

## Witness

by Doc II  
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No Man's Land by Eric Bogle (verse 3)

*Well, the sun's shining down on these green fields of France;  
The warm wind blows gently, the red poppies dance.  
The trenches have vanished long under the plow;  
No gas and no barbed wire, no guns firing now.  
But here in this graveyard it's still No Man's Land;  
The countless white crosses in mute witness stand  
To man's blind indifference to his fellow man.  
And a whole generation who were butchered and damned.*



Note: dialog contained within < > denotes the speaking of a foreign language, either French or German as will be apparent within the context of the scene.

#

Saunders lay on his belly under the bridge, chin resting on the back of his right hand. Several yellow butterflies drifted in the idle breeze, fragile wings bending in the currents and carrying them ever closer to the prone sergeant. He ignored them, shifting just enough to turn his left wrist and the watch strapped around it to his face. *Five minutes.* He'd promised the leader of the Maquis ten. *It felt more like twenty.* Sucking in a lungful of fragrant country air, Saunders forced his muscles to relax and ignored a persistent itch somewhere in the neighborhood of his right knee.

Behind him, deeper in the shadows of the stone bridge, lay the exhausted men of first squad. Despite the watchful demeanor of his NCO, Kirby dozed. Next to him, Cajé stared off down the river, dark eyes following its gentle meanderings. A fish jumped downstream, its silvery body a shimmering rainbow in the bright glare of the afternoon sun. The Cajun blinked, but otherwise remained motionless. Beyond the scout and Kirby, Littlejohn and Billy lurked in the darkness, shoved up against one another in the cramped space. As it was, Littlejohn's long legs stretched into the shallows and Nelson had his head on one side, his dented helmet resting against the underside of the stone buttress.

Saunders looked at his watch again. *Seven minutes.* He sighed, allowing himself the minor luxury of running his hand over his grimy face, knuckling the grit out of each eye and then scratching at the overgrown stubble on his chin. Earlier, on their journey to this place, he'd looked forward to a shave and a clean shirt. Now he'd settle for just losing the rising anxiety in his guts.

#

At nine minutes, Saunders tapped the crystal of his watch, frowning, and then leaned his head down to it. The butterflies were gone, leaving only a single dragonfly buzzing over the pools of water at the edge of the river. For a moment, Saunders followed its jerky flight, blue eyes narrowed in concentration as the steady ticking filled his ear. In the next instant, he was on his feet, Thompson ready in his hands, Cajé right behind him.

They heard feet pounding along the road, faltering and then picking up again. Saunders crouched in the long grass, waiting. Ten feet away, Cajé lay prone, sighting along the barrel of the Garand. The others remained under the bridge, weapons at the ready.

"Sergeant, Sergeant!" A young man skidded into view, his feet skating out from under him as he tried to stop short. He landed hard on his outstretched arms, and rolled into the thick grass lining the road. Palms raw and bloody, he climbed to his knees. He held his arms out imploringly, eyes wide and full of tears. Dark stains spattered the front of his shirt and pants, which clung damply to him.

Saunders glanced back at the Cajun, indicating the Frenchman, and then whistled softly to the men under the bridge. As they climbed the bank, he listened carefully to Cajé's rapid translation, fingers tightening on the submachine gun in his arms as the languages tumbled over each other, the young man not waiting for Cajé to catch up.

Without command, the squad set out for the village, automatically maintaining their intervals, but running all the same. The young man remained behind, sinking to the ground and finally succumbing to the sobs he'd tried to prevent. As the footsteps of the soldiers faded away, he rocked back and forth, cap squeezed between his fingers, dark hair ruffling in the afternoon breeze.

#

Saunders crouched in the scant protection of the doorway, his heart hammering in his chest. He gulped air, trying desperately to slake the fire in his lungs and still the trembling of his hands. He knew he'd be useless with the Thompson and yet still he gripped it, a cold talisman in a situation that had grown rapidly out of control. *Out of HIS control.* Swallowing hard, he glanced over his shoulder, gratified beyond measure to see his men still following orders, holding their positions behind whatever cover they could find.

