time Saunders didn't even seem to notice it, as if it should actually be that way.

Soon enough, Hanley's men stopped treating him as an officer and began to act as if he were their lieutenant. Now they looked up to him because he had earned their trust, proven himself to be a good leader, and stayed that way. Equally important, Hanley knew he had earned their respect, and not just because the bars on his collar commanded it. Hanley was more confident than ever in his role as a leader. He had learned a lot about himself in the past few months. Some things had surprised him, some reassured him, but nothing, thank God, had shamed him. And for that, he was grateful.

But now Hanley had to perform one of the more thankless parts of his job. And for that, he was resigned.

Doc lay still, every inch of his exhausted body screaming for a sleep that wouldn't come.

He looked up at the ceiling, silently thankful that there was one there. Three walls remained in this building. The fourth spilled out into a small alleyway, completely blown out in decreasing piles of rubble, coming to rest against the buildings on the other side of the road.

He and Saunders were the only two in the squad's billet; the rest, bar one, were bunked in the aid station. Saunders had only just returned from there about an hour ago and was now restlessly stirring in his bedroll.

Kirby had waited until Saunders left to check on the others, and then left himself, in search of 'some fun.' Doc knew Kirby would find that, along with a good dose of trouble too. Doc had hoped, futilely, that Saunders wouldn't notice Kirby's empty spot.

But Saunders, with his usual perceptiveness when it came to Kirby, had noticed the private's absence immediately. Feigning sleep so as to avoid interrogation, Doc heard Saunders leave again, most likely in search of Kirby. The sergeant had returned a half hour later, cursing under his breath, settled into his bedroll and proceeded to toss and turn.

Finally giving up his struggles, Saunders stood, crossed the room into the open alley, and settled his back against a pile of debris. As he bent his head to his cupped hand to light a cigarette, Doc caught a quick glimpse of the worried sergeant, the flame illuminating tired eyes and tousled mane. Saunders took a long draw, then tipped his head back and exhaled into the crisp night air. Closing his eyes, he sighed and let his head rest, the pale moon sketching only the barest portrait beyond a silhouette. Doc was actually tempted to join Saunders and have one of his own rare cigarettes, but fear of what kind of reception he'd get stopped him. For Doc knew that Saunders was upset over the men he had lost, and Doc knew that it was all his fault.

Kirby had told him, in one of those ramble-on Kirby modes, that the German sergeant had been all set to buy Saunders' setup. Then he had found the empty vial of morphine. It didn't take the sergeant long to figure out that he'd been duped. Doc closed his eyes in despair. All those months of training and what does he do? Drops his waste in an open space. Because of this, the two squads had spent the day in a running battle. Saunders' squad had eventually come out on top, but Blocker, Johnson, and Gray had died, and all but Saunders and Kirby were casualties. Doc himself had almost made it, then stumbled about a mile from camp, badly wrenching his ankle. So, to add to his remorse and humiliation, Cajé and Littlejohn, wounded themselves, had to help him hobble along, while the sergeant and Kirby carried the pilot's litter.

Saunders hadn't uttered a word of reproach to Doc, he'd actually complimented him on keeping the pilot alive. But Doc was sure that this was the end for him. He wasn't formally attached to this squad and knew now that he never would be. He hadn't been with them long, but long enough to know that he wanted to stay. He shifted in his bedroll, trying to find a more comfortable position for his ankle while watching the moonlit sergeant field strip his cigarette butt.

All was silent for a while, then Doc saw another figure looming over Saunders. Looking up, without a word, Saunders moved over as Lieutenant Hanley sat down. Settling back, also not speaking, Hanley lit two cigarettes, passing one on to Saunders. They smoked companionably for a while in their silence.

Despite his own discomfiture, Doc was intrigued. It was a rare sight to see these two men together in a quiet moment like this. Doc had heard rumors of their friendship but hadn't really seen too much of it. It gave him a weird feeling of comfort, reminding him of jostling for space with his siblings in the backseat of the car while his parents drove home after a late night family event. Listening to the muted to and fro cadence of their voices melding into the night's soft silence while the miles rolled away beneath him had always lulled Doc into a drowsy state of calm.

Finally, Hanley spoke.

"It's not your fault, you know."

Saunders looked away, shifting slightly. He didn't reply, just rolled his cigarette out between his fingers.

"I mean it, Saunders. You've got to stop doing this to yourself, it's going to tear you apart."

There was still no answer from the motionless sergeant. Then, with a hint of a sigh, he lowered his head to hands clasped around his upraised knees. Yet, still he said nothing.

Hanley let out a frustrated sigh of his own as he pitched his cigarette away. He'd

known that he wouldn't get far with this, but as Saunders' leader he had to try. Now came the rest.

"Where's Kirby?"

Saunders stiffened and lifted his head.

"I asked you a question, Sergeant!" Hanley's low voice edged. "Where is Kirby?"

Saunders turned his head to look at Hanley. His CO's face was taut with anger and etched with fatigue. Something else was stirring there, and Saunders knew it wouldn't be long until he found out what.

Sure enough, Hanley continued on, without giving Saunders a chance to reply. "You know what, Sergeant? I know where Kirby is and so do you. The point is, he isn't where he's supposed to be, which is here. I've told you before, and I'm telling you now, you're too easy on him. He tap dances all around you, and you let him. I've also told you that one day it's going to cost you. And now it will."

Hanley paused and lit another cigarette, intentionally omitting his sergeant this time. "Well, do you know where he is?"

Silence, then—

"Yes, Lieutenant." Low but firm, Saunders' voice carried its way to Doc's listening ears.

"And?"

Saunders looked at the ground.

Hanley growled and threw his barely smoked cigarette to the ground.

"Great. Well, S2 is here. They want to see the wreckage of that plane.

Apparently there was another camera on board, one that even the pilot didn't know about. It's a prototype and they want it back before the Germans find it. You're the only one who can guide them in. I have two replacements to send with you and Kirby. But now, no Kirby. So it's all on you. And I have no other men to send as backup."

Hanley stood and looked down at his friend for a moment. Sighing, he shook his head. When he spoke again there was an almost imperceptible softening in his voice.

"C'mon, Sergeant. Let's get you on your way."

Slowly, Saunders stood and ducked into the squad's billet. Silently, he gathered his Thompson, jacket, and helmet. Then, he rejoined the waiting Hanley, and together the two men walked out of Doc's sight.

Doc lay still, seething. Normally very astute, he hadn't foreseen this. He had told Kirby to stay in, not go looking for dames and games, but Kirby had shaken him off as usual. At the time Doc had been thinking of Kirby's knack for finding trouble and imagining Saunders' ire when he found Kirby missing. He hadn't figured on this, the lieutenant sending them out again when the entire squad was laid up. Doc knew with his ankle he'd be more of a liability than an extra guide. He couldn't go. But Kirby could, and he had the firepower. Kirby had picked a fine time to go AWOL, Doc thought bitterly. Lying there, fire encircling his ankle and searing up his leg, worry and frustration gnawing at his heart, it took Doc a long time to settle into a very unrestful sleep.

Carefully, very carefully, he turned his throbbing head towards the light trying to pierce his fuzzy haze. Struggling, he opened first one sticky eye and then the other, quickly shutting them against what he could only guess were floorboards, undulating alongside his face. Trying again, steeling his will and his stomach, he pushed himself up, only to sag backwards onto a wall behind him, useless legs stretched out in front. Finally, in an attempt to gain his bearings, he lifted his head and peered through slitted lids—straight into the bemused eyes of a grinning, gum-smacking GI. Tipping to and fro

in a ragged, straight-backed chair, the soldier looked at him with a twinkle in his eye.

"How ya feeling, chum?" the soldier cracked, with a barely suppressed chuckle.

Kirby scowled and snarled at the happy chap opposite him.

The GI was laughing openly now as he offered Kirby a hand up.

"If I was you, and if you can, I'd hightail it outta here before Lucinda comes out. She's plenty mad that you camped out on her floor last night, says you ain't good for business."

Lucinda? Business? Ohhhhh, that Lucinda. That business.

Kirby swayed slightly before gaining his balance. Bringing a hand to his head, he stifled a groan. He could barely remember the woman 'hosting' the card game last night, let alone her name. One of the few pros in a town where business was good, her time was in great demand. Kirby vaguely remembered winning first shot at her last night with an ace high flush, but had no idea whether he'd claimed his winnings or not.

Shaking his head to clear it, and immediately regretting it, Kirby pushed his newfound friend away and stumbled out the door. The corporal's laughter escorted him down the street where Kirby kept a wary eye for patrols. He wandered a short way, stopped to answer a call of nature, and tried to figure out just exactly where he was. Cursing over the finding of no cigarettes anywhere on his person, he tried to recall his evening.

He hadn't been this hung-over in a long time—just what did he drink last night? He had gone out for a good time, trying to forget the patrol of the day before. It had started out normally enough, if kill or be killed can be called normal, but ended up with a three-man loss.

Usually Kirby could deal with that, had learned how, because he had to. What was different about this patrol was the Sarge. Solid, steady and taciturn, Saunders rarely wavered off course. Smiles were rare from the sergeant, insights into his psyche rarer still. Thus, when Kirby caught him at the command post and offered what he felt was a compliment on Saunders' strategy, he was stunned when Saunders took it and turned it around.



"Yeah," he had said sarcastically. "I was just brilliant!!"

Kirby knew Saunders was responsible for his men and had always guessed that Saunders felt responsible to his men. Yet, Kirby had never glimpsed the weight that Saunders carried around with himself at all times. It shook him to see Saunders second-guessing himself, showing a tiny chink in his armor of invincibility. Kirby worried. As mad as he ever got at Saunders, he always, somewhere deep in his soul, looked up to him. He relied

on his judgment and never doubted that 'Sarge knew best.' Now, Kirby was left with a creeping feeling that Saunders just might be human. And he didn't like it, not one bit.

Preparing to walk back to the squad's billet, he mentally prepared himself for the dressing down he was sure to receive. Upon arriving, he was pleasantly surprised to find it empty. Flopping down on his rack he was beginning to doze off when he finally caught a whiff of himself. Recoiling in disgust, he decided to find a shower of sorts. It definitely wouldn't help his case to be found smelling like this! Wearily, he began to gather his things. Shower, coffee, and a cigarette, not necessarily in that order. After that, he'd stop by the aid station to see the guys. Satisfied with his plans for the next hour or so, Kirby went in search of the showers he had heard were somewhere in camp.

Billy was mad.

"Angry, dear," his grandmother always said. "Only dogs are mad."

"Well, Grandma," he thought, "I'm mad! And as a dogface, I'm entitled," he finished grimly to himself. He looked at the somber group around him. Cajé and Littlejohn, mirror images, as each nursed opposite upper arm wounds and matching scowls on their faces. Doc, squirming mightily as he tried to unobtrusively find an elevated spot for the ankle which 'didn't hurt at all anymore.' Billy knew he didn't look much better. No wonder everyone was giving them a wide berth.

"You think that we could catch up with them, Littlejohn, and help the sergeant out?" Cajé asked, anger dropping his voice an octave and thickening his accent.

"I guess it's worth a try." Littlejohn frowned, trying to rub the pain out of his arm.

"Don't be foolish," snapped Doc, jackknifing his body to grab his ankle as he gave up all pretense of a miraculously healed sprain. "He's been gone for hours, you'll never catch up. And besides, none of us would be much help right now."

"Yeah, but we could at least wait by the river for him," Littlejohn said, not yet willing to abandon their self-authorized mission.

"And where on the river would you wait?" crabbed Doc. "There's no real crossing point now that the boats have been destroyed."

Cajé looked away, nostrils flaring a plume of smoke. He knew Doc was right, although he wasn't ready to admit it yet.

Billy sighed, completely forgetting that he was avoiding deep breaths. He, too, knew that Doc was right, that a soldier who was having trouble breathing while lying down wouldn't be worth two cents on a mission. Gingerly, he held his ribs. Boy, Kirby had really fouled up this time!

"How could Kirby be so—so—how could he do that?!" Billy plaintively asked.

"How could he go off like that and leave the Sarge alone on a mission?"

Littlejohn cast a worried glance at his friend. The flush in Nelson's face wasn't entirely due to anger. The doctor had been able to remove the bullet from his side but still wasn't sure if the ribs were cracked or broken. A working x-ray machine would be nice, but of course they didn't have one. The ambulance that was supposed to bring Billy back was to bring one up, but that wasn't here yet either.

"Now Billy," interjected Doc, desperate to keep the peace no matter what his own feelings towards Kirby were at the moment. "How was anyone to know that the Lieutenant would send a two-man squad out?"

But Billy wasn't about to let it go. "Yeah, well, you know what? I don't care! Can't Kirby last a day without getting into trouble?" He tried to quell the rapid breathing that hurt so much.

At that precise moment, as if summoned to fill the void left by the ebb of negative

energy in the room, a dampish Kirby strolled through the door.

"Hey you guys, what's going on?"

Surly silence met his greeting. Lighting a cigarette, Kirby didn't notice it at first. But eyes drifting over cupped hands finally did.

"What gives? Why the long faces?"

"Jerk!" snarled Littlejohn.

"Wh—well, what'd I do ta you, ya big ox?!?!" an indignant Kirby shot back.

"Did you have a nice time last night, Kirby?" rasped Littlejohn. "Did you find everything you were looking for?"

"As a matter of fact, I did!" snapped Kirby. "I think," he muttered to himself, dropping his voice a register. Then, suspicious, "Why do you want to know?"

"Cuz while you were out looking for a good time, the Sarge had to go out—alone—with two replacements!"

"Two replacements means he wasn't alone, Littlejohn," Kirby spit out, trying to comprehend what was being said to him.

"You know what I mean," Littlejohn countered.

Finding no help in Littlejohn, Kirby turned to the rest of the squad. "Will someone please tell me what's going on? Cajé? Doc?"

"Kirby, after you left, the lieutenant came looking for you and Sarge," Doc said.

"Yeah? So? I'm in trouble for being AWOL, is that it?"

"No, Kirby," sighed an exasperated Doc. He hated it when Kirby took such a bull-headed stance. "He had a mission for you guys. They both knew you were missing. I don't know if they're gonna make an AWOL issue out of it."

"Well, why was the lieutenant coming to us? We's down to only two guys, hardly enough for a mission," Kirby hedged.

"Because, Kirby," said Doc, an edge rounding out his reply. "The patrol was back to the airplane. And you and Sarge were the only able-bodied guys who knew where it was."

"Yeah, well, so, I missed it!" barked Kirby, now thoroughly angry with his squad mates as well as himself, but equally determined not to show it. "Whadya gonna do to me, huh?"

He looked from face to face. Billy's fevered eyes, accusing. Littlejohn, glowering, angry. Doc, tired, concerned.

"Cajé? Cajé?" Kirby threw it out, questioning, tentative, desperate.

Cajé looked at Kirby for a moment, dark eyes deeply unreadable. Then, he looked down at the ground, unwilling to condemn his friend, yet unable to defend him.

At that, Kirby turned, and, without a word, walked out the door.

Shivering in the cool darkness of the night, Saunders called a halt to his sodden group of soldiers. They were far enough past the tree line that they wouldn't be caught out in the open by any passing German patrols. Besides, he mused wryly to himself, any watching Germans were probably still laughing if they were witness to their comedic river crossing.

They had started out well enough. Since there were no boats with which to cross, Saunders had the men tie their weapons, ammo, and coats in their rain gear. Halfway across, Lieutenant Morris had gone under and panicked. Stultmeyer, the closest man, had tried to help him. He almost had Morris, but Morris' panic, coupled with his lunging attempts to regain his bundle, took out Stultmeyer. Saunders ended up grabbing the two of them, and promptly went under himself, as Morris climbed up his

back. It was only by diving straight down that he was able to escape Morris' frantic grabs. Shoving a gasping Stultmeyer ahead of him, Saunders then put Lieutenant Morris in a headlock and hauled him ashore. Sputtering, the men had made their way into the trees and partway up the hill. That's when Saunders called a break.

Short, snuffling pants were the only sounds the men made while they did their best to sluice as much water off themselves as possible. A little way off from the others, Saunders took stock of his men. Stultmeyer and Andersen, the two replacements, had never been on the line before. They seemed alert enough, however, and had moved quickly and quietly along the trail. Stultmeyer was a little taller than Saunders, with sandy hair and brown eyes. Andersen, as blond as his name would suggest, had the ruddy checks and blue eyes to match. Although they had just met en route to the 361st, they already seemed to make a good team.