Caje caught his attention, pointing with his narrow chin up the street at something Saunders couldn't see. The scout shrugged, his eyes dark beneath the brim of his helmet. Leaning out from behind the overturned cart, he took a quick look past the sergeant's position, and then just as quickly returned to relative safety. He shrugged again, shaking his head slightly.

Shrill screaming rent the air.

Saunders knew something was up the second they approached the bombed out village. It appeared to be deserted, but that was the beauty of the whole setup. To appear to be something it wasn't. What the town had been months ago before the Germans shelled it into piles of rubble no longer mattered. For the last month it was the stronghold of a small band of resistance fighters and their families. A group that went about its business as silently as poison gas, striking and then vanishing in the rising wind. Saunders and first squad had joined up with them for a mission, using the combined intelligence of the Allies' military leaders and the feral Frenchmen to create a plan so audacious no one would expect it.



Except now, Saunders was struck numb by the knowledge that not only had someone anticipated their actions but had managed to seek revenge before the GIs and the Maquis had even gone to ground. He'd held his men back at the bridge while the Frenchmen had gone on, trying to come up with a plan. Now, he forced the squad to rely on their training and experience, leapfrogging from one doorway to an uneven pile of twisted metal to the ruins of an old church.

The French had no such discipline. Hearts in their throats, they'd run for the ruins they'd called home where they'd left their families. The screaming had started almost immediately.

And still Saunders held his men under tight control while his own nerves threatened to unman him. He knew their best chances at defeating an unseen enemy lay with what had worked in the past. And yet he trembled with the slowness of the pace. And with the knowledge that he'd left a man behind in the village with the families, deliberately ordering him to stay.

Rising on unsteady legs, Saunders signaled the men on, from one doorway to the next. He filled his lungs with air and ran ahead of them, almost blind with panic.

#

Christian stood on the crumbling steps of what had once been a candy store. The first few nights he'd slept there, he'd awoken, stomach rumbling, with a small boy's desire for chocolate. He'd laughed with his wife, Manon, that their unborn child would arrive in the world with a sweet tooth, despite the deprivations suffered by all of France's citizens. Now, as Christian stood before the open doorway, the keening of his men behind him in the village fading to no more than a hollow hum echoing inside his head, he took a deep breath. No longer did the elusive scent of burnt sugar fill his nostrils, as it had the first night they'd stayed here, without even a single candle for fear the Germans were watching. The aromas of his childhood, nutmeg, cinnamon, vanilla, which had flavored every clandestine meeting held in the basement storeroom amidst the ruined candy-making machinery, were all overpowered by the throat burning smell of old pipes and older francs.

One hand over his nose and mouth, Christian climbed the few steps, his worn leather shoes dragging through a sticky substance he didn't immediately identify. At the threshold, he paused, shoulders hunched and tense.

"Christian!"

The Frenchman remained where he was, but turned, watching the American sergeant deploy his men throughout the street and then walk toward him with such slow deliberation that Christian wanted to hurl himself from the steps and beat the GI senseless. Instead, he bit hard on his lower lip, and waited for the man who had become not only an ally but a friend. They'd been through a lot the last few weeks, the American and the resistance leader. Knowing that his life would be forever changed the moment he entered the candy store, Christian waited on the man whose presence had precipitated that change. It only seemed appropriate they walk in together.

#

The little storefront was empty. The pile of broken timber in the corner seemed undisturbed, as were the oddly intact rows of neat shelving against the back wall. Saunders crouched in the doorway for a moment, blue eyes wide in the dim light as he searched for threats, for targets. Nothing moved and he edged further into the room, Christian right on his heels despite the sergeant waving him back.

As he moved toward the door behind the counter, Saunders allowed his gaze to sweep the room once more, stopping suddenly as the changing angle of light through the window revealed that which he couldn't have seen from the front: boot prints, dozens of them crisscrossing the room, and long sliding marks that extended from the main door to the backroom. Even in the waning afternoon sun, Saunders could tell the color of those marks, a hue he'd have no trouble recognizing the rest of his life.