Saunders' meditative gaze took him next to the S2 officers on the mission. Captain Baxter was a small, compact man, who moved with an air of confidence and authority. Saunders guessed that the professionalism Baxter exuded was the same that he expected from everyone else. He knew his job and was secure enough to delegate to others without feeling threatened. Thus, Saunders' ability to call a halt to this detail; Baxter had charged him with getting the group to the plane in question.

Then there was Lieutenant Morris. Baxter hadn't expounded much on Morris, but Saunders had gathered from remarks here and there that this was Morris' first time out. His job was to blow the plane, hopefully after the camera was removed. If all else failed, he was to blow it with camera in place. He had shamefacedly thanked Saunders and Stultmeyer for their help and then sat idle under a tree, no longer having weapons of his own to check and load.

Saunders finished wringing himself out as much as possible and proceeded to check the status of his weapons. He noticed that Morris was shivering so much that he was barely able to sit still. Stultmeyer and Andersen, sitting near Morris, noticed as well.

"Here, Lieutenant," Stultmeyer said, reaching into his bundle. "Why don't you wear my jacket for a while until you warm up?"

Stultmeyer passed his still new, somewhat stiff, field jacket over to Morris.

Morris seemed about to protest, but another bout of violent shivers forced him to reconsider. "Th-th-th-thanks," he chattered, as he took the jacket from the private's hands. Shrugging his way into it, Morris' hands automatically checked out the pockets. Finding a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, a smile crossed his pale face. "Hey, Stultmeyer, do you mind?" he asked, flicking his hand over to reveal the treasure.

"No sweat, Lieutenant," Stultmeyer replied, as he looked down the barrel of his Garand.

Saunders looked up at the sharp click-hiss of the lighter and was at Morris' side in an instant.

"Put that out right now! What's wrong with you, do you want to let every German within ten miles know where we are?" Saunders' fury was in no way muted by the necessary whispering. The fiasco at the river, and now this, were combining to make him forget he was speaking to an officer.

Morris quickly stubbed out the cigarette, pale eyes huge in his white face. His hair was beginning to dry and flame red tufts were appearing all over his head. "I'm sorry, Sergeant, I didn't think," he said.

"Not thinking can get you killed, Lieutenant," said Saunders, trying for a kinder tone, while hoping to avoid charges of insubordination. "You and all the rest of us." He sighed, and then handed his sidearm to Morris. "Here, Lieutenant. Why don't you hang on to this until we get you something else."

Looking over to Stultmeyer and Andersen, he noticed that they were observing

the give and take between him and Morris. "You two make sure that your weapons are fully operational," Saunders told them brusquely.

He glanced sideways at Morris, hoping that he wouldn't have to offer the same 'suggestion' to the lieutenant. Morris gave a slight start, as though he knew what Saunders was thinking. About to drop his cigarette butt on the ground, he thought the better of it and pocketed it. He then proceeded to check out the Colt .45.

Saunders mentally shook his head and headed back over to his own pile of stuff. He was clipping his web belt on when Captain Baxter approached him.

"Sergeant," began the captain.

"Yes, sir," Saunders replied, settling the belt down on his frame.

"We're far enough out now that I can let you know the rest of the mission," Baxter stated.

Saunders paused, head down. Without raising it, he asked, "The rest of the mission, sir?"

"Yes," Baxter said. "There's one crucial piece of information that I wasn't able to let you know before now."

"What's that, Captain?" queried Saunders, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"The Germans know we're coming."

Saunders couldn't believe his ears. "What did you say, Captain Baxter?" he said, in the low, icy calm tone his men feared so well.

Baxter forged onwards. "Battalion G2 intercepted some radio chatter before I left. The Germans know that there is a camera still on the plane, and they know that the 'wrong' one was retrieved earlier today. They aren't sure where the camera is located, but they are sure that we are coming to get it."

Baxter paused and sighed deeply, then continued, "Sergeant, there's been a leak somewhere between G2 and S2. No one knows who or where it is, but the last few missions with K Company S2 have been compromised. It could be anyone in the company, not just an intelligence officer. That's why you weren't privy to this information before. I still shouldn't be telling you, but I've come to doubt that you are the leak. I want you to know our status, so you'll be prepared for what may come."

Saunders couldn't believe what he was hearing. Missions were tough enough. The paranoia and gut-knotting fear that went with them were ever present, even when he had his own men to back him up. Responsibility for reple depples, until they reached 'maturity,' increased the burden ten-fold. To find out that he was leading men into a possible trap pushed the needle right off the meter.

"Sergeant." Captain Baxter was still standing beside Saunders.

"Yes, sir," Saunders managed.

"Sergeant, this doesn't change the scope of our mission in any way. We are still going to retrieve the camera and blow up that plane. This information is only meant to enhance your security measures. Don't make me regret imparting it to you."

Saunders' head snapped up. He looked into the steady eyes of the waiting captain.

"Yes, sir," he said again.

"Good." Baxter turned, and paused. "When you're ready, Sergeant." He then walked away.

Saunders took a minute to digest the news. Then, he put it behind him, while trying to figure out how to use it. He had gotten good at that—putting things behind him. Forgotten but not gone, as he liked to think of it. But that wasn't right either, because he knew he'd never forget. Whether he was awakened by a sharp noise, a quick movement, or a sweat-soaked dream, the past was always there with him. He knew he couldn't dwell on his decisions or their consequences, nor did he have the luxury of

reliving the scenes that his life was playing out now. Later, he knew he would. For now, he had to be content with compartmentalizing them in his mind. Putting the bad behind him, hanging onto the good, and forgetting it all. That was how he was managing tonight's mission after today's battles. As upset and angry at himself that Saunders was over the loss of his men, he let it go. There was nothing he could do for them now, but he could do something for Stultmeyer and Andersen. And that meant doing his best to keep them alive, at least long enough for them to become veterans. As their sergeant and fellow soldier, he owed it to them. Hopefully they would live long enough to owe him back.

Saunders sniffled, swiped his nose, and donned his helmet. Man, was he cold! The full body dunking, combined with the lack of sleep, and cool night air, were really sapping at his strength. Better to get moving and warm up a little. Motioning to the others, he said softly, hoarsely, "Let's go. Andersen, you take the rear."

Taking the point himself, he started the group on its way. Without further incident, they reached the hill which occluded the plane. Gesturing everyone down with a 'wait here,' he bellied up the hill to check things out.

Keeping himself as flat as possible, he slowly worked his way into a position to see the plane. It was then that he knew Captain Baxter had been telling the truth.

There were two guards on the plane, one at each end. Try as he might, Saunders couldn't see anymore from his point of view.

"Figures," he mused to himself. He watched the guards, to see if they had any routine to their assignment. After a few minutes, he eased back into the bushes and made his way down the hill. By the time he reached the four men waiting for him, he had figured out what he wanted to do.

"Okay," he said, after gathering the others around him. "There are two guards, but it could be more. We need to make sure before you try for the camera, Captain."

Baxter looked at Saunders.

"Do you have a plan, Sergeant, or shall I take it from here?" he asked, a barely visible smile tugging at the downtrodden right corner of his mouth.

"Well, sir, I figure that we need to take those guards out." At Baxter's go ahead nod, Saunders continued. "Stultmeyer, you go around the front of the plane, I'll go

around the back." Saunders paused to look at Stultmeyer. He had no idea how to explain to this kid what to do, he never did. You would think by now he would, but no. Usually he had Kirby or Cajé to show by example. Shrugging off his doubts, since they wouldn't accomplish anything, he went on.: "Andersen, you give us cover from the top of the hill. Sir," he said, turning to Baxter, "when you see us take out the guards, then you'll be able to retrieve the camera. And after that," he turned to Morris, "you can blow the plane, Lieutenant."



At everyone's nod, Saunders turned to lead the way back up the hill. Arriving at the top, Saunders pointed out the plane and guards. Flanked by the two officers, he twisted around, making sure the others could see. Morris gave a very low whistle and

shook his head.

"Well, Baxter," he said. "I guess it's a good thing we heard about the possibility of guards on the plane, huh?" Morris' pale eyes were darting back and forth. Suddenly, he stilled. Sucking in his breath, he looked at Baxter over Saunders' back. "Um, you did tell the sergeant, didn't you?" he asked belatedly.

Captain Baxter gave Morris a sour look and pointedly ignored him. Turning his attention to Saunders, he pulled him aside.

"Sergeant," he said, frowning, "perhaps I should go around, instead of Stultmeyer." The captain's calm demeanor belied his worried eyes.

"No, sir," Saunders said. "With all due respect, Captain, you're the only person here who knows where the camera is and how to remove it without damaging it. We can't send you around."

"Okay, Sergeant," Baxter said, with a tip of his head. "See you at the bottom."

Saunders nodded and looked around a moment more. Crawling over to Andersen, he issued a few basic instructions, mainly to make sure that Andersen understood the meaning of covering fire. Saunders knew he shouldn't have to doubt the fact that any U.S. Army soldier knew what it meant, but he also knew just how many replacements he had met who didn't. Gratified to see that Andersen did understand, Saunders paused briefly, then asked to borrow his bayonet. Making sure that Andersen and the officers found good cover, he then took Stultmeyer and moved out a bit.

"Stultmeyer, see that tree by the front of the plane?" At Stultmeyer's nod, Saunders continued. "Use the hill's cover to come up behind it. On your way, look for any other patrols or guards. If you can take them out without alarming the rest, do it. Otherwise, go back to the top of the hill. I'll be doing the same on the other side. Once you get to that tree, I'll see you. Then we can take out the two guards together. Their radio is on the wing, first one done takes care of it. Any questions?"

Stultmeyer shook his head, although his hands moved up and down his rifle nervously. Saunders pretended not to notice.

"Okay, Stultmeyer, let's go."

It seemed to take an eternity, crawling through the underbrush to come up behind the plane. Saunders kept his head down and his eyes open, but he didn't see any additional German troops. Finally reaching his own staging point, he looked towards the tree that Stultmeyer should be behind.

No Stultmeyer.

Stilled by necessity, Saunders felt himself growing colder as the wind bit right through his wet clothing. The sweat from his exertions was no longer an insulator, instead it turned traitor and joined with the rest of the forces trying to freeze him into submission. The damp scratch of wet wool would truly drive him mad before the war ever did, Saunders mused wryly. He cursed the wool, he cursed the war, and was just about to start cursing Stultmeyer when he saw movement from behind the tree.

Stultmeyer.

From the look the private gave him, Saunders deduced that all had been clear for him as well. Silently, Saunders held up a hand, hoping to God that the kid would know to go on three.

He did.

They both charged their marks at the same time. Stultmeyer's guard was looking at the ground and didn't see him until he was right on top of him. It was a brief, but furious, struggle. Evenly matched, the German wasn't going to give up easily. Stultmeyer's pure terror-driven fury was the only thing that made up for his lack of experience, and, in the end, that was what triumphed.

Saunders, on the other hand, wasn't so lucky. His guy topped him by six inches

and forty pounds, at least. While Saunders had the element of surprise, the German seemed to have all the other aces in the deck. After the initial surprise, he seemed to be more amused than scared. With little effort, he grasped Saunders by the neck and proceeded to beat his head against the plane. Saunders choked in the firm grasp, seeing spots before his eyes. The German then threw the dazed sergeant to the ground and jumped on top of him. Grasping the front of Saunders' jacket with one hand, he dealt him several hard, swift, stinging blows with the other before Saunders had even gathered his wits together. The few shots that Saunders did get in seemed to annoy his foe, rather than deter him. Finally, the German stood, and Saunders rolled, attempting to gain his feet. He had barely made it to his knees, when a well-placed kick forced him back down to the ground. As he lay there stunned, trying to catch his breath, the German continued to kick the prone sergeant in his kidneys and ribs.

"Forget this," Saunders thought, as his world began to turn. Not liking to fight dirty didn't mean he wouldn't. With all his might, he double-fist hammered the German in the balls. A strangled cry, and the soldier went down. Saunders immediately straddled the man and made use of Andersen's bayonet.

When he looked up, he saw Stultmeyer standing over his guard, motionless. Rising gingerly, Saunders made his way over to the German radio and smashed it with the butt of his Tommy gun. He then went to Stultmeyer.

The kid's first. He'd never forget it, never get over it. It couldn't have even been in a firefight, when you had the comfortable cushion of distance. Instead, it was a face-to-face take-out. Saunders wanted to tell him that he'd be okay. He wanted to tell him to leave it behind. He wanted to let him know what he himself had learned through this long, long war. But he knew that Stultmeyer would have to learn it on his own. So, Saunders contented himself with what he always asked the new guys after their first kill.

"You okay?"

Stultmeyer looked up, startled, as if he had forgotten where he was.

"Yeah, Sarge, I'm okay."

Saunders nodded. He turned and signaled up the hill to the others, then felt the back of his aching head. When he pulled his hand away, it was covered with blood. Looking over, he saw Stultmeyer's dazed look. He then decided to teach Stultmeyer the next article of war.

"Help me move these bodies out of the way. We don't want them to get blown up with the plane."

Stultmeyer looked confused and repulsed at the same time. But he didn't question Saunders, just followed his lead. As they placed the bodies under a copse of bushes, Saunders decided to break a rule and give Stultmeyer a little more information.

"You'd want someone to do it for you, Stultmeyer."

Stultmeyer looked shocked, as if he finally realized what was going on. Quickly recovering, he nodded his head.

"Got it, Sarge."

And Saunders knew he did.

Making their way back to the plane, Saunders found that Captain Baxter was in the middle of removing the camera. Unlike the camera he had retrieved earlier in the day, this camera was in the tail. Baxter was busily working to free it from its connecting wires.

"Captain," Saunders asked. "Where's Lieutenant Morris?"

"I left him up there with Andersen. If anything goes wrong for us down here, at least he can still blow the plane later." Baxter stopped his labors and looked directly at Saunders. "I told Andersen not to attempt to give us any cover if he was outgunned. This mission is too important."

Saunders met Baxter's gaze and nodded. He then sent Stultmeyer to one end of the plane to keep watch, while he took the other.

As soon as Baxter was done, he made for the top of the hill. Soon enough, Lieutenant Morris was at Saunders' side.

"I'll need about five minutes, Sergeant, to wire up this plane. The fuse will have a sixty second burn, so be ready to move when I say."

Well, at least Morris seemed sure about something, Saunders thought, as he headed over to Stultmeyer to relay the news. He had just settled back into position, when he heard a noise. Catching Stultmeyer and Morris' attention, he signaled them that he was going to check it out.

There, a little way down the road, was a patrol of about six German soldiers. They were headed directly for the plane. Quickly making his way back, he let the other two know.

"Stultmeyer, you set up over here; I'll be over there. Lieutenant, how much longer?"

"Almost done, Saunders." Morris' hands flew at their task, while their owner barely paid them mind. "I just need another minute."

Another minute might just be all we have, Saunders thought. Nonetheless, he prepared for the inevitable.

Crouching in the brush, he heard the soldiers approach. They stopped a little way from the plane.

<Franz! Karl!>

Saunders held his breath. He could see Morris creeping along the plane's wing as he attached the final charge. Morris gave him a furtive thumbs up, then lit the fuse.

Saunders' eyes widened. One minute, right? Okay, he thought, let's go. He let loose with his Tommy gun and was relieved to see two of the Germans go down. Well, that cut their odds a little.

Within a heartbeat, Saunders heard the congested coughing of Stultmeyer's Garand, followed, surprisingly, by the sharp crack of his own .45. There was nothing from the hillside.

The Germans immediately dropped to the ground and began to return fire. Focused on the task in front of him, Saunders still remained fully aware of the time limit they were facing. Twisting around, he caught Stultmeyer and Morris' attention. "Move out!" he yelled over the sounds of gunfire. "I'll give you cover!"

The two soldiers ran, crouching, to the brush at the bottom of the hill. They were unable to climb up it, however, due to the withering fire they began to endure from above.

Above?

Saunders looked over, just in time to see Stultmeyer dive backwards down the hill. What in the world is going on, he wondered, turning his attention back to the problem in front of him.

As he returned the fire of a particularly good shot, who kept coming way too close, it hit him, almost mummifying him in its vastness.

Intelligence had a leak.

A leak between G2 and S2.

Well, he had found it.

Glancing towards Stultmeyer and Morris, he could read the hesitation in their movements.

"Move out!" he screamed.

With only seconds to spare, Saunders crouched up to run himself. He had only gotten about ten feet, when the airplane exploded.

Airborne, Saunders barely had time to wonder just what had Morris used to wire the plane before he hit a tree. Dead on, full force, so hard that his arms and legs instinctively wrapped around it. Which didn't help anyway, instinct being all they had to go on, since they had stopped listening to the increasingly feeble signals his brain was trying to send out. Pieces of the plane flew outward in several different directions.

Saunders fell to the ground in a red, foggy haze of pain and confusion. Try as he might, he couldn't move. He was dimly aware of the light and heat from the now burning plane giving away any last hope of hiding from the Germans. Everything seemed to exist in a vacuum that was rapidly sucking him in. The last conscious thought he had before everything went black was that he hoped his men got away.

Caje and Littlejohn were released from the aid tent that afternoon—if being kicked out due to lack of cot space could be euphemistically called release. The ambulance for Nelson finally arrived, along with the x-ray machine that didn't work anyway. Nelson was loaded into the back with smiles and encouragement from his squad mates, and the promise of weekly letters from Littlejohn. Then the others returned to their billet to worry and wait.

Caje smoked long, endless cigarettes, deep eyes staring straight ahead, giving away nothing. Doc started a letter home, but gave up after several false starts. He put away the tangible reminders of a life existing outside his current cosmos and settled instead for checking and organizing his medical bag, his own special reality. Littlejohn looked to want some conversation, shifting this way and that on his bedroll, clearing his throat several times. But there were no takers, and Littlejohn resigned himself to tossing playing cards into his helmet, missing often and cursing his aim.

So it was a quiet group that occupied the squad's billet that evening. Quiet, but not the peaceful kind of quiet that these men so often sought. It was a tense silence, that begged to be broken by any means.

And the means was on its way.

Kirby had had it. He was mad at the world. Mad at the guys for blaming him, mad at the lieutenant who hadn't even chewed him out, but, most of all, he was mad at himself. Mad because he had screwed up, again. His mind was buzzing with emotion, and his body was trembling from the effort it was taking to hold it all together. He knew he only had so much more left in him. Stalking down the alley leading up to the entrance to the squad, he made no effort to be quiet. He strode through the non-existent wall and stood there, fist-clenched hands on hips.

The others looked up at him, then down again to what they were doing. Kirby stood a heartbeat longer and then exploded.

"All right, that's it! I've had enough of you guys here!" He struck a cocky stance, ready for an unusual battle.

The others looked up again, and this time no one looked back down.

"You've had enough?!" Littlejohn's voice cracked in its surprised intensity.

"Enough of what? C'mon, Kirby, tell us! Enough of what?"

Kirby was so angry, he could barely speak past the red haze in front of him. But he persisted in trying to pierce through it, to the men with whom he was so angry, but who were the only ones who would be able to understand and forgive him.

"You-you-you— You know what? There ain't none of you can point a finger at me!! You hear me? None of you!! Who do you think you are, setting me up to be the fall guy, sitting there like you ain't never done nothing wrong, huh? Well?!?!?!"

Kirby paused and took a breath. The broken silence lingered, fractured and

waiting for its final farewell.

"Caje, don't you dare pretend to me that you always do right! Who was with me just last week, trying to score a date with those three girls!? Who almost fouled a mission up cuz of some little urchin orphan, huh? And there's plenty of other things you done that the guys don't know about. You ain't always perfect!

"Littlejohn, Sarge himself said you have two left feet! You're always screwing up the missions, dropping primer cord in the road, or not staying put, or, or—" Kirby stopped. Even in his rage, he couldn't throw out the words describing how Littlejohn had fumbled the grenades when they took that farmhouse and bridge.

But Littlejohn knew where he'd been headed. Flushing, he looked to the ground for help, large features contorting with shame at the memory.

Kirby continued on, trying to draw the attention away from that. "And Billy, when he gets back, I sure will remind him of last week with me 'n Caje, or about the time he lost his grenade pins, or washed his rifle in soap and water! Just cuz he got evaced don't mean he's out of this!

"And Doc! Doc, you, you,—oh, never mind Doc, you don't count." Having run out of steam, Kirby sagged against the wall. He had so much to say, and he had said it all wrong, as usual.

But someone else was now ready to speak. Doc was standing, favoring his ankle a little, but standing as tall as he could. "I don't count!" Blue eyes snapping revealed the depths of Doc's passion. "How dare you stand there and say I don't count!"

"Well, well, I don't mean you don't count, Doc, I-I-I just mean that you, that you—" Kirby stuttered and stammered, not at all sure what he meant anymore.

"I know exactly what you mean, Kirby!" Doc took a step in Kirby's direction. "You mean that I don't count cuz I don't carry a weapon, cuz I don't shoot nobody. Cuz when you guys are all in the thick of it, I'm just lying down somewhere, doing nothing!" Doc's own frustration at exactly that was seeping into his tone. "Well, lemme tell you something, Kirby! Maybe I don't count for that! But I sure do count when you want some aspirin for another hangover, or some foot powder for your ever-lovin' feet! I sure do count when one of you guys needs a ride back to the aid station, I count then, now, don't I Kirby?"

Doc was now up in Kirby's face, having gotten there somehow in the midst of his tirade. Hovering in as close as he dared, he continued. "You think that I'm not a full-fledged member of this squad, Kirby, just cuz I'm a medic! I know what you think! It doesn't matter what I do or how often I do it, I'm just a tag-along to you!" Doc paused and closed his eyes. He wanted to make himself stop, but he couldn't do it. Way down deep, he knew that he was accusing Kirby of exactly what he himself had been thinking all day. And he wondered just how much of it was true, and how much he was projecting onto Kirby for himself. But the anger overlaying his logic was paramount, and he was about to continue, when—

"Doc."

It came from the corner, shock and distress overwhelming the simple word. Everyone turned to look at Caje, wondering what he would add to this conversation.

"Doc, you know that's not true." Caje's brow was furrowed, he was genuinely upset. "You know that we consider you a part of us. Don't talk like that."

"That's easy for you to say, Caje," Doc shot back. He felt like a kid, totally unable to stop the damaging words he was saying. "It's easy for you to say, you're not the one who screwed up the whole mission!"

Surprise now settled on every face in the room.

"Doc, what are you talking about?" Littlejohn asked in bewilderment.

"You know! It's my fault you all got it. I tipped the Krauts off to us getting there

first, they found the empty syrette of morphine I dropped!"

To Doc's chagrin, Cajé began to laugh. This was mirrored in Littlejohn's face by the barest of grins, while Kirby hung back, hoping that this would prove to be his break.

"Doc," Cajé said, not unkindly, "Doc, you've got to be kidding! Listen, none of us is perfect, all of us have made mistakes." Cajé paused, and shook his head, involuntarily closing his eyes as he recalled a certain dark-haired orphan he had left behind. He opened his eyes and, looking at Doc, continued in a more sober tone. "You have to get over it, Doc. You can't bring back what was, fix what has already happened. You have to let it go, forget about it. There'll be a lot more opportunities for you to get it right, don't worry."

Doc looked from face to face, trying to find any hint of recrimination. But each one wore the same look. The look of someone who had been in his shoes, who had made his own mistakes, and who, despite it all, was able to go on. It was a look that Doc hoped to cultivate for his own some day.

"And Kirby," Littlejohn broke in, "I reckon all of us has done something wrong, somewhere along the way. "

Kirby began to visibly brighten with relief.

"But Kirby," Littlejohn continued, not inclined to let Kirby off so easily, "You're still a screw-up."

Kirby opened his mouth to protest, looked around himself, then thought the better of it and closed it again.

"Well, guys," Cajé said softly, looking down at the cigarette he was stubbing out, "What do we do about the Sarge?"

He couldn't breathe. There was a large weight between his shoulder blades, pinning his twisted arms behind him, as well as on his head, grinding his face down into the dirt. His attempts to turn his head were met with further pressure, forcing him to cease his struggles in order to be able to draw a breath. That's when he realized that the weight between his shoulders was a knee, and the one on his head was a hand. There also, Saunders realized, was a gun pressed up against his neck.

<Don't move American!>

The soldier holding Saunders down moved back a little, allowing Saunders to somewhat turn his head. This made room for the German to jam the muzzle of his gun right up against his throat.

Another German soldier came trotting up, roughly herding Morris and Stultmeyer in front of him. Helmets off, hands clasped behind their heads, they were shoved to the ground, close to where Saunders lay.

<This was all I found, no one else.>

<Did you check up the hill? There was some firing up there, also.>

<Yes, I did. No one alive up there, two dead Americans.>

<And the camera? Did you see any camera?>

<No, Sergeant.>

The German pinning Saunders swore, digging his knee further into his back. Saunders could barely see Morris, who was visibly trembling, and Stultmeyer, who was watching the Germans nervously, but intently.

<So,> said the German sergeant, <We have no idea if they got the camera or not.>

<No, Sergeant.>

The German sergeant stood up. Placing his foot on Saunders' neck and digging

in his heel, he ground down in an unspoken message to be still. The gun, now relocated to Saunders' head, only served to reinforce this message. Saunders had no idea if he could move anyway, his entire body felt locked tight. Shifting even more of his weight onto Saunders' neck, the German sergeant beckoned Stultmeyer up and over.

"You, American," he said in passable English. "Take belt and tie hands. Tight." He pantomimed for Stultmeyer to tie Morris' hands behind his back.

Stultmeyer swallowed, hoping that Lieutenant Morris would forgive him. Dropping to his knees beside the lieutenant, he slipped the officer's belt through its loops and pulled Morris' hands behind his back. Stultmeyer paused and looked up at his German captors.

The sergeant gestured angrily with his weapon, while pressing his heel harder into Saunders' neck, drawing blood.

"Quickly!"

Stultmeyer wound Morris' belt around his wrists. He tightened it until he felt Morris flinch, dropped back a hitch, and tied it. Then he waited for his next command.

The German private moved closer and motioned for Stultmeyer to help Morris up. As he pulled the lieutenant to his feet, Stultmeyer tried to make eye contact with him. Morris glanced at Stultmeyer, and the private could see that the lieutenant was as rattled as him.

The German sergeant barked a command to his private, who pushed Stultmeyer and Morris over to him. Grabbing Morris by the arm, he roughly turned him around to examine his bindings. The sergeant tugged on them several times. He then turned his attention to Stultmeyer. Cocking his head to one side, he laid a hand on Morris' shoulder and shrugged. "Not tight enough," he said casually.

He raised his gun from Saunders' head and pointed it at Stultmeyer. Stultmeyer felt his blood freeze, unable to believe that this was how his life would end. An ignoble shot from a dishonorable soldier. He took an involuntary step back. The sergeant was watching Stultmeyer, a faint smile playing around his lips. He locked eyes with Stultmeyer for a brief moment, and readjusted the aim of his weapon. Then, he brought it round further, and shot Morris point blank in the back of the head.

Stultmeyer gaped. What he was seeing was inconceivable. He watched as Morris crumpled to the ground, partially on top of Saunders. The lieutenant's face was gone, some shattered teeth and shards of hair were all that remained, along with copious amounts of blood and gore. The sergeant looked down in distaste at the dead soldier lying across his boot. With a short grunt of effort, he kicked Morris' body out of the way, further down on Saunders' back. Then the sergeant turned to Stultmeyer.

"Do better this time," he said, gesturing towards Saunders. He stepped back and off of Saunders, but still kept his weapon covering the two Americans. Trying to quell his shaking hands, Stultmeyer dropped to his knees beside his sergeant. Swallowing, he reached out and tried to shove Morris' body off of Saunders. It didn't move. Trying again, he finally succeeded in rolling the lieutenant up and over Saunders' head, where it lay close to the sergeant on the ground. Above him, he heard the guards talking.

<Well, that's one less American private we have to drag around.>

The German laughed at his sergeant's joke, but quickly became serious when he continued. <Make sure you don't kill the American sergeant, though. He will be the one with any information that we need.>

The German sergeant had replaced his boot on Saunders' neck. Stultmeyer wondered how he was supposed to remove his sergeant's belt, but the German wasn't inclined to give him time to figure it out.

"Quickly!" he said, and struck Stultmeyer in the small of his back with the butt of his weapon.

Stultmeyer reached under Saunders and fumbled his belt undone.

"Sorry, Sarge," he breathed while his head was still near Saunders'.

There was no answer, but Stultmeyer thought he could read desperate anger in his sergeant's eyes.

Moving around behind Saunders, under the watchful eye of a German gun, Stultmeyer pulled Saunders' hands tightly behind his back. He looped the belt around them and pulled even tighter, until he felt resistance from the sergeant's shoulders. Holding the belt tautly in place, he wound the rest of its length around Saunders' wrists and tied it off. Holding his breath, he stood, awaiting the German sergeant's inspection. The German came over and tugged and tested Saunders' bounds.

"Good," he said. Reaching under Saunders' elbow, he pulled straight up. Saunders tried to gain his feet, angling himself up the best he could. But his battered body was not yet up to the challenge and he found himself sprawled awkwardly on the ground again.

<"Stupid! Get up!"> The German sergeant landed a few swift kicks to Saunders' side and head with his hobnailed boots.

Saunders stifled a grunt of pain and rolled to his knees, forehead pressed to the ground. Gritting his teeth, he slowly straightened and then forced himself to rise, staggering slightly. He noticed the other German soldier was lashing Stultmeyer's hands behind his back. If the look on Stultmeyer's face was any clue, he was tying them rather tightly as well. Once that was done, Saunders and Stultmeyer were hustled back to the road that the German patrol had arrived on.

Before they set out, the German sergeant went over to where his men lay dead on the ground. At each soldier's side he knelt, broke their dog tags and took their service book. He then rejoined the others.

<"Let's go.">

A faint dawn was beginning to take over the night sky as the four soldiers double-timed their way along the road. Saunders and Stultmeyer stumbled along, doing their best to maintain their balance with their hands behind their backs. Finally, after about half an hour, the Germans called a halt.

"American! Down!" The sergeant gestured for Saunders and Stultmeyer to lie flat on their stomachs, side by side. Then he and his man moved a few paces away, guns still trained on their captives. They each lit one of the cigarettes they had taken from the Americans and relaxed into their smokes.

Stultmeyer decided to take a chance. He was worried. Saunders looked awful, his face swollen and covered with blood and dirt, hair matted with the same. He hadn't spoken a word, or tried to connect with Stultmeyer in any way, since he had bound his wrists.

"Sarge," Stultmeyer murmured into the ground. He didn't dare move his head. "Sarge, they didn't get the camera!"

For a moment, Stultmeyer didn't know if Saunders had heard him, then,

"You speak German, Stultmeyer?" his own whispered rasp offered to the dirt below.

"Yeah," Stultmeyer answered. "They didn't get the camera, they missed their contact—whatever that means. And Sarge—they killed Lieutenant Morris for no good reason. They thought he was a private. Must have been my jacket." Stultmeyer paused, thinking how a simple act of kindness could deal the cruelest blow.

<"No talking!"> The German soldiers strode over to the two Americans and stood over them, weapons at a menacing angle. "<Up!">

As the forced march continued Saunders stumbled, and was prodded to his feet by his captors. He caught a quick glimpse of a worried look Stultmeyer cast his way,

then tried to hide. Straightening up as best he could, Saunders did his best to assume a nonchalant air. Whatever happened, he knew that his behavior would have a direct affect on the private. Looking down the mist-shrouded road before him, Saunders confidently moved forward, angling himself somewhat between Stultmeyer and the German soldiers. The mission comes first, but don't forget the men, he reminded himself.

 Saunders strove to be the leader that Stultmeyer needed.

 Slowly, Andersen came to his senses. He was lying on his back, face upwards to a flat, gray sky. Moving stiffly, he felt his throbbing, knotted head. Looking at his hand, he wasn't at all surprised to find it covered with blood. That was some kind of sidewinder that Captain Baxter had given him. The worst of it was the lack of warning; Andersen had had no chance to defend himself.

 Carefully, Andersen rose to his feet, cautiously surveying the terrain around him. Near as he could tell, he was at the bottom of the hill, on the other side from the airplane. Dropping down to a crouch, he scabbled his way up the slope. Looking down, he saw the burnt remnants of the plane; nothing else presented itself to his observing eyes. With a sigh and a grimace, Andersen crabbed along the crest of the hill, hoping to find Baxter, or at least his weapon.

 He was successful at both.

 Baxter was lying beside Andersen's rifle, blood-teared eyes staring at the sky. A piece of the airplane had sliced right through his head. Andersen stood for a minute, staring at the officer. He had seen dead people before, but never this close, and certainly never this gory. Observing protocol, he felt for a pulse, not feeling much remorse when he didn't find any. Grabbing up his weapon, he made his way down the hill.

 Scouring around the wreckage of the blown-out plane, Andersen found enough debris to surmise that there had been a pitched firefight. The discovery of Morris' body gave him a jolt. Closing his eyes, the private gave Morris the only minute of mourning that he could spare, and then continued on. There was no sign of Saunders and Stultmeyer. Figuring that they were either dead somewhere or captured, Andersen made up his mind to scout out a ways and try to find them.