"Manon!" Christian cried out in despair, catching Saunders off-balance with a hard shove, and pushed thru the ragged curtain that still hung between the rooms.

Saunders regained his equilibrium, the Thompson once more secured in his hands, and followed the Frenchman into the back room. The rough fabric of the curtain caressed his face and he flinched away from it, raising one arm to fling it aside. As it dropped back into place behind him, Saunders collided with Christian, who stood stock still only a pace into the room.

“Mon dieu.” *Scarcely a whisper.*

The sergeant took a step to the left, boots sliding in the thick gelatinous substance coating the floor. An overwhelming odor of copper filled the air, filtering insidiously down the back of his throat and threatening to choke him. Beside him, Christian trembled, thick tears flowing unheeded down his white cheeks and soaking into his collar. Saunders pulled his gaze away from the horrified resistance man, and turned to survey the room.

The walls were drenched in blood, striped and stippled and spattered. Even the ceiling had large irregular dark stains in places. What glass had been left in the windows after the German shelling was now shattered over the floor and ground into powder in places by the bloody boot prints. A large eyebolt had been screwed into a ceiling rafter, supporting a hangman’s noose that swung gently back and forth in the breeze flowing thru the empty windows. It was tied off at the base of the staircase, where a single chair sat, placed at an angle for the best possible view of whatever horrors had been staged there. A man still sat there, ankles tied securely to the legs of the chair, and hands roped together behind his back. His head hung down, chin resting on his chest. His shirt and pants were liberally covered in blood and a puddle of it spread around his boots – his GI issue boots.

“DOC!” Saunders flung himself across the room, dropping to one knee in the sticky mess. He reached out, fingers stopping just short of touching the medic. “Doc?”

Doc’s chest suddenly heaved, and he drew in a ragged breath. He raised his head so slowly that it wasn’t clear at first that he was even moving, other than the tremors that rippled down his neck muscles. The trembling spread to his shoulders and then down the rest of his body, until the chair was audibly rocking on the floor. His jaw was working, but only guttural sounds came from his throat. As his head came up, both Christian and Saunders could see that his eyes were tightly closed, the left swollen and purple.

Saunders shook his own head, realizing that the bruise had taken at least a day to ripen to that dark red color. *They must have come right after we left!* He pulled out his knife and deftly cut through the ropes binding Doc’s ankles. Reversing the blade in his hand, he passed it to Christian, who freed the medic’s hands. Doc’s arms fell to his sides, his fingers pasty grey.

“Please...no more...please.” Doc’s hoarse plea was almost inaudible. His head lolled on his shoulders. “Please...please...no more.” A single tear slid down his cheek, tracking through the dirt and the blood.

Realizing with a start that he hadn’t cleared the building, Saunders placed a gentle hand on Christian’s shoulder, pulling the man’s attention to him. “Stay with him, I’ll check upstairs.”

The Frenchman’s eyes widened in shock and he glanced up, a plea of his own unspoken. He nodded, and swallowed against the sudden dryness in his throat. He handed Saunders the knife, and then moved closer to Doc, hoping that his presence would be comforting.

“Please, God, take me instead...”

#

He crept up the stairs, left shoulder brushing against the wall and ankles aching with the exaggerated slowness of his stride. He wanted to take the steps two at a time. *Stick with your training.* Saunders clenched his teeth against the rage rising in him. He was following one of the red trails, a fairly wide slide pattern overlaid with droplets of blood. As he approached the top, the path led into the larger of the two bedrooms, out of his line of sight. From the window at the landing, he could hear men shouting, sobbing.

It only took a minute to clear the smaller room. It had no closet, no furniture, nowhere at all to hide. Now Saunders approached the other room, the slick, coppery smell stronger in his nostrils. This room, too, had no furniture, save for the lumpy palette on the floor. He took a step closer, the Thompson dropping away to dangle from one hand. Sagging against the wall, Saunders closed his eyes, wishing with his entire soul that he didn't have to go back down those stairs and tell Christian what he had found: that the two beaten and bloody corpses on the palette were the man's wife and newborn child.