 First, he decided, he needed to get all the supplies he could carry. Thus, he made his way to the top of the hill and began a search of and around Baxter's body. He found one ration can of cheese in Baxter's pockets. Nothing else—no ID card, no cigarettes, and no ammo.

 Patting around in the grass, he found a small, covered over depression about three feet to the right of Baxter. Using the muzzle of his rifle, he carefully tested its depth. He had only gone a short ways when he felt, rather than heard, a small, metallic click. Holding his breath, he used a tremulous hand to brush aside the sheltering grass. And exhaled in a quiet "oh" of surprise.

 The camera.

 As Andersen stared down at the innocuous looking piece of technology, he gradually became aware of the fact that he was now faced with what could very well be the most important decision thus far of his young life.

 The mission or the men.

 It was that simple.

 Reaching into the hole with one hand, Andersen removed the camera. Right underneath it he found Baxter's map, overlay included. Well, thought Andersen, if he

was looking for a sign, here it was. He realized that what he had taken for granted, thought was a choice, was really anything but. The camera and map were here. Saunders and Stultmeyer were not. The mission was to retrieve the camera.

It **was** that simple.

In the few seconds it took Andersen to settle the camera and orient himself, he grew older than any youthful right of passage had ever promised in his previous life.

Checking his memory of the way they'd come against Baxter's map, Andersen resolutely set out on his way back to camp, although his thoughts were left behind. Body in motion, mind in neutral, he did what he had to do.

After about an hour of a forced jog hike, Saunders, Stultmeyer, and the two Germans reached a small, seemingly abandoned, farmhouse. Set several yards back from it was a dilapidated old chicken coop. The soldiers pushed and prodded the two Americans up to and inside the chicken coop and closed the door.

The coop was about ten feet long and six feet wide. Although it looked as if it hadn't had any inhabitants in quite a while, evidence of its past still lingered. Piles of decaying chicken waste littered the floor, cemented together with the occasional feather. Shuffling through the debris, Saunders and Stultmeyer sought a relatively clean area in which to sit. Leaning as far back as their bound hands would allow, they tried to relax. Saunders looked meaningfully at the door, then spoke to Stultmeyer, voice ever so low.

"Where'd you learn German, Stultmeyer?"

Stultmeyer gave a short, stifled laugh.

"Sarge, I was born in Germany."

Saunders looked at Stultmeyer expectantly. If he was surprised, it didn't show.

After a pause, Stultmeyer went on, "I lived there until I was twelve. My parents owned a small, hometown newspaper that wasn't very favorable to the current political climate." Stultmeyer paused, aware of how odd that sounded. He shrugged and went on.

"To make a long story short, they sent me to live with some of their cousins in America. They never told me why. I guess they thought I would be safe. I found out later that they had gotten lots of threats; I do remember their shop being wrecked once." Stultmeyer stopped and sighed, shaking his head at the oft-visited memory.

"Anyway, Sarge," he continued, his voice pitched even lower than before, "some neighbors wrote me a couple of years ago. My parents disappeared in the middle of the night, on what is being called Kristallnacht. No one has heard from or seen them since."

Saunders closed his eyes and tried to absorb this new information. He had heard vague stories about such things, but it wasn't something he paid close attention to. The war was bad enough each step of the way, without immersing himself in all its details. Now, here, he was faced with someone who had lost more in this war than him. Someone who had lost so much more, even before the war was part of America's consciousness. It made Saunders feel ashamed for all the times he had ever felt sorry for himself along the way.

Saunders opened his eyes and looked at Stultmeyer. He had no idea what to say to him. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, to acknowledge what had been said. But, at that precise instant, the door to the shed was flung open.

The German sergeant stood in the doorway, gun pointed at Saunders. "You! Up!"

Saunders struggled to his feet, sliding up along the wall, every muscle in his body making a valiant attempt to pull him back down.

"Faster!"

He finally gained his footing, only to have the German upset his precarious balance with a hard blow to the midriff. Stultmeyer came half off the ground with a start and a cry, but the German sergeant swung his weapon to cover him. Convincing Stultmeyer that he would be better off if he stayed put, the German turned his attention to Saunders. Saunders had staggered, doubling under the blow, and it was taking all of his willpower to remain on his feet. Looking up at the German, he noticed a faint smirk on his face. The German signaled to him to move out. Wishing that he could wipe the smirk off with his fist, Saunders had no choice but to follow the sergeant's orders.

Stultmeyer gasped in the stillness of his dream, awakening to find that the chicken coop was anything but still. The rats were back again, and this time they had gotten closer to him than before. Kicking out as hard as he could, he was savagely happy to hear a few thuds against the wall. He paid for the effort however, with a renewed pain in his still bound wrists and shoulders. Trying not to cry out, he focused on letting his eyes adjust to the gloom of the coop. The little glowing looks that were returned did, indeed, unnerve him. However, he was glad to see that most of them were heading out of the coop. He gradually became aware that he was sitting in a growing puddle of water.

It had been all day and into the night since the Germans had taken Saunders away. Stultmeyer had no idea what was going on, or even if the sergeant was still alive. He hadn't been offered any food or water, but knew he was under constant guard. He knew this because the few times he had tried to get up and look out, he was rewarded for his curiosity with a rifle butt to the head.

Shortly after they had taken Saunders, it had started to rain. It was heavy, and constant, and the chicken coop had immediately proved itself to be a poor shelter. Now he was not only sitting in mud, he was sitting in mud and water that was slowly turning into a small stream. Shifting around in the dark, he tried to find a higher, drier spot. It was useless.

The chicken coop door was suddenly pulled open. The German sergeant's silhouette filled the doorway, illuminated by flashes of lightning. "Come!" he shouted angrily, as if it were Stultmeyer's fault that he was getting soaking wet.

Stultmeyer slowly rose from the muck and moved forward, wondering what his turn would bring. Laboriously, they crossed the yard to the farmhouse, the mud sucking their boots down deeper with every step. Stultmeyer could see faint, flickering rays of light, shyly peeking through the farmhouse windows. A fire, he thought, envying the warmth that went with it.

Once they reached the farmhouse, the German sergeant pushed Stultmeyer up against the wall with his weapon. Pinning him in place, he opened the door and called inside, <"I have the other American here! Shall I bring him in?">

<"Yes, Sergeant, bring him in.">

Stultmeyer was ushered inside to a dingy kitchen which ran the length of the house. A few wooden plank chairs and a table haphazardly furnished the room, nothing else. A low, grimy counter-top ran the length of the opposite wall, with a break in the middle for a cut-through fireplace. A fire was playing itself out in the small opening. To Stultmeyer's left, an uneven doorway, with a greasy, hanging blanket cover, provided access to the second room beyond. A small-paned window was in the wall to Stultmeyer's right. There was no other opening in the house.

Choking a little in the sooty haze, Stultmeyer waited. A German Hauptman

strode through the blanket opening and came to a stop in front of Stultmeyer. Despite the late hour and disheveled hovel they were in, this officer looked as if he were on his way to the finest restaurant. His hair was smoothed, his boots were shined and his uniform was wrinkle free. The only thing missing was his cap.

Looking Stultmeyer up and down, the Hauptman wrinkled his nose ever so slightly in disgust. Turning his head, but not his eyes, to his right, he spoke to the sergeant. Immediately, Stultmeyer felt someone fumbling at his wrists, and then his bindings were cut. At first, Stultmeyer felt nothing but sweet relief. And then the pain set in. Magnificent prickles of numbed limbs waking, leading to radiating pain throughout his torso. He sank to his knees, barely aware that he was doing so. Looking up through the finally subsiding agony, he saw contempt on the officer's face. This didn't bother him. What did bother him was the satisfied amusement that replaced it.

"So, Private, are you ready? It is your turn now."

The Hauptman sounded as if he had just stepped out of Yale. Noting Stultmeyer's failed attempt to hide his reaction, the captain smiled.

"Not all of us speak 'pigeon' English, American," he said, with a pointed look at his sergeant. "Now, let me show you what you have to look forward to, if you are unwilling to answer my questions."

Turning, the Hauptman strode into the other room. Unceremoniously hauled to his feet, Stultmeyer was made to follow. The pain in his arms at this handling was exquisite, but it was overshadowed by his fear of what would be next. Turning the corner into the other room, Stultmeyer stopped dead. Closing his eyes, he tried to erase what he had seen, tried to pretend it was all a dream. But a hand on the back of his head entangled itself in his hair, pulling until his face was forced upwards.

"Open your eyes, fool! See what happens!"

The sergeant's breathy growl puffed in his ear, sending a chill across Stultmeyer's shoulders and down his spine. He didn't need to look again at the image that was burned into his mind.

Hanging from the roof's supporting beams was Saunders.

Littlejohn looked at the rising levels of water on the floor. Having a roof over their heads didn't make up for the fact that their shelter was missing a wall. The pounding rain was making good use of its uninvited entrance, wending its way around the piles of debris and order that populated the room. What was going to happen next, he didn't know.

Caje had been summoned by Lieutenant Hanley a short while ago. They were sure that it had to do with Saunders. He had been gone for over twenty-four hours now. Although it was late, no one could sleep. Their own trip to the airplane, firefights included, had only taken half a day. Something had obviously gone wrong.

They all heard it at once, running footsteps splashing through the rain. Looking up expectantly, they were rewarded for their impatience when Caje hopped through the wall. Taking off his coat and helmet, the Cajun made his best effort to dry off.

"Well, Caje? Did the lieutenant hear anything about Sarge?" Kirby stepped forward, brown eyes worried, fearful of what he might hear. Then he stopped short, when he realized that someone was standing behind Caje. "Who's this?"

"This is Andersen," Caje said, stepping to one side to give the others a better view. "He was one of the replacements that went with the sergeant yesterday. He just got in a little while ago."

"Well, hey—" Kirby stopped in mid-sentence. It suddenly occurred to him that

Caje had said 'he,' not 'they.'

"What's going on, Caje?" asked Doc, quietly from his bunk. "Didn't Sarge make it back?"

"No," said Caje shortly, turning his back on the room while rifling through his pack.

A leaden silence fell over everyone as they tried to digest the news.

"No way," whispered Littlejohn, "It can't be!"

Caje turned back around, having found what he was looking for—namely, a fresh pack of cigarettes. "Well, Littlejohn, we're not really sure what happened," he said, packing open his smokes. Pausing, he offered them around the room. Kirby and Andersen were the only takers. "I think you'd better let Andersen tell you what he knows."

Andersen looked up from lighting his cigarette. He extended the match to Caje, who nodded his thanks, and then to Kirby.

"What are ya, crazy, kid?!" yelled Kirby, as he jumped back. Still eyeing Andersen, he took out his lighter and lit his own. Shrugging, but looking puzzled, Andersen blew out the match and dropped it in a puddle. He then looked quizzically at Caje.

The Cajun was sitting on his bunk, leaning back against the wall. His legs were stretched out before him, feet wedged against a beam. His left hand held his cigarette, thumb playing at his mouth, while his right hand cupped his left bicep. His eyes were staring a million miles away. Seeing Andersen's gaze through the wispy smoke, he pulled himself back to the present with a visible shake. "Three on a match, kid, don't do it," he said with a half-hearted smile. Then he grew somber. "Andersen, tell them what you told me and the lieutenant."

Andersen sighed and prepared to repeat the tale that he had told so many times to so many people in the last few hours. Looking up, however, he saw the worried, drawn faces waiting for this recitation. And he knew that he would have no better audience than the one he had now.

"Well, it started out okay..."

At the Hauptman's low chuckle, Stultmeyer angrily opened his eyes.

"Are you afraid, private?" the Hauptman asked.

Stultmeyer turned his head and met his gaze. A long time ago he had learned how to do that. Don't look down, don't look away, never look guilty. He could hear his father's voice plainly in his head. You have done nothing wrong. Nothing. Small minds create small problems. Greater minds solve them. Stultmeyer then did what came next.

He turned his attention to Saunders and ignored the Hauptman, refusing to give him the power he was trying to take. Yes, he may be in charge of Stultmeyer and Saunders' immediate destiny, but Stultmeyer knew that ultimately, he was the one who decided the terms of his own life.

Saunders was hanging by his wrists, which had been bound over his head. Remnants of his shirt hung in tattered strips, most of which were dangling from his waistband. What was visible of his torso was criss-crossed with raw, weeping, bloody welts. The top of his pants were soaked with as much blood as they could absorb, and rivulets of the runoff dripped from his boots. Despite all this, Saunders was not fully unconscious, couldn't be in the position he was left in. For his interrogators had tied a noose around his neck and run it down his back, linking it to his feet, but with not enough rope to stretch downwards. If Saunders straightened his feet—whether through need or

loss of consciousness—he would slowly strangle to death.

Stultmeyer turned at a snort of impatience behind him.

The Hauptman was watching him closely. "Well, Private, are you ready?" His cold, obsidian eyes bore into Stultmeyer, reminding him of the snakes he used to catch as a kid on the riverbanks. Stultmeyer almost expected the Hauptman's tongue to flicker as well.

He was trying to decide what answer to give, if any, when a loud commotion from the other room interrupted his thoughts. The Hauptman too, was distracted, as both turned their heads towards the source of the sound.

A new German soldier entered the room and nervously saluted his superior. <"Sir, I apologize for interrupting you, but there is something you must know. The river is ready to overflow its banks from all this rain. Sir, unless you would like to spend the next few days here, we must leave now. I fear that the road we need to travel will soon be under water.">

Taking a moment, the Hauptman digested this new piece of information. His desire to return to his commander, information in hand, warred with his distaste at spending any more time than necessary in these accommodations. Finally, he turned to his driver. <"Very well, make ready to leave.">

The Hauptman's driver called in the other two soldiers and proceeded to bark out a series of orders. Stultmeyer found himself unceremoniously shoved to the floor, where he was ordered to be still. Next, the German sergeant moved over to the wall. There he cut the rope which was holding Saunders up, letting Saunders crash to the floor. A wheeze, quickly choked off, was the only reaction Saunders gave to his change in position. The German sergeant went over and slashed the noose that was on Saunders. He then tightened the ropes on Saunders' wrists, making sure they were tied in front. After this, the private was set in charge of prisoner watch.

Scouring through the cabin, the driver came across Saunders' discarded jacket, heaped on the floor. Tossing the coat to the private, he motioned towards Stultmeyer. Looking vaguely annoyed, the private moved to stand over Stultmeyer. He handed Stultmeyer the coat and indicated that he should put it on. Warily, Stultmeyer hesitated, suspecting a trick. Growing impatient, the private prodded Stultmeyer with the muzzle of his weapon. Realizing the futility of protesting, and craving any extra warmth he could get, even from a tattered and torn jacket, Stultmeyer complied. Then his wrists were also bound in front, and he was again shoved to the floor.

Stultmeyer could tell that the jacket had obviously still been worn by Saunders during at least part of his interrogation. It was ripped and torn almost to pieces, and stiff with dried blood. In fact, Stultmeyer thought, the blood might be the only thing holding it together. He shuddered, just imagining how it had come to its present state.

Finally gathering all items that they intended to take, the soldiers donned their overcoats and prepared to exit into the driving rain.

Stultmeyer was prodded to his feet, then it was Saunders' turn. Eyes slitted in his bruised, battered face, breath rasping forth through his swollen throat, at first Saunders just lay there. Then, after repeated 'urgings,' he tried to stand. Stultmeyer could do nothing but helplessly watch as Saunders struggled to rise. Finally, with a bitten off exclamation of impatience, the German sergeant yanked Saunders to his knees. Saunders remained that way, wavering, for several seconds. Then he slowly pitched forward, head on bound hands pressed against the floor. Again, the German sergeant reached for him, and this time there was unmitigated fury in his eyes. Motioning for the private to help him, they each grabbed an arm. Together they half-dragged, half-kicked Saunders out of the cabin. Stultmeyer was pushed along behind him by the driver, all under the bemused eyes of the Hauptman.

There had been no let-up in the rain since Stultmeyer was first taken into the cabin. In fact, it seemed to have gotten worse. Visibility was less than poor, and the yard was rapidly turning into a swift moving stream. The Germans holding Saunders stood, cursing the mud as well as their burden. Finding a well formed puddle, they stopped and dropped him in it face first.

After a heart-stopping second, Stultmeyer saw Saunders raise his head, sputtering and coughing. The German sergeant gave Saunders a mighty kick to the side, and Saunders rolled to get away. Under the sergeant's menacing weapon, Saunders finally staggered to his feet. He was pushed and shoved over to where Stultmeyer had been led earlier. Saunders stood there, sodden, head bowed. Water ran down, around, and off him.

Stultmeyer's heart sank. He didn't know if he could do this alone. He needed to know if Saunders was anywhere in there, or if things really were as bleak as they seemed. He shook the rain out of his eyes the best he could, and tried with all his might to will his sergeant to move of his own volition. Then he saw it, an almost indiscernible straightening roll of the shoulders. Gradually Saunders' back lengthened, and his legs took a firmer grip of the earth. His head began to rise, as Saunders seemed to grow in stature.

"Sarge?" Stultmeyer ventured, hoping against hope that he had some company for this march. He was rewarded for his efforts with a rifle butt to the small of his back. Staggering, he fell to his knees, still looking to his sergeant for some kind of sign.

And he was rewarded again, this time with a glimpse of pain-darkened blue eyes, filled with anger and edged with determination.

Hanley dumped the phone into its holder and put his head into his hands. Scrubbing his hands vigorously through his hair, he let out a frustrated gravel-growl. It was times like this that he really had to wonder how the army ever got anything done. The Germans in their area were retreating; Hanley needed every available man to catch up stragglers and plug any holes. It was hard enough to keep things running smoothly while he was missing his best sergeant, it was bad enough personally that he was missing his friend. Now, he had just been handed a specialized mission on top of everything else.

A 'humanitarian mission' Jampel had called it. Both he and Hanley knew what it really was. Some brass in supply wanted to make sure his girlfriend's grandmother was okay in all this flooding. So, now Hanley had to send his men out into the middle of nowhere to make sure someone's granny hadn't floated away. Just who was he supposed to send, he'd like to know. Yet, even as he formed the question in his mind, he knew exactly who was going. A few holes here and there hadn't stopped Saunders' squad yet, and Hanley knew it would be better to put them to work than to let them keep brooding, trying to devise ways in which to rescue their sergeant. Yes, Hanley knew what they were trying to do and now he had a perfect way to redirect them.

Satisfied that he had some kind of solution to at least one of his problems, Hanley set out with purpose to find his first squad.

For a moment they just stood there, Saunders' unwavering gaze boring into the German sergeant. For an instant, the captor seemed to falter in his self-assured role of dominator. But it was just an instant, and, just as quickly, it was gone. The sergeant

and the private prodded Saunders and Stultmeyer over to the back of the staff car and stopped them there. The driver jogged back, collar up, hat pulled down and shoulders hunched against the unforgiving rain. The Hauptman was comfortably settled into the back of his car, impatiently glancing back through the rearview window.

The driver had two lengths of rope with him. One he handed to the sergeant, the other to the private. He then ran back to the car and slid behind the wheel. The two German soldiers checked the bindings on Stultmeyer and Saunders, making sure that they were fast. They then attached one end of a rope to each man's wrists and took the other end to the car. Working quickly, they tied each rope to opposite ends of the bumper. Once they were sure that all knots were secure, the soldiers went towards the front of the car, the private to the left, the sergeant to the right. Each mounted the running board on their side and held on with one hand, while training their weapons on the two American soldiers with the other. Without taking his eyes from his prisoners, the sergeant banged on the roof of the car with his MP-40. There was a brief hesitation, then, with a jerk that almost unsettled the private, the car was off.

Caje slogged on through the pelting rain, wearily resigning himself to the fact that no matter what he did, no matter how much he shook it, his helmet was positioned to drip directly onto his nose. This, in turn, caused a running stream off its tip that he was constantly trying to blow away. Giving up his attempts to stop it, he settled instead for several frequent swipes of his sleeve to help contain it all.

The mission had been a wash-out, much like the weather. The old lady was fine, if a little wet, and flatly refused to come back with them. In fact, she had refused to believe they were American soldiers coming to check on her. She had rudely demanded that they leave her property at once and not try any of their fancy tricks on her. No amount of pleading or charm from Caje or Doc could make her change her mind. Caje had finally called the guys together and told them they were leaving. His orders had been to see that the woman was safe, nothing more. So, for once, Caje decided to do it by the book.

Looking back at the men behind him, Caje mentally shook his head. He and Littlejohn were still sporting opposite shoulder wounds. A little on the weak side, they were at least able to make the trip. Kirby and Andersen, both unharmed, were bringing up the rear of the column. That left Doc.

Caje knew he should have left Doc behind. With his bad ankle, Doc had no business being on a hike like this, especially going up and down hills in the mud. But Doc had insisted on coming, and who

was Caje to stop him? Caje knew what it felt like to be left behind when something important was going on. To be left waiting, worrying, wondering. It was unbearable. Thus, when Doc took his place with the rest of the squad as they prepared to head out of town, Caje had looked the other way. He knew Saunders wouldn't have done it, knew that Saunders would have ordered the medic to stay in camp. However, Caje also



understood how important it was to Doc to be with the squad right now. Doc's feeling of responsibility over the botched patrol a few days ago hadn't truly abated with time, Cajé could see that. He realized that Doc felt he had something to prove to himself, as well as the others. No matter what, Cajé understood that Doc would never forgive himself until he moved past his earlier mistake. And the only way to do that was to create the opportunity to make another one—and not. So, Cajé had turned his head when Doc joined the column heading out of camp. But now, watching Doc slowly, painfully, make his way through the muck, up and down the hills and hollows, Cajé knew he had been wrong.

Exactly when Cajé reached that conclusion, Doc stumbled and went down. With a sharp cry of pain, he slid down the rain-slicked hillside, futilely attempting to slow his progress with handfuls of mud. Swearing softly in French, Cajé stopped and slid down behind him, motioning the others to stay put.

Upon reaching the bottom, Cajé made his way over to Doc. The medic's head was on his knee, shoulders tight and face grimacing. His hands encircled his ankle while he gasped in pain.

"Doc." Cajé squatted down beside the medic. "Doc, are you all right?"

For a moment, the medic didn't move. Then he lifted his head to look at Cajé. Pain and frustration filled his eyes. Doc couldn't believe that he was screwing things up again. He tried to find the words to tell Cajé what he needed to say, but the scout stilled him with a shake of his head.

"Forget about it, Doc," he said. "It is raining too hard anyway, we'll need to find shelter somewhere. Can you stand?"

Wordlessly, Doc extended a hand to Cajé. Reaching out, Cajé grasped it and pulled. Doc was a picture of abject misery in the pouring rain, hair streaming into his eyes, shoulders slumped dejectedly. Cajé reached down and scooped up Doc's helmet, handing it to him.

"C'mon, Doc," he said softly.

Together, the two men scratched and crawled their way back up the hill. Once they were at the top, Cajé gestured everyone over to him. "We have to find shelter!" he called over the rumbling thunder. "Stay here while I go look."

Turning and squinting ahead, the scout made his way over the perilous trail.

The remaining squad members moved off to the side and huddled in the meager shelter they found under an old tree. The branches may have shielded them from some of the rain, but they also funneled it to certain spots, making any hope of brief respite merely a joke, as one by one they all squished together, trying to ward off some of the damp cold. And so they settled in to do what soldiers do best—wait.

If it weren't for the mud that was making their trip so miserable, Saunders mused ironically, the going would have been impossible. He and Stultmeyer were doing their best to keep their footing, while trying to avoid the worst of the clods thrown up at them by the staff car. The only good thing about that, was that the mud was slowing down the German car, enabling Saunders and Stultmeyer to keep up with it. They had already been forced to push it out of the mire once.

Saunders looked sideways at Stultmeyer. He seemed to be handling this well, or at least was very good at hiding his emotions. The private had not said a word since calling Saunders' name at the farmhouse. Saunders was glad he had, however. Always cognizant of his responsibilities, Saunders had sunk to a point where he almost forgot them. Seeking refuge from the unrelenting beatings, he had tried to escape within

himself. Hearing the familiar "Sarge!" called out in an unfamiliar voice had broken through to him. The voice may have been unfamiliar, but the tone was one he'd heard so many times before. Fearful and desperate, vying with hopeful, another soldier looking to him for help. At first, his mind responded automatically, then, as he became more aware of what surrounded him, he responded consciously. Stultmeyer was his responsibility, as so many others had been. Saunders had always had the stubborn hard will to survive. It had gotten him through many situations others had deemed hopeless. Knowing that others depended on him had only strengthened his resolve. His brief lapse was now behind him, as he sought to find a way out of this current predicament. He knew he'd find a way, there always was one.

Saunders realized that he wouldn't be able to take on his captors in his present state. Stultmeyer looked to be fairly unharmed physically, but that wasn't saying much. If he had checked out emotionally, then he wouldn't stand a chance either.

Saunders didn't think there was any part of his body that didn't hurt in some way. His head felt like it was splitting in two, and his vision was still blurry from the concussion of the blast from the airplane explosion. Dozens of indiscriminate blows had left their marks all over his body in the form of cuts or bruising. The pounding rain made its way down his back and torso, keeping lacerations open and painful. Blood mixed with the water that was making so free with him. His hands and fingers were numb from the constant restraints. He face was throbbing from the treatment he had received, but worst of all was his throat. The tightness of the noose, coupled with the times that he had straightened his legs, combined to make his throat raw. He could feel the swelling, inside and out. It hurt to even breathe, each respiration a conscious effort to be kept as shallow as possible, while still allowing him enough oxygen for his exertions. Saunders worried how long this leg of the trip would be.

The car's whining engine pulled Saunders' attention forward. They were heading down a steep grade. Spewing mud everywhere, the car screamed and slid its way forward. Every few seconds the driver would apply the brakes, sending the back end into a sideways glide, towing Saunders and Stultmeyer behind. The two of them were barely able to keep their feet, half the time skidding around behind the car. The German sergeant and private were hanging on with both hands, weapons momentarily abandoned to their slings as they fought to maintain their footing on the running boards.

Finally, the car made the bottom of the hill. Inching its way forward, it managed a right-hand turn that put it on a crude road. Gaining the relative safety of an established path, it gathered up a little speed. Saunders and Stultmeyer were forced to half-walk, half-jog in their struggles to keep up. The hill they had just descended stayed to their right. But to their left, just a few feet away, was the rushing, roaring river. It was several feet higher than it normally would be, as evidenced by tree tops and other partially submerged objects trying to be seen above the water. The river was an angry, swirling brown, hurtling branches and other debris downstream in its effort to clear itself a path. It ran parallel to the car, seemingly headed for the same destination. The gradual lightening of the sky as dawn tried to claw its way through made very little change in the way of visibility, and only reinforced the knowledge that things were not improving.

It seemed as though the driver came to the same conclusion, for he attempted to increase the speed of the car. As more mud flew at the trailing captives, Stultmeyer slipped and went down. Head down against the battering rain, Saunders didn't see it at first. A grunt of pain when Stultmeyer was dragged over a rock brought Saunders' head around.

Without even realizing what he was doing, Saunders moved to help him. Seeing his attempts to get to Stultmeyer, the German sergeant let out a yell, along with a burst from his weapon. Whether it was in response to that or something else, Saunders would

never know, but at that exact moment, the car began to slide. Its front left wheel strayed to the soft shoulder above the river, while the spinning back ones made straight for the downed Stultmeyer's head. What happened next went by so fast, Saunders had a hard time taking it all in. The weight of the car was too much for the weakened riverbank to bear, and the ground immediately began to give way. Desperately trying to avoid an icy plunge, the driver spun the wheel and applied the gas. It was all to no avail, as the car only settled into its ruts. Then, with no pause at all, it slid straight down into the river.

Caje pushed forward, his sense of direction only slightly off focus due to the pounding rain. He wanted to make it back to the squad before any more of the path washed away. As the trees he had left them under came into view, he slowed his pace down. No sense in getting shot by whoever was lookout! Sure enough, Littlejohn had a bead on him as he approached. With a sigh of relief, Littlejohn put his weapon aside as he recognized Caje.

Joining his squad mates under the trees, Caje tried to make himself heard over the rain.

"I found a cave just a little bit past the hill. C'mon!" Relieved faces absorbed the news as Caje turned to go. A large hand held him back, however, as Littlejohn grabbed his arm.

"A cave, Caje? You want us to go into a cave?" The private's face was twisted with doubt as he questioned his leader's decision.

"Yes, Littlejohn!" shouted Caje, hoping that no Germans were within earshot. "A cave! It's dry, and deep enough that I think we can build a fire to warm up! Now, let's go!" Again, Caje turned to lead the others to the shelter.

And again, Littlejohn stopped him.

"Caje, you can't go into a cave in weather like this! The river is flooding and this isn't very high ground. If the dams break and we're in a cave, well, gosh! There'd be no way out!"

Littlejohn stood face to face with Caje, knowing that he was making the Cajun's job that much more difficult. While it wasn't his intention to do that, Littlejohn still knew that there was no way he was going into a cave right now.

Caje stood stock still, staring at Littlejohn. His face may have been inscrutable, but his thoughts were churning. How could he have not thought of that one? Of all people, Caje knew what flooding could do to low-lying lands. He had seen it firsthand. Littlejohn was right, and Caje was glad that he had spoken up. However, there was still a question of shelter for the men. And then there was the other, ever-present question that threatened to derail Caje for the moment—why?

Caje had never quite understood the why of leadership. He knew that when Saunders was gone he was second-in-command. It was his by virtue of rank, and a sign of Saunders' trust. No one disputed it, it was an accepted fact. Caje knew that he was a competent leader and that the squad respected him. But, Caje also knew that if Saunders were here and told the men to follow him into a cave that they would do it, no questions asked. Try as he might—and he had, often—Caje never really understood why. Now he was faced with Littlejohn questioning him and his leadership—he would never do that to the Sarge. Caje wondered what it was that he was lacking. People followed Saunders without question. Call it what you will, Saunders had a certain something, a certain quality that made people trust him and his judgment. Whatever it was, people followed him when he said 'let's go.' Caje knew the guys would follow him because they trusted Saunders, who had left Caje in charge. But it wasn't the same.

Caje knew that he didn't have that quality, that 'it' factor that Saunders had when it came to leading men. He had thought long and hard about it, many, many times, wondering what it was, but always came up empty. It was unnamable, indefinable. Oddly enough, there were others in the squad who did have it. Kirby had it, Doc had it. But Caje didn't. He thought he had accepted that, but with Littlejohn confronting him, Caje realized he hadn't.

"Caje? Caje? Are you okay?" Doc's voice, creased with worry, reached him.

Caje shook his head and looked to the men. Whatever he had or lacked, now wasn't the time to debate it. He had a job to do and he was going to do it, no matter what. And in that flash, Caje realized why Saunders had chosen him as second-in-command. Saunders knew that Caje always understood that the mission came first. He would get the job done, despite personal feelings or stacked odds

Looking up at Littlejohn, Caje bit his lip.

"OKay, Littlejohn, you're right. Let's all go together for a while, and hope that we find something else." Caje turned, again, to leave.

And this time everyone followed.

The shock of the cold water stunned Saunders into senselessness. His body was buffeted this way and that, as he felt a tugging on his wrists. It was all too easy to surrender, to follow the lead that somebody else was offering. A burning in his chest, growing with each passing second, made him realize that his fight was not over yet. The lead that was offered was no solution, just another way for him to give up. Pulling back and kicking with all his might, he surged upwards. For a heart-stopping moment he thought he wouldn't make it, then his head broke through the tumultuous surface, ears ringing with the roar of the river's power. Gagging and choking, Saunders fought to keep his head above the water. His vision blurred and his world momentarily narrowed to the singular task of drawing a clean breath. Unable to go any higher than shoulders out of the water, Saunders tipped his head back to the rain, wondering which would drown him first.

The car was totally underwater, no trace of its occupants to be seen. Saunders was caught between two small outcroppings of rocks. Looking to his right he could see Stultmeyer caught up against the other side of the formation, a few feet downstream. He was wedged between two larger rocks and seemed to be unconscious.

Then, without warning, Saunders was pulled back down into the water. Desperate, clawing hands moved their way up his body and found his face. Opening his eyes, Saunders looked through the foamy brown and saw the German sergeant's wavering face staring back at him. Together the two men broke the surface, each one struggling with the fight to live, so they could live to fight. Kicking as hard as he could, Saunders attempted to free himself from the sergeant's grasp. The sergeant only tightened his grip on his shoulders, forcing Saunders back under the water. Hands still tied, Saunders used whatever means he could to extricate himself. Rolling his head downwards and to the side, he bit down hard on his assailant's hand. The hands pulled back and Saunders again rose to the surface, gasping in as much air as he could. His assailant broke through the water beside him, rubbing his bleeding hand, and reached out to grab Saunders again. The sergeant's eyes were full of hatred and anger as he fought the current threatening to sweep him away. Coming after Saunders, he showed no mercy. Grabbing him with one hand and swinging with the other, the German delivered several sharp, stinging blows.