He sank to his heels, his hands coming up to cover his face. *Manon!* Dark haired and dark eyed, she had welcomed the squad as if they were family, knowing the danger they were all courting, but willing to risk everything for her country and her beloved husband. And now she was dead, along with the much awaited child. Saunders opened his eyes for a moment, and studied the tiny body. And then shut them again, pressing the palms of both hands into them until he saw sparks. How could he walk back down those stairs and tell Christian that not only was his family dead but that Saunders couldn't even tell if the infant had been a boy or a girl?

#

They were all dead. Eight adult women, including two mothers of resistance men, plus five children. *No, six including Christian's newborn.* Saunders corrected himself with an abrupt shake of his head, shaggy mop of blonde hair flopping in his eyes. He shoved it back abruptly, wiped the sweat from his forehead and replaced his helmet. Not that it made any difference. Within thirty seconds he felt hot, itchy and dirtier than he could stand. His pants legs were stiff with dried blood. He could only imagine how Doc felt. *Doc.* Saunders sighed, knowing he'd avoided the medic long enough. After ascertaining that no one remained alive in the village, Saunders had hustled them all out, despite the protests of Christian and his men that their women needed proper burials. Later, later, he'd promised, knowing that the Krauts had to be waiting for their return, watching and waiting.

A mile outside the village, perimeter watched by Littlejohn, Nelson, Kirby and two of the resistance men, Saunders finally felt a little of the tension leave him. *But none of the despair.* He climbed to his feet and moved over to the small creek where Cajé was attempting to wash the worst of the grime from Doc's face. The medic leaned back against a tree, propped where Cajé set him. Saunders had been gratified to discover that the black eye seemed to be the worst of his injuries, rope burns aside, but Doc was almost catatonic. He hadn't opened his eyes, mumbling his unanswered requests of his creator until his voice gave out. Even now he sat so still that Saunders thought he must be asleep. A glance at Cajé's worried face and a quick negative shake of the Cajun's head told him otherwise. As Cajé ran the wet rag over Doc's bruised eye, the medic flinched away, the muscles in his arms tensing as if he would fend off the water, but lacked the strength to do so. Cajé caught Saunders' eye, shrugging slim shoulders.

Kirby appeared out of the brush. He hitched the BAR into a more comfortable position and dropped to one knee next to Cajé, staring into Doc's face but addressing the sergeant. "No



sign of nobody, Sarge. Littlejohn an' me, we backtracked all the way to the village, went around an' then back again. Nothin'." He fell silent for a moment, brow furrowed in unaccustomed deliberation. "The Frenchies, they want blood." Kirby glanced at the creek where Doc's shirt twisted and turned in the current, anchored at the collar by a smooth rock. Downstream, the water ran red. He averted his gaze and found himself staring straight into Saunders' clear blue eyes.

Saunders didn't look away. "Can you blame 'em?"

Caje's hands froze for a moment, dark eyes not giving anything away, particularly not the shock he felt at this question from his by-the-book sergeant. He dropped the rag into the grass and sat back, drying his palms on his thighs. He could hear the low, urgent murmurs of a conversation between Christian and his men, some twenty yards away upstream.

"What are we gonna do, Sarge?" The Cajun kept his tone deliberately neutral, knowing that his own emotions were floating dangerously close to the surface. He reached into Doc's rucksack and pulled out a pack of sulfa powder, sprinkling some over his fingers, and then gently applied it to the torn skin surrounding the medic's eye. Doc turned his head away, grimacing. "Shh, it's okay, Doc, just gotta fix this."

Not trusting his voice, Saunders just sat and watched his scout, seeing not Doc but a small girl, only three years old, crying over a skinned knee. Caje had scooped her up, whispering words of comfort in the child's native French. Little Josette had taken a shine to Caje the day they'd arrived in the village, although Saunders knew the Cajun was just as smitten. Josette's mother was dead, killed by the Nazis. Her father, Laurent, took care of her basic needs, but focused on destroying the Boche in his grief. Caje gave her silliness and taught her to play. He made puppets out of Kirby's socks, and flew kites with Doc's bandages for tails. In a few short days, Josette had learned to laugh. And now her mutilated body lay wrapped in a sheet, rowed up with the other children.