Struggling to break free, Saunders abruptly changed his tactics and let the

current force him against his opponent. Wrapping his legs around the sergeant's waist, he managed to get his bound hands in between them. Spreading his palms as far apart as he could, he straight-armed the sergeant square in the throat. Keeping his elbows locked, Saunders forced the man's head underwater and held it there. The sergeant's hands flailed helplessly, disappearing under the water. They re-emerged to drag Saunders under with him, grimly determined to share their fate. Doggedly, Saunders hung on, watching as yet another life passed beneath him. When the German was stilled, Saunders released him and made his own way up to the surface. Retching and coughing, he clung to a rock, watching as the river took possession of the body, moving it slowly at first, then faster and faster as it spirited it away.

Utterly exhausted, Saunders took a moment to try and regain his senses. To his right he could still see Stultmeyer, beginning to stir. The private appeared dazed, and blood seeped from a large cut on his forehead. Closing his eyes, Saunders tried to get his ragged breathing under control. The frigid water was rapidly overtaking all thoughts and sensation, Saunders could barely feel his arms and legs anymore.

Still tethered to the unseen car, Saunders held his breath and let the stream carry him to Stultmeyer. He was able to come within a few inches of him, but was in danger of escaping the protection of the rocks.

"Stultmeyer!" he called. "Stultmeyer, can you hear me?"

The private moved feebly against the rocks, seemingly unable to place the new sounds he heard.

"Stultmeyer! Look at me!" Kicking with all his might, Saunders tried to tread water near Stultmeyer.

Finally, the soldier turned his head and looked at his sergeant. A glint of recognition shone in his eyes, and he opened his mouth to speak, only to sputter out the water he inadvertently swallowed. Trying again, Stultmeyer managed to make himself heard. "Sarge!" he shouted over the roar of the river. "Sarge! What is that?"

Saunders cocked his head and looked at Stultmeyer, then looked down at the shoulder Stultmeyer was indicating. There, partially sticking out, was the hilt of a knife. All Saunders could think was that the numbness from the cold water had kept him from feeling it. Now, however, his attention drawn to it, he began to feel nauseated. There was no way he could pull it out himself, given the angle it followed.

Struggling against the mounting turmoil, Saunders tried to maneuver as close to Stultmeyer as possible.

"Listen!" he shouted, "We've got to get out of here! Pull this out!"

A vague look of alarm, followed by befuddlement, crossed Stultmeyer's face as he faded back against the rocks. Saunders reached out as far as possible and kicked at Stultmeyer, catching him somewhere mid-body.

"Stultmeyer! Stay with me!"

The private opened his eyes and shook his head, then tried to focus on Saunders.

"Stultmeyer, let go and come out to me! Grab hold of me!"

Bracing himself, Saunders watched as Stultmeyer pushed off the rock and was swept into Saunders. Grabbing hold of each other, the two men were buffeted this way and that, until they caught up against the very edge of the rock formation. There they lingered, the water now up to their necks.

Saunders bent his head to Stultmeyer's ear. "You've gotta pull this knife outta me and don't drop it! Got it?"

Stultmeyer nodded and braced himself between Saunders and the rocks. Taking hold of the hilt, he caught Saunders' eye. An almost imperceptible nod, and then he pulled. Biting back a cry of pain, Saunders shut his eyes and tightened his grip on

Stultmeyer's jacket. Taking a few deep breaths, he tried to center himself. Opening his eyes, he looked into Stultmeyer's worried face.

"Sarge! Are you okay?"

Not daring to speak yet, Saunders just nodded. Then he remembered. "Do you still have the knife?" he croaked, hoarsely.

Stultmeyer nodded, indicating the weapon clutched in his hands. Flexing the fingers on one hand while maintaining his grip on Stultmeyer with the other, Saunders reached for it. Clumsily the two men managed the hand-off.

The water was furious now, its pent-up rage slamming the two men repeatedly into the rocks. Saunders knew that there wasn't much time left until their small refuge was under water. Looking at Stultmeyer, he noticed the private was fading rapidly. He still needed Stultmeyer awake and jostled him the best he could.

"Stultmeyer! Stay with me! I'm going to cut your hands loose, then you're going to cut mine! You got it?" There was no response from the sagging soldier, and Saunders began to feel desperate. "Stultmeyer! Stultmeyer! Do you hear me?!"

Stultmeyer roused himself enough to nod weakly at his sergeant. With his body pressing Stultmeyer's into the rocks, Saunders struggled to raise the knife. He brought it to bear on the ropes binding Stultmeyer's hands and began to cut, holding his breath against cutting the man's wrists as well. Finally, the ropes fell free and Stultmeyer's hands bobbed in the river, the private nearly unconscious by now.

Using the force of the river and the ropes that still bound him into place, Saunders strove to keep the two of them together.

"Stultmeyer! Stultmeyer! You've got to cut me free! Stultmeyer!"

With an effort, Stultmeyer roused himself. "k Sarge," he muttered, reaching out for the knife.

Handing over the knife, along with his faith, Saunders had one more thought. "Hold on!"

Again using his legs, Saunders held himself against Stultmeyer. Raising his arms above his head, he felt the hitherto silent shoulder wound scream in protest. Bringing his arms down, he looped them around Stultmeyer.

"Turn around and cut my hands free!" he shouted.

The water was chin-high where they were by now. Saunders hoped that Stultmeyer could do it. Eyes half closed, the private was moving into the realm of beyond caring. With a determined shake, Stultmeyer gathered himself and began to turn. When he faced Saunders' hands, he began to cut.

Bracing himself for what he guessed would come, Saunders held his breath. As the ropes fell free from his wrists, the lines that held him to the car also fell free. Knowing that there was no longer anything left to anchor them to the spot they were in, Saunders gripped Stultmeyer as tightly as his numbed hands would allow, while the floodwaters smashed them against the rocks on the rapidly disappearing bank. Then, with fickle fingers, the swirling current plucked them from a possible salvation and hurtled them downstream, bumping and slamming into all the other debris along the churning way.

Hanley swore as he launched his six-foot plus frame over yet another who-knows-how-deep-it-really-was puddle in the street. He had been summoned to see Jampel, and he knew it wasn't going to be good. Rumors were swirling like eddies all over camp about Captain Baxter. Hanley shook his head as he wondered again about the efficiency of the Army's gossip mill. It had only taken a few hours for everyone to

find out that there had been a leak in intelligence and that it had already been plugged—in every manner of speaking. Now he was on his way to Company Headquarters for the fourth time today. At least, he thought dryly, we're in the same town.

The first time he had been there was for a platoon leaders' briefing. That was the best part of his day, since he had found out that K Company was being held in reserve for the next forty-eight to seventy-two hours. At the end of the meeting, however, Jampel had pulled Hanley aside and reminded him about some missing paperwork. So, Hanley had had to return to his headquarters, recreate from memory something which he had forgotten long ago, and run it over. Jampel had indicated that he



intended to question him about some of it, so, Hanley figured to save time that way. When he got there, however, Jampel was in a meeting, and Hanley was forced to leave the paperwork with the company clerk. Arriving back at his CP, he was greeted with a message that Jampel wanted him back there, pronto. Trying to restrain his grumbling, Hanley returned to Company HQ. There, he was ushered into Jampel's office, where he found himself in the company of one Major Richardson of supply.

Apparently it was Major Richardson's request that had started Hanley's men on that 'humanitarian' mission, and now he was here personally to find out the result. When Hanley was forced to tell the major that the squad had not yet returned, the major became quite agitated.

"Do you mean to tell me, Lieutenant, that your men have failed to complete such a simple mission?"

Barely biting back a really nasty retort, Hanley had to satisfy himself with a more sedate reply. "What I mean to tell you, Major, is that my men have not returned yet, so I don't know the status of their mission."

Hanley could see Jampel's grimacing face out of the corner of his eye. He had no doubts about Jampel's concern for his men, but he also knew that Jampel would only let him go so far when speaking to a superior officer. Hanley tried to tone it down. "They are on radio silence, sir, until they hit the green zone. I'm sure you can appreciate that they are unable to report in until they reach that mark."

Richardson looked at Hanley sourly. "By my estimation, Lieutenant, they should have reached that point hours ago. Why does the rescue of one little old lady pose such problems for your men?"

Quickly, Jampel stepped forward, in an effort to avoid a conflict between the major and one of his best junior officers.

"Sir, I apologize that this mission is, as of yet, incomplete. I assure you that Lieutenant Hanley's men are some of the best in the field, and as soon as we have any information, we shall inform you immediately."

About to utter another scathing remark, Richardson thought the better of it, and picked up his hat. Twirling it in his hands, he turned to face Jampel.

"I don't know about the quality of your men, Captain, but it seems that I have no choice in the matter. Now I have to go tell a distraught young woman that there is still no word on her grandmother. See that you contact me the moment your men return."

Turning on his heel, Richardson shoved his cap onto his head and marched out the door.

Hanley stood there, seething. How dare Richardson complain about someone's grandmother when he had an entire squad missing? Who did he think he was, pushing people around in order to impress some girl? Dismissed by Jampel, he returned to his own 'office' to fret about his missing men. When his presence was requested yet again a few hours later, he was irate. Fully intending to lop Major Richardson's head off, Hanley set out.

Upon reaching company HQ, Hanley was mildly surprised to find Captain Jampel waiting for him. Standing next to Jampel, and topping him by a good six inches, was another major. Groaning inwardly, but maintaining an unreadable face, Hanley managed to toss off a quick, but acceptable, salute to the officers. The major returned it immediately, accustomed to the rights of his rank, while Jampel was a little slower with his reply.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" Hanley asked, dropping his hand.

Jampel nodded, beckoning Hanley to follow him into a more private area of his command center. Once there, he turned to make the necessary introductions.

"Major Carroll, this is Lieutenant Hanley. His men are the ones who went out after the plane. Lieutenant, Major Carroll is from G2. He has a few questions for you."

"Lieutenant," Carroll acknowledged him with a barely perceptible nod, then regarded Hanley with blasé scrutiny.

Hanley tipped his head to one side, wondering just what G2 wanted from him now. Some more human sacrifice? But, "Sir," was all he said, and waited.

Carroll inhaled deeply, then bit his lip and sighed, sounding almost angry. "Lieutenant," he began, "I understand that it was your men who retrieved the camera from the plane that went down a few days ago."

Hanley nodded. "Yes, sir."

Carroll looked straight at Hanley and continued, "I also understand that it was your same men who guided in my men for the second retrieval."

Again, Hanley nodded, "Yes, sir."

Carroll sighed again, seeming to be considering his words. He removed his helmet and ran his hands through his hair, in a manner that reminded Hanley of a certain missing sergeant. Replacing his helmet, Carroll again turned his attention to Hanley. "Lieutenant, let me be frank. I was the one who debriefed your man Andersen when he returned from the second mission. I know that there are men still M.I.A. in regards to that mission." Major Carroll paused, then continued. "Look, Lieutenant, I need to know about your missing men."

Hanley frowned. Just what did Carroll want to know? Names, ranks, serial numbers? Quirks and efficiencies? What? What was the major unable to glean himself from each man's jacket?

"Well, what do you need to know, sir? Didn't Andersen give you a full report?"

"Yes, he did. Very exact, and very informative. No, Lieutenant, what I need to know won't be in any report. What I need to know is about your men's ethics, their moral characters."

"What?!" Hanley stared at the major, flabbergasted. Morals? In the middle of a war? From G2? "Sir, I'm afraid I don't understand what the major is asking me."

"What I need to know, Lieutenant, is the trustworthiness of your men. I need to know if you think they are the sort to talk."

Hanley stared at the man standing in front of him. "Sir?" was all he managed.

"Look here, Lieutenant. The Germans don't necessarily know that their source is dead. I don't know what your men know or saw, but if they have been captured, we

have to assume that they will be interrogated. I need to know the limits of your men, in order for me to best plan our next step."

Hanley was just amazed. He had no idea how to handle this man. "Sir," he said, "Private Stultmeyer had just joined us. I was not able to get to know him at all."

"Right, we know all about Stultmeyer. He's another tangible, German born and bred. But what about your sergeant?" Carroll regarded Hanley with hard, unyielding eyes.

Hanley returned the stare. What about Saunders? What could he say—that Saunders had proved time and again that he was loyal beyond doubt, that he could—and had—withstood several not-so-nice interrogations already? Hanley had no idea what kind of force would be used in this matter. The Germans wouldn't be looking for troop strengths, unit numbers and positions this time. They were into something far more complicated than that. As much as he knew Saunders, as much as he trusted him beyond question, he had no idea of the actual limits the man could reach. So many times he thought Saunders to be limitless, but, he was, after all, only human. What was he in for now?

Hanley looked at the waiting officers and shook his head. "Major, what are you asking me? Just what kind of information will the Germans think he has?"

Carroll narrowed his eyes and nodded his head. "Lieutenant, consider all information imparted in this meeting to be strictly confidential. In other words, it dies among the three of us."

"Yes, sir," Hanley bit out, "I do understand the meaning of confidential."

"Lieutenant!" said Jampel, but Carroll stayed him with a raised hand.

"That's all right, Captain. I haven't explained myself very well to your man."

Scanning the room to make sure they were in no danger of being overheard, Carroll turned to fully face Hanley.

"Lieutenant. We knew we had a leak somewhere between us and you. We narrowed it down to two suspects, both of whom I sent out with your men. They were instructed to retrieve the second camera, and to warn the soldiers with them to expect trouble. We hoped to learn who the leak was by which man disseminated—or did not—the information. However, that didn't work. Andersen stated that your sergeant warned them to be on the lookout, but never revealed how he knew they'd been set up."

"Wait. " Hanley felt the room begin to gray. "Set up?"

"Lieutenant, intelligence is a very delicate matter. No matter how hard you try, you are hard pressed to cover all the bases. We cooked up the second camera scheme to flush out our leak—and it worked. According to Andersen, it was Baxter who took him out. When he came to, Andersen found the camera and map overlays buried next to Baxter. So, we are reasonably sure that it was Baxter who was planning to leave the information for his contact. As far as we know, Baxter never met his contact face-to-face. So, if they don't know who he is, they don't know he's dead. As long as your men don't know this information, or crack under pressure, we can use the fact that the Germans think their agent is still alive."

"Wait," Hanley said again. He felt as if he'd just sprinted five miles. "If Baxter intended to turn the camera and maps over to the Germans, why would he warn my men to expect trouble?"

Carroll tilted his head and looked at Hanley. "Lieutenant. Baxter needed your men to watch his back while he retrieved the camera. He needed to leave it for his contact, and then, apparently, he was hoping for the ambush. My guess is that he would then be able to make his way back to camp, alone and without the camera. He would be able to report that the mission had failed, the Germans retrieved the camera first and killed all the others."

Hanley massaged his temples. "Major, you mentioned the word 'setup.'"

Major Carroll nodded. "Right. We couldn't take any chances that whoever the leak was, would be successful. So we made sure that the camera film was blank. That way, if the Germans did manage a successful hand-off, there would be nothing of consequence for them."

"Major, am I understanding you correctly? Are you meaning to tell me that you sent my men on this mission, thinking that they would probably be killed?"

Carroll looked coldly at Hanley, through narrowed eyes. "Lieutenant, we always allow for loss with every mission we plan."

"But you meant for my men to be killed, so that the Germans could retrieve a blank camera? And you were waiting to see who stumbled back into camp, alone, so you would know who your leak was?" Hanley was having trouble forming his words, he could feel them fading away on the sea of red that was threatening his vision.

Carroll swam right through that ocean. "Exactly."

Hanley felt as though he had been sucker punched. He couldn't breathe, and the walls were closing in on him. Without being dismissed, he turned to leave. Then, stupefied by a sudden thought, he turned back. "Major," he managed. "You've used the phrase 'setup' several times. Now, let me ask you this, if I may. Was the original plane crash real, or was it staged, to somehow create this entire scenario from beginning to end?"

Major Carroll raised his eyebrows and looked at Hanley. Then he smiled, a small, cold, smile. "Why, Lieutenant Hanley," he said, softly. "Very nice. We may have to find a place for you in intelligence yet."

Hanley stared, gape-jawed. He couldn't believe it. He'd lost three men, K.I.A., as well as three others, W.I.A., for a phony rescue? Granted, the pilot had been hurt pretty badly, but a purposeful dump of a plane? Serves him right, thought Hanley. And now he was missing two more, one being his best sergeant, so that G2 could find its leak? The blurred lines in Hanley's life were fast becoming erased. He gradually became aware of Carroll calling his name.

"Lieutenant, you still haven't told me if your man can be counted on to withstand a strenuous interrogation."

'Strenuous interrogation'. Was that a new Army term? Hanley couldn't remember seeing the paperwork on that one. Turning to face the major, Hanley gritted his teeth.

"Major," he squeezed out of the side of his mouth, "I have no idea what kind of 'interrogating' they will do to my sergeant. I don't know his breaking point—I've never seen it. I do know this—I have trusted my life to him a thousand times over, more even, since we hit that beach together. I have never had cause to worry—ever—when I've sent him out to do what needs to be done. So, Major, I do believe that your secrets, such those as he may know, will be safe with him."

Turning, again without waiting to be dismissed, Hanley fled the room.

The running water played by his ears, taking him back to long ago. He was home, twelve again, catching frogs on the riverbank with his friends. When they had all they wanted, they would lie on their backs, watching the clouds go by. A breezy day guaranteed one, if not all, would fall asleep before they took their leave. Each would arrive home, sodden and muddy, pant knees more worn than the day before, shoes, if they had a pair, tied together at the laces and slung around their necks. And each would be met by a scolding mother, who rushed them to wash up for dinner. The words were

all the same and covered up the true worries. Worries about food, money, coal, and whether or not the pants that their frog-catching son was wearing would stand up long enough to be passed down to the next child.

He was home, he was drifting, and he was—cold! As reality broke through, Saunders realized where he really was. His body was vibrating with cold and shock, and he could barely open his swollen eyes. When he did, he found himself lying half in and half out of the water, head leaning back against the trunk of a felled tree. A great weight was upon him and when he tried to move his arms, he couldn't. Panicked, he looked down at himself. Stultmeyer was lying across his legs and lower torso, pinning his right arm down. Saunders left arm was numb for entirely different reasons. Blood slowly circled and pooled in the currents before washing away downstream. Trying unsuccessfully to rouse himself, Saunders grunted at the futility of it. Finally, he managed to roll Stultmeyer off him, onto the ground above water. Then, slowly and painstakingly, Saunders managed to drag himself up beside him. Head down, he paused to catch his breath, swallowing hard. The ground managed to slip in and out of focus, while he battled to contain the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him. He was so tired, all he wanted to do was lie there. Lie there and be carried away by the flow of memories that could take him to the places where he wanted to be. He could feel them calling to him; all he had to do was close his eyes and he'd be there. Somewhere where he wouldn't be charged with so many young lives, nor responsible for the decisions that saved or lost them. As his eyes began to drift closed, he felt something shift by his leg. With the greatest of efforts he turned his head and saw Stultmeyer looking up at him.

"Sarge?" he ground out, eyes filled with pain and confidence. "Sarge, where are we?"

Saunders closed his eyes again, sighing. Decisions, choices—he knew someone was laughing at him somewhere. No matter how much he agonized over them, no matter how often the consequences kept him up at night, even making him physically ill at times, most of them were preordained. He couldn't even remember the last time he had truly been given a decision to make, one where the 'right' solution, no matter how disastrous, wasn't staring him in the face. He could tell from the river's flow that they had landed on the right side. The easy choice now was to stay put, to wait for someone to find them. But how could he do that? No one knew where they were, least of all Saunders himself.

Choices, decisions—he could feel himself set out on that long, lonely path of responsibility. No matter what the decision, he would bear the consequences alone. Alone, counting the dead and taking heart from the living. Opening his eyes, he looked into Stultmeyer's befuddled, confident ones.

"I don't really know, Stultmeyer, let's go find out."

Brockmeyer grimaced, eyes closed, holding the handset of the radio against his forehead. The lieutenant was going to kill him for sure.

Noticing the lengthy silence to his right, Hanley looked over and caught his radioman's look. "What's the matter, Brockmeyer?" he inquired.

"Sir," said Brockmeyer huskily. He stopped and cleared his throat, and tried again. "Sir, it's Major Richardson on the line for you."

Hanley regarded Brockmeyer with raised eyebrows. So many thoughts ran through his head, that he knew he would be unable to single out just one to give voice to. Dourly, he picked up his extension. "Lieutenant Hanley here." Within three seconds he was wearing Brockmeyer's grimace. "No, sir, they haven't returned. No sir, there has

been no radio contact. No, sir, I am not joking with you."

Brockmeyer's head bent further into his paperwork, as he struggled to keep a grin off his face.

"No, sir. No, sir. Yes, sir. No, sir. No, sir. Yes, sir."

Brockmeyer knew Hanley's tone well, well enough to not even breathe loudly as Hanley thrust the 'phone' into its holder. A short silence ensued, during which Brockmeyer wondered if he could come up for air.

"Brockmeyer!"

Guess not, thought Brockmeyer. "Yes, Lieutenant!"

"If Major Richardson calls again, tell him that I'm not in!" Hanley stood up and pushed out of the room, leaving a trail of paper and a gaping, albeit grinning, private in his wake.

The pounding rain had lessened, but the body's relief at that was clouded by the increasing chill that rode in on the dusky skies. Night was falling, and still the two soldiers had no idea if they were any closer to home.

They had moved on for what seemed like days, each alternating the role of leader to the other's follower. They pulled each other on by dint of determination and sheer willpower. When one's boots faltered, the other's planted firmly.

Finally, when they collapsed for what seemed like the millionth time, Saunders felt as though he could take it no more. He looked over to Stultmeyer and saw him silent, unmoving. Panicked, Saunders moved as quickly as his protesting body would allow. Stultmeyer was still breathing—weak and sketchy—but still breathing. A short break couldn't hurt, thought Saunders, as he laid his throbbing head on the ground. The cool earth soothed his fevered face, and he soon felt himself drifting away. Growling, he brought himself to the present with a jerk. He couldn't afford to waste time lying on the ground, he had to get himself and Stultmeyer back to their lines.

"Stultmeyer?" Saunders reached out with a shaking hand and grabbed at the other soldier's tattered, bloody coat. "Stultmeyer, c'mon."

There was no response from the unconscious man. Saunders put his head down in frustration, still pulling futilely on Stultmeyer. He was feeling tired, more tired than he had felt in a very long time. All he wanted to do was rest, just for a bit. It couldn't hurt, to rest for a while.

Just... a... little... rest... for... just... a... little..... while.....

It was a motionless silence, broken only by sound. Dripping echoes of left-over rain, dropping from leaf to leaf. Birds, tentatively calling out to others, receiving twittered replies. The stillness of the dawn sky, as morning whispered its way in. The silence of a world awakening, shaking off its soaking from the day before.

Kirby stood to one side of the hunter's shack the squad had managed to find the previous evening. Four walls and a roof with a muddy dirt floor, it had seemed the Ritz to the exhausted, soaking men. Tumbling inside, they had been relieved to find no one else there. After a quick perusal of the perimeter, Caje had established a watch order and the weary men had immediately fallen asleep.

Kirby had pulled third watch and failed to wake Littlejohn up for his shift. Kirby told himself that Littlejohn was exhausted and still healing from his wound of a few days ago. That was his foremost reason. Truth be told, however, Kirby was still working

through his own nagging guilt.

No one had said a word to him since that conversation back at base. Everyone had had their say, the problem was resolved as best it could be, and the men moved on. Kirby counted himself fortunate to be among men who were able to do that. Yes, arguments happened, and at one time or another they all hated each other. But it was rare for anything to last beyond a few days, and rarer still for a grudge to be held. Kirby had seen for himself the results of a soldier refusing to move on from some real or imagined hurt. It was nothing short of disastrous. As far as Kirby could tell, the matter was over and done with, he was forgiven. But he was a long way from forgiving himself.

A slight squelch of mud to his left caused him to turn quickly, BAR up and sighted, while dropping to one knee. To his immense relief, it was only Doc.

"specting company, Kirby?" The medic drawled, one eyebrow raised, as he held himself perfectly still.

"Well, c'mon, Doc, wha'd'ya think yer doin' sneaking up on me like that?" Kirby scrambled to his feet, ruefully regarding his dripping knee.

"Sorry, Kirby, didn't mean to scare ya," Doc said.

"Ya didn't scare me, Doc, you just almost got yourself killed, is all," Kirby grumbled, unwilling to admit to anything.

"Okay, Kirby, I'll be more careful next time." Doc moved closer to Kirby, while still maintaining a respectful distance.

Kirby gave Doc a sideways frown, then turned back to his gloomy watch. He had always loved the stillness of the a.m., the expectant promise of the day to come. A few years ago, he had only known it through one bleary, half-open eye as he staggered home from the night before. The army had shown him a different side to morning, its softer, gentler side. Gentler, that is, as long as your DI wasn't screaming in your ear. Once he'd gotten beyond that, Kirby had begun to appreciate mornings as a beginning, rather than an end. Right now, however, he couldn't see beyond the hopeless gray of the sky, which was still trying to hold its sway, despite the rays of sun trying to break through. Colored by his mood, Kirby sided with the gray. Again, he silently berated himself for his actions. Sarge was still missing and it was still his fault. He looked to the warring sky. Violent, ice-blue on one side, light breaking through on the other.

"It's beautiful, ain't it?" Doc whispered softly on Kirby's left.

Kirby looked at Doc, eyebrows raised. "Yeah, Doc, I always loved that shade of gray," he muttered sourly.

"No, Kirby, over there." Huddled into his jacket, collar up, hands in pockets, Doc indicated what he meant with his chin.

Kirby turned slightly and saw a different view. A rainbow was shimmered out for all to see, incomplete and softly fading. Kirby snorted to himself. Rainbows? Where was Doc going now?

"You know what a rainbow is, don't ya, Kirby?" Doc queried. "It's a sign of God's covenant with us. He promised to never destroy the earth with water again." Doc looked at Kirby's stony profile. "It's a sign of new beginnings, Kirby," he finished softly.

Kirby raised one eyebrow and looked sideways at Doc. He was about to toss off some other pithy reply, when something stopped him. Reaching back, way back, into his memory, he realized that Doc was looking for his own new beginnings. Kirby wasn't the only one who had fouled up the previous mission. Doc had pretty much admitted that the entire running chase was his fault. Kirby knew that wasn't true, just as he knew that it truly wasn't his fault that Saunders was missing. But knowing and feeling are two different things, and what Kirby knew, sure didn't help what Kirby felt. Dropping his head, Kirby's brow furrowed in furious thought. Doc felt pretty badly about his perceived failure, if his blow-up a few days earlier was any indication. Yet, Doc wasn't walking

around feeling sorry for himself. He was moving on, doing what had to be done. Kirby was too, but he had been letting his guilt override his instincts. Looking up, he was startled to meet Doc's cool blue eyes, eyes that seemed to reach into his soul. Eyes that were now watching him in his inner turmoil, ready and waiting to help. Kirby gave himself a visual shake. It was time to move on, to do what he could about what had been done. And, to leave it all alone, if that was the only solution. Closing his eyes, he twisted his face into a wry grin, then shook his head.

"C'mon, Doc, I haven't seen anything all night. Smells like the guys thought it was okay to brew a pot of coffee, and I sure could use some." Kirby turned to go inside and surrender his watch to the next person.

A hand on his arm stopped him. Now Doc was shaking his head, with a barely concealed grin of his own.

"No you won't, Kirby," he said. "Caje said if you wanted the watch so bad that you didn't wake anyone else up, you got it. But I'll see if I can wrangle ya a cup of coffee," Doc chuckled as he headed inside, leaving a fuming Kirby behind him.

Hanley cocked his head and stared, one eyebrow slightly raised, at the sergeant standing in front of him. It's not his fault, Hanley told himself, resisting the urge to slug the man. It's not his fault that he has a horse's ass for a CO. He tightened his grip around the metal canteen cup he was holding, glad for once that the coffee in it was cold. The sergeant seemed to sense Hanley's mood, and, unfortunately, his face seemed to indicate that it was not altogether unusual for him to be greeted this way.

"No, sergeant," Hanley said, measuring his words, along with his patience. "They haven't reported in yet. As I said before, I will be sure to alert Major Richardson immediately upon their return."

"Begging the lieutenant's pardon, but the major has asked that I remain here until they return. That way there will be no delay in his receiving the news." The sergeant braced, as though to receive a blow.

Hanley could feel the heat emanating from his body. He almost expected the coffee he held to boil. All the military protocol he had acclimated the past few years flew out the window.

"You have GOT to be kidding me!"

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, really I am, but I have my orders. Major Richardson said that he would be happy to discuss them with you if you had any questions." The sergeant's eyes warned Hanley that it wouldn't be a very smart thing to do.

Hanley swore, knowing it would be no use to kill the messenger. Without really thinking, he looked the sergeant in the eye and blurted, "Tell me, Sergeant, is she really worth all this?"

A smile, quickly banished, flashed across the sergeant's face. "I wouldn't know, sir," he answered staidly.

"Very well, Sergeant," said Hanley, rising from his seat. "Since it appears you are going to be around here indefinitely, why don't you make yourself useful and brew a pot of coffee." He held his cold, half-filled cup out to the sergeant.

Now it was the sergeant who regarded the lieutenant with quizzical eyebrows.



But, "Yes, sir," was all he said, as he took the proffered cup.

Hanley sighed. It was going to be another very long day.

It was the quiet that woke him. The quiet of a rain squelched earth, lying sodden against his cheek. Slowly, he opened his eyes, trying to remember where he was and how he had gotten there. As partial memories streamed their way across his mind, he remembered Stultmeyer. He jerked himself up on his elbows, then fell back down as his left arm utterly refused to support him. His shoulder—he had forgotten his shoulder, and it was reminding him now. Gasping in pain, he curled up on himself, gingerly covering his wound with his hand. Not too bad, he thought. Bleeding a little, probably from his quick movements, but it seemed to be all right. Well, as all right as it could be with no real bandages or sulfa powder. Okay, next.

Stultmeyer.

Stultmeyer lay close to his side, eyes closed in a very pale face. Pulling his way forward with his right elbow, Saunders put his head to Stultmeyer's face, listening for any breath sounds. They were there—slow, very uneven—but they were there.

"Stultmeyer! Stultmeyer! C'mon! Wake up!"

There was no response from the private, despite Saunders' repeated pleas. Dropping his head onto the ground, fingers still wound in Stultmeyer's jacket, Saunders tried to figure out what he had to do next. His body was stiff and sore, his left arm numb and practically useless at this point. Besides, he knew he wanted to use it as little as possible in order to avoid more bleeding. His head ached and he couldn't think very clearly at the moment.

Okay, he thought, first, let's see where we are.

Pushing upwards with his good arm, he managed to scramble to a nearby tree. With the aid of its trunk, he pushed himself upwards. As soon as he gained his feet, however, the world began to tilt around him. Reaching out for the tree he had just loosed, he sagged against it, willing himself to stay standing, refusing to give in to the vertigo. But it was no use, at least not for the moment. As hard as he tried to stay upright, the world was pushing him downwards. Still clutching the tree trunk, he sank to his knees, and gave it all up for a moment as he bent forward and vomited out everything that wasn't in his stomach.

Resting back on his haunches, Saunders wiped his mouth, while trying to regain some semblance of control. Then he tried again, pushing himself upwards, willing his stomach to remain in place, commanding his legs to hold him. Neither worked, as he again found himself on the ground, retching his way into dry heaves. One more time he tried, one more time, until finally he was able to gain a wavering stance.

They were still in a wooded area, and Saunders could see that it was nearing daylight. Where they were, he still had no idea. He looked for some kind of sign, some kind of landmark that would give him a hint of which way to head. All he saw was the gray break of a day, trying to push its way through an equally colorless sky. As he watched, the gloom lessened a little, enough to illuminate his surroundings. Still he saw nothing familiar, just the horizon, devoid of hope. Sighing, he strengthened his resolve. Nothing would get done while he was standing here, he had to make it happen.

Carefully, slowly, Saunders made his way over to Stultmeyer. Holding his breath, he carefully bent over the still unconscious soldier. He rolled him over onto his back and checked the zipper on his coat. Satisfied that it was secure, Saunders straightened, clasping the left epaulet of Stultmeyer's coat in his right hand.

"C'mon, Stultmeyer," he muttered to himself. "We're going home."



Caje squelched along at the head of the squad, forcing his mind to its job when it threatened to wander off. Behind him he could hear the others, picking their way along the path he had created. He grinned, knowing that no one could see him, as he heard Kirby's muttered cursing, letting him know that the BAR man had once again fallen in the mud. The smile quickly faded, however, as he worried about the sound traveling to other waiting ears. Caje was fairly certain that they were out of imminent danger from

German patrols, but that would be a fool's bet to play. Sound carried far in the rain silenced woods, so he kept his eyes and ears open, scanning the water-soaked horizon.