Saunders closed his eyes, forcing the images from his mind.

"Yeah, what are we gonna do, Sarge?" Kirby stood, restless energy emanating from him like heat from a stove. He rested his forearms on the long barrel of the BAR and studied the Maquis in their tight knot under an ancient tree. Once in awhile, one of them would look up, face hidden under a cap pulled low over the brow, and cast an eye around, ending with the Americans, then return to the group. Kirby frowned, wondering just why the very men he'd trusted with his life last night now made him itchy and anxious.

Hands on his knees, Saunders heaved himself upright, his weary muscles screaming in protest. "We're moving out. First light."

"Moving out? But...what about the..." Kirby waved his hands in useless circles.

Saunders pulled a single, half-crushed cigarette from one pocket, his lighter from another. His eyes took on a dangerous glint, staring down the BAR man. Cigarette lit, Saunders took a deep drag and held the smoke in his lungs for a long moment. Finally, he blew it out again and dropped his gaze to the medic.

"What about what, Kirby? We did our job."

The Cajun stood abruptly, fishing Doc's shirt from the creek, and twisted it in his strong hands. "I'm staying." Water spiraled from the fabric, splashing back into the currents.

Saunders' shoulders dropped and he half-turned away, anger pulling his features into sharp angles. "We're moving out, Cajé, you heard me."

"I'm not leaving Josette like that." He shook out the shirt and tossed it over a bush. Turning to face Saunders, Cajé crossed his arms over his chest, dark eyes cold and defiant. A flush of red bloomed on each cheek, and he dropped his chin a little, all the while maintaining eye contact with his sergeant.

Saunders removed the cigarette from between his lips, smoke slipping out with his words. "We have to. The Krauts are just waiting for us to do something stupid." He let the full weight of his gaze fall on each of the men in turn, stopping at Cajé. "We've been through this before. You take the tags, you move out. We take time to bury 'em, they'll be burying us."

Cajé merely stared back, mouth one thin line and eyes narrowed in tightly contained rage. "Thing is, Sergeant, they don't have tags." His fingers curled around his own dog tags, rubbing his thumb along the rolled edge. "Krauts treated them like they were nobody. If we leave them like...like that, we're no better than they are."

*And just how do I answer that?* Saunders waited out the silence, aware of the Frenchmen gathering behind his scout, their faces slack with grief. They murmured softly to each other, and to Cajé, and the Cajun answered them in their own language, not bothering to translate for Saunders. Kirby stood in frank bewilderment, neck swiveling from his NCO to his squad mate and back again. Even the creek seemed to up its tempo, its water tumbling ever faster over the smooth rocks.

"Sarge?"

They all froze, not quite believing what their ears were so clearly hearing. Cajé moved first, shoving past Saunders and kneeling in front of the medic. Doc's eyes remained stubbornly closed, hands still lying useless in the grass. He shivered, though, as the rising wind blew his wet hair off his forehead and plastered the thin undershirt damply to his chest.

Saunders crouched next to Doc, holding out a canteen until Cajé snatched it from him and wet a clean rag, squeezing it over the medic's parched lips. Doc tried to swallow, gagging and coughing until he cleared his throat.

"Those women...the kids...they didn't give up a thing, Sarge. If we don't...take care of them...don't honor them ...it'll be for nothing." Doc lifted his face, turning slowly toward his sergeant. With a grunt of pain he opened his eyes, blinking hard a few times before focusing on the men around him.

Kirby and the men of the Maquis, leaning in to hear the hoarsely whispered words, flinched away at the sight of Doc's eyes, the sclera completely blood red against the vivid blue of his irises.

"If we don't do this, nothin' will ever be enough."

#

The fog threaded between the trees, dragging the night behind it and leaving the men damp and more than a little edgy. Littlejohn and Nelson divided up the few rations they had left, sharing equally with the Frenchmen, who in turn offered a few stale crusts of bread. Cajé and Kirby, out on the perimeter, came close to shooting each other more than once as they passed on their recons. Saunders, covering the west side with Christian and several of his men, finally



gave them set positions, settling himself down with as good a view of the road from the village as he was going to get. The fact that he could only see ten feet before the fog closed in wasn't something he could do anything about. There was little comfort in knowing the Krauts were equally handicapped.