Suddenly, he stopped, hand raised, knowing, feeling, that the men behind him had hit the ground as soon as he gave the signal. He didn't need to look back, into the sudden silence, to know who was where. Littlejohn, finding the best cover he could, but sacrificing it if need be, in order to be in a better position to fire. Doc, a little further back, wanting to be available if needed, but wisely staying out of the way until then. Kirby, a little further out than the others, the hated mud forgiven as he now nestled into its perfect camouflage, bringing the BAR up to bear. Andersen—well, Andersen was the unknown. But Caje still didn't turn back, knowing that someone would make sure that Andersen kept his head down, his mouth shut, and his weapon ready.

Swinging his arm downwards, and waving to the others that he planned to check ahead, Caje slowly crept forward. His heart beat loudly in his own ears, but that had more to do with the earth's soaked silence than his own fear. Sure, he was always afraid, but that usually came later, when the mission was over and he was lying in his bedroll somewhere. It ruled his dreams, not his actions. No, in reality, Caje's heartbeat was within normal limits, refusing to be affected by the adrenaline now coursing through his veins. He needed to keep it that way, to keep control while maintaining his edge. It was like this every time, and he knew it was like this for the others. Calm, steady, aware, reactive—that was the way they had to be in the field. Racing hearts, shaking hands, labored breaths—that was for later, when all was said and done. As sure as Caje knew his squad mates' behavior right now, he knew that they all also experienced the latter emotions, he'd been through too many silent shattered nights with them not to know otherwise.

But now he had to concentrate on what was in front of him.

There, he heard it again. A solitary foot fall, a muffled grunt. Nothing more, but Caje could sense someone's strain. Slowly, he wriggled through the mud, rifle in his cradling elbows, breath slowed and silent.

What he saw made him stop cold.

Two men were standing in the tree line, covered in muck and filth. One was lying on the ground, back half-bent upwards, in the grasp of the other. That man was standing, straining forward, right hand looped in the first one's jacket, trying to pull him along behind him. But neither man was moving, and it was only the weight of the man

on the ground that was keeping the man standing on his feet from falling forward.

It was impossible to tell who the men were—German, American, civilian—and, for a moment, Cajé considered bypassing them without even finding out. The squad was tired, cold and hungry, they didn't need either two more kills or two more rescues to their credit. Then, something in the way the standing man moved his head, caught Cajé's attention. He stared, and then signaled behind him, hoping that Kirby would see and move up.

Kirby, always reliable despite the past few days, did. A moment later, he slid into place beside Cajé.

Cajé indicated the pair with his chin, and watched for Kirby's reaction. Kirby stared intently at the tableau before him, then, after a moment, eyes widening, looked back at Cajé. Cajé nodded, and motioned to Kirby to stay back and give him cover. As quickly as he dared, he made his way towards the odd apparition.

He had no idea how long he had been staggering through the woods, dragging Stultmeyer behind him. He knew it wasn't long, he knew he hadn't gone far. But it felt like forever, and shouldn't time be rewarded with distance? Truthfully, he knew in his deepest reach that he didn't have much left in him, but he refused to let that translate to his mind. As he moved on, step after staggering step, the world collapsed inwards on him. Sensation began to leave his hands and arms, as his legs lifted slowly, heavily, only to drop back down an inch or so ahead. Self-imposed blinders were replaced by real tunnel vision, sound ceased to exist. Soon nothing was left for him to see or hear, nothing with which to judge his progress—or lack thereof—by. All that was there was himself. Himself and his relentless drive to survive. It seemed that he had always been enmeshed in this struggle, this Sisyphean task. Eyes closed, leaning forward, held back only by the willing weight he grasped. Nothing else mattered except that he continue to move on, he couldn't even remember why.

Step.

Step.

Step.

Step.

As if from a long way he heard a voice, then voices. One came closer than the other. It was one he'd recognize, even in his sleep.

"Sarge! Sarge! Let go, we've got him now! Sarge, let go!"

"I am," he tried to say, but nothing came out save an unintelligible rasp.

More voices, then, suddenly, he was loosed from behind. For a split second he remained upright, swaying, then he crumpled forward, into Cajé's waiting arms.

Reaching the two men, hardly daring to believe himself, Cajé stopped in front of them. "Sarge? Sarge! It is you!" he breathed. Waving Kirby forward, Cajé grasped Saunders' arm and tried to pry Stultmeyer loose.

Saunders didn't even seem to realize Cajé was there, as he faltered forward another step.

"Sarge!" Kirby came trotting up, BAR crossed in front of him. "Well, c'mon, Cajé! Why the heck are ya just standing there?"

"I'm trying!" Cajé hissed. "I don't think he even knows we're here! Sarge!" He again tried to get Saunders' attention. Tugging on Stultmeyer's arm, he attempted to

free the unconscious soldier from his sergeant's grasp. "Sarge! Sarge! Let go, we've got him now! Sarge, let go!"

A hoarse wheeze made its way from Saunders as he stopped straining to move forward. But still he held tightly to Stultmeyer's jacket. He seemed unable to let go.

"Kirby!" said Cajé, "Cut him loose!"

Quickly, Kirby moved in, drawing his bayonet. Pulling Saunders' hand upwards, away from the fabric, he easily sliced the epaulet off the jacket. Saunders swayed momentarily, then pitched forward into Cajé, without a sound.

The sergeant had made himself useful enough, marking his time at King Company, Second Platoon, by making coffee. At one point, he had even answered the phone when Hanley was on another line and Brockmeyer had gone to drop off more paperwork. Other than that, he tried to stay out of the way. The afternoon was in a distinct lull, now that the rain had stopped. Mud covered the floor, tracked in by combat boots worn by checking sergeants. When the next pair pounded their tattoo on the floor, Hanley didn't even raise his head, letting Brockmeyer handle it. But this one was for him.

"Sir, Private Henderson from First Platoon reporting, sir." A baby faced, fuzz-cheeked boy, who couldn't have been more than sixteen, stood before Hanley.

Hanley looked up, puzzled. "Henderson, why are you reporting to me?" His pen lay motionless in his hand.

"Sir, my sergeant asked me to notify you that some of your men have come home. They were stopped at the outpost because they didn't know today's password, but one of the guards recognized a Private Kirby. My sergeant let them in because they had wounded with them. But he asked me to tell you sir, all due respect intended, that all your men will be held under guard, in the aid tent, until you have properly identified them."

Hanley was already on his feet, reaching for his helmet.

"How many wounded, soldier?" he asked brusquely, slapping the steel on his head with one hand.

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't know. My sergeant just gave me the one message." Henderson stood, wearily waiting to be dismissed.

Hanley cut him loose with a wave, as he strode out the door.

"Lieutenant? Lieutenant? Are these the men that Major Richardson is waiting for?" The silent sergeant in the corner stood up, calling after Hanley.

"Well, let's find out now, Sergeant, shall we?" Hanley's voice faded back, and the sergeant was on his way.

He lay there, floating, between darkness and questions. As often as he tried to fight his way to the surface, they were there for him, waiting.

How many...

Where are they...

What did you tell them...

He'd been recaptured, all his efforts gone for naught. Whatever happened to Stultmeyer, he didn't know. He couldn't stand it, yet he offered to them the same answers he had offered before: name, rank, serial number.

At times he heard voices talking over him. At one point he thought he heard

Hanley's voice, angry, protesting. He heard many, many voices throughout this whole thing, voices of the living, as well as the dead. All of them faded away soon enough, leaving him to the cold, hard truth—he was alone. Cold, tired, hurting and alone. And no one was coming to save him.

At one point the questions stopped, a hard face hovered over his. The stone voice was still talking, even if it wasn't demanding answers. Something about maybe he didn't say anything after all. Something about coming to see him again, later.

He feared later.

But after that there were no more questions.

And he slept.

When next he opened his eyes, it was to find himself in a small, dimly lit room. His body was stiff, sore and hurting, but the pain was less than he remembered from before. Slowly turning his aching head to either side, he saw that he was alone. He tried, and failed, to rise up off the cot he was on. All he succeeded in doing was dislodging the blankets that had been keeping him warm. As he watched them puddle to the floor, he thought longingly of the how nice the previously cursed wool had felt.

A noise, and then a medic entered the room. An American medic. Saunders closed his eyes in relief.

He was home.

"Hey, there, Sergeant." The medic bent over and picked up the blankets, expertly whipping them up, over, and onto Saunders. "Would you like some water?"

Without waiting for an answer, he slid a hand under Saunders' shoulders and slightly raised his head. Bringing a cup to his lips, he held it steady as Saunders drank what he could. When he could drink no more, the medic lay him back down on the cot.

"Now, try and stay awake, there, Sergeant. I'm going to go and get the doctor, so's he can give you the once over." The medic quickly slipped from the room, leaving Saunders to ponder all his unasked and unanswered questions alone.

But he was home.

They all trickled in to see him, one by one. Each brought something, and each left a part of himself behind. It was the only way they knew how to help a wounded comrade heal. Without realizing it, they also helped themselves. For, by helping their sergeant to mend, they also unwittingly began to repair the fractured structure of their squad and retying the threads that held them together. Their gifts were of little consequence, often intangible; it was what they unknowingly left that made the difference. But each also took something of their leader, whether they knew it or not.

Caje brought cigarettes and left steadfastness. The bond he shared with Saunders was not merely one of a soldier to his leader, nor was it due to the length of time they had served together. In truth, Caje couldn't explain it himself, but he knew that the time they had spent together had altered him in ways he never knew possible. Deep, basic changes, many of which he wouldn't discover for years, if ever at all. Some were good, some were bad, all were irrevocable. He knew that the direction he took, the choices he made, were in many ways due to his sergeant's silent guide. Caje left with a lightened step and a brighter outlook than he'd had in days.

Littlejohn brought himself, and that was what he left. Large, plodding, and ever faithful, Littlejohn had the ability to see things for what they were, but the hope to believe

the very best. He constantly experienced eternal hurt and bitter disappointment when man failed to live up to himself. No matter what he went through, he never lost his hope, but it was often sorely tested. It was a renewal of that hope that he took when he left.

Billy brought outdated copies of *Stars and Stripes* and *Yankee*, and left youthful confidence. Dropping the papers on the floor beside Saunders' bed, he lowered his still semi-shaky frame onto the ground. His pale face bespoke his own recent hospital stay, which had been mysteriously cut short. He had promised the lieutenant that his paperwork would catch up to them, but Hanley knew that he wouldn't be seeing it anytime soon, rather he'd be filling out a few forms about this himself. Supremely trusting of, but often puzzled by, his sergeant, Billy's quiet loyalty went a long way towards restoring Saunders' own confidence. When Billy left, he took the enveloping warmth that comes with the safety of home.

Doc brought remorse, and left contentment. His fathomless eyes, holding whispered secrets of the dead, now hid a few more, some new ones of his own. Quietly he visited, his soft, drawling presence giving to Saunders more than he took. Doc always did. When he left, it seemed as though something was missing from the room, and it took Saunders time to readjust his senses to it. Doc took relief, and his soul thanked him.

Two men were a little slower to show, as Saunders knew they would be. But eventually they came, for they knew they must.

Kirby brought guilt and left humor. Never speaking of what had transpired, he lit the cigarettes that Cajé had brought, making sure to take one or two himself. His eyes, his gestures, his conversational pauses, bespoke all that his words did not. Saunders absolved him the same way, with a tip of his head and a rarely seen smile. That, and a cigarette, was what Kirby took.

Hanley, when he came, brought his friendship. It was all that he had, and though he drew from it often, it still taxed his soul. Not one to be comfortable with open expression, Hanley showed what he could. It wasn't much, when it came down to it, but Saunders understood. A 'take care of yourself' tossed after his retreating back, a hand on his shoulder when issuing an impossible command, a silently offered cigarette—Saunders knew and understood what wasn't said, sometimes even better than Hanley. And that was all that either needed.

Hanley tossed a pack of cigarettes to Saunders, eyes going to the other packs nearby. "Brought you some cigarettes, Saunders, but it looks like you're in pretty good shape in that department."

A soft 'huh' escaped Saunders. "Yeah, there were a lot more before Kirby showed up."

Hanley grinned, teeth flashing in his pale, haggard face. He hadn't been sure what kind of reception he'd get. "So, how're you doing, Saunders?" he asked, dragging a small chair in the room closer to Saunders' cot.

"Fine, Lieutenant, you?" Saunders didn't look up as he asked this, instead he busied himself with lighting a cigarette and passing it to Hanley, then working on one for himself.

Hanley lowered himself into the chair, stretching his long legs out in front of him. Taking the proffered cigarette, he nodded his thanks. Staring into the distance, he bypassed Saunders' question, silently savoring his smoke. With a wince, he brought himself back to the room he was in, and looked over to see Saunders watching him, head tilted to one side, eyebrows raised. "Well, you look a lot better than when you first got here, at any rate," Hanley stated, sitting straighter in the chair.

Still, Saunders said nothing, then he slowly nodded his head.

Hanley sighed, and closed his eyes, rubbing them with his fingers. When he

blearily opened them again, he saw Saunders lying back on his cot, watching the cobwebs on the ceiling. So that was it, he thought. I'm shut out. Again.

Sighing, he left alone what he couldn't change. Another day, another time, he'd tackle this. He and Saunders had bolstered each other up through enough tough times, and for sure there were more to come. But when it came to letting their defenses down, each was as guarded as the enemy they were trying to rout. Perhaps one day there'd be a crack in someone, but not now, not today. Instead, Hanley put himself to the business at hand. Yet, in doing so, he realized, he was showing something to Saunders, for it wasn't everyone that he would clue in on these happenings.

"Saunders," he said, "they're not done. They'll be back."

Saunders turned his head. "Just who are 'they', Lieutenant?" he asked quietly, intensely. His eyes narrowed as he tried to divine what Hanley wasn't telling him.

Hanley looked down to his hands, holding the almost finished cigarette. Amazing how much distance a small amount of knowledge could put between friends.

"They were trying to debrief you from the mission, before you were fully able to, uh, make sense." Hanley wasn't sure how much of it Saunders knew or remembered—the denied medical care, the quarantine from the rest of the hospital, the constant, repeated questions posed to a man who was semi-conscious and uncaring.

"Yeah," said Saunders quietly, as if he'd read Hanley's thoughts, "I remember that."

"Saunders, I did what I could. I'm only a junior grade, not much clout there. Even Jampel had to get someone else to help us out. Finally G2 said they had what they needed, but they'd be back to re-cap later, when you were a little more coherent."

"Is that why I'm in isolation here, Lieutenant?"

"I guess so." Hanley dropped his cigarette to the floor and ground out the butt with the heel of his boot, knocking savagely at it. "I don't know if they changed their mind or what, but Major Carroll seemed pretty satisfied."

"They wanted to know if I had talked." It was a statement, not a question.

"I don't know what they wanted, Saunders. All I know is that they weren't letting anyone in to see you for a while, not even staff. I bluffed my way in, and had a few words with the major."

Saunders nodded. It had been Hanley that he'd heard.

Hanley continued. "Whatever they got out of you, and Stultmeyer, when he regained consciousness, seemed to make them happy. I'm willing to bet that they'll be stopping by to see you at some point, though."

Stultmeyer. Saunders wanted to kick himself.

"How's Stultmeyer, Lieutenant?" he asked.

Hanley lit another cigarette, then, with a quick glance, handed it to Saunders. "Stultmeyer is going to be okay. He has a pretty good skull fracture, but no permanent damage. They shipped him back to England a few days ago." Hanley chuckled. "Then they're transferring him to G2. Said he's pretty valuable. Carroll was a bit upset that his background wasn't picked up during basic."

Saunders grinned. He didn't know how much Stultmeyer would like his new assignment, but he did know that it probably was for the best.

"And you, sergeant, aren't going anywhere. I've been told that you'll be just fine and dandy, given a few more days here. So don't go trying to milk this one, else you'll end up in a reple deple somewhere."

Saunders yawned and stretched as much as his body would allow. "Milking it?" he snorted softly. "Lieutenant, I'm staying here forever. Clean sheets, no puddles, and let's not forget those little pills that let you sleep right through barrages. No, sir, Lieutenant, I'm staying right here." He spoke the last words through yet another yawn,

and rubbed his eyes.

"We'll just see about that, Saunders," said Hanley. He tipped in the rickety chair, eyes wandering over the smallish room that contained them. "We'll just see about that." Looking down, he saw that Saunders was sound asleep.

Rising quietly, Hanley left the room. And with him he took redemption, hope, and friendship.

end