Despite all the impassioned words from his men and from the grief-stricken husbands and fathers and sons, Saunders still planned on moving out at first light. He had no answer for Doc, other than he knew it would be a disaster of monumental size. The Maquis had surrounded the hapless medic, inundating him with questions in a language he didn't understand and that he wouldn't, or maybe couldn't, answer anyway. He'd drawn his knees to his chest, wrapped his arms around them and dropped his head down, effectively walling himself off. *And hadn't said another word since.*

Saunders sighed, shifting from one hip and elbow to the other. Somewhere high in the heavens, a full moon hung. Without the fog, visibility would have been excellent. The sergeant couldn't help but wonder if that had figured in the Germans' plans. The whole thing smacked of premeditation. He guessed that somewhere in the elaborate chain that linked the underground together, there must be a mole. Looking over one shoulder, Saunders almost convinced himself that he could see Christian, efficient German submachine gun, stolen from a body the Frenchman himself had knifed, ready in hands that weren't quite steady. He knew that most of these men were related, brothers, cousins, in-laws. That one of them might be a collaborator who had orchestrated this massacre chilled him more than the dropping temperature.

#

Caje watched Kirby's wiry figure materialize out of the mist, scattered shadows moving toward each other and then coalescing into the BAR man. He held up one hand in greeting, gaze already shifting away from that which he recognized to the darkness beyond.

"You see anything?" Kirby knelt in the wet grass, one hand automatically reaching for a cigarette, and then regretfully changing course to scratch his left ear. The fog closed around them, muffling the night noises.

The Cajun snorted softly, recognizing the objective of Kirby's movements. He glanced over his shoulder, listening intently, before turning back to his squad mate. "Yeah, I saw Hitler go by, riding on a pony."

Kirby blinked. He leaned in closer, studying the somber lines of Caje's face. He'd been with the scout when they'd discovered Josette's sad little body, and watched him fall to his knees in shock. It was Kirby who'd found the quilt and covered the girl, and who'd coaxed Caje to his feet. Now Kirby wondered if Caje wasn't losing what had to be a tenuous hold on his emotions, or even his sanity. "Hitler, huh? On a pony? Did he stick a feather in his cap?"

One eyebrow arched up, then quickly settled back into place as Caje shook his head. He consulted his watch, and rose into a crouch, one shoulder braced on the nearest tree. "Time to move out."

Before Kirby could reply, the Cajun was gone, vanishing into the fog as if he'd never existed. Kirby sighed, squinting into the darkness. Reaching down, he flexed the toe of his right boot up and down, trying to relieve the aching pain in his foot. All he managed to accomplish was to send pins and needles up his ankle. Glancing at his own timepiece, Kirby sighed, and then hitched the BAR into a more comfortable position.

“Glad I didn’t ask him if Hitler called it macaroni.” His voice trailed off as he, too, disappeared into the gloom.

#

Littlejohn lay on his side, head pillowed on one arm. Nelson sat next to him, munching on tinned biscuits and making an inordinate amount of noise, considering the danger lurking in the night. As the younger man dug into his pockets, producing yet another can, Littlejohn cleared his throat, and grabbed the offending object out of Nelson’s unresisting hands.

“Can’t you just lie down and try and get some rest? We gotta relieve Kirby and Cajé in an hour.” He tucked the biscuits into his jacket and sat up, scrubbing at his sweaty hair and plopping his helmet back on his head. Yawning hugely, he stretched out his long arms, almost knocking Nelson over backward. “Sorry.”

Billy squinted in the darkness, staring at the dim figure only a few feet away. “Do ya think he’s gonna ever talk again, Littlejohn?”

“I dunno. But I bet he can still hear, don’t you?” Littlejohn cuffed Nelson lightly on the shoulder. He rolled to his hands and knees and scuttled over to the old tree where the medic sat cross-legged in the deep grass, chin resting on his chest.

He wore an odd variety of GI-issue and home-spun French civilian clothing, his own still damp from Cajé’s laundering. Despite the layers, Doc shivered, his teeth clicking and grinding against one another. His arms hung loosely from his shoulders, hands turned palm up on his knees as if in supplication. Saunders’ canteen rested in his lap, and a small pile of untouched rations sat in front of him.

Littlejohn figured he hadn’t moved since Cajé had stuffed him into the borrowed clothing and parked him by the ancient oak. “Doc?” He flinched at the sound of his own voice, tremulous and overly loud in the fog-banked glade. “Doc?” The shivering died away, for just a moment, then resumed. Littlejohn shook his head, backing slowly away, and then sat next to Nelson again.

Aware of Billy’s questioning gaze, he shrugged his shoulders, still watching the silent medic.

“He’s just gotta talk.” Nelson leaned forward, absently patting his own pockets in a futile search for the biscuits that Littlejohn had appropriated. “I mean, if he doesn’t talk, how’s he gonna ask where we hurt?”



#

Beads of moisture rolled off the barrel of the Thompson, reappearing almost as fast as Saunders wiped them off. The fog parted before him, step after careful step, as he paused to listen with ears strained from the hours of muffling silence. Underfoot, he felt the slight slide of his left boot on packed earth and angled to the right, staying in the shelter of the forest. Not even the Krauts would be dumb enough to approach on the road, but Saunders would be damned if he’d allow himself to be caught out there.

A shadow flickered in his peripheral vision, and Saunders dropped to one knee, staring blindly into the grey haze. Holding his breath, he flanked left, ducking under a dead tree that leaned at an angle against its brothers. The shadow moved again, materializing into Kirby whose dark eyes were wide with apprehension. The business end of the BAR never wavered, though, and Saunders quickly raised one hand to signal the wiry soldier.

Kirby hunkered down, letting his knees take the weight of the BAR. He rolled his wiry shoulders in undisguised relief. "What's shakin', Sarge?" He batted at a wisp of fog floating past his nose. "I can't see nothin' in this soup."

Saunders removed his helmet and wiped a fine layer of perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve. Despite the chill in the air, he was drenched in sweat from head to toe. The momentary lull in activity allowed the cold to sink into his bones, and he shivered, although even he couldn't determine if it was the temperature or the abysmal conditions. Turning his wrist, he stared at his watch in the ghostly light cast by the moon through the fog.

"I've got oh-four-hundred." Saunders sighed, closing his eyes for a moment before continuing. "It's almost dawn. I know they're out there."

Kirby shoved his sleeve back down after checking his watch. He turned up the collar of his jacket and rearranged his suspender straps, hitching the BAR into a more accessible position. Peering past Saunders, he slowly drew himself up, leaning on a tree to maintain the balance his exhausted body seemed to have forgotten. "That way's the road, huh?"

"Yeah. Luc should be about a hundred yards past that." Saunders stood, too, reaching out to slap Kirby lightly on the back as he passed him. He turned, watching the BAR man trudge away. "Oh, and Kirby?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't let him shoot you."

Kirby looked back, expecting to see at least a ghost of a grin on his sergeant's face. Saunders stood there, Thompson resting lightly across his arms, his eyes in shadow. He raised the barrel of the submachine gun slightly in a half salute, and then turned away, the fog obliterating all trace of him. Kirby shivered, the night inexplicably colder than it had been moments before. Shaking his head, he took off, setting one aching foot in front of the other.

#

One knee pressed into the damp earth, Cajé stared into the mist. He glanced over his shoulder, and then rose silently to his feet, circling back toward the copse of trees where he'd last seen young Luc. Saunders had improvised the perimeter defense, leaving half the members of the resistance band at set intervals, and the rest joining the GIs in patrolling the lonely woods. Barely noticing the passage of his own boots through the loamy undergrowth, Cajé cursed the fog's ability to steal his hearing, knowing all the while that their enemies would be in the same predicament. He'd thought he'd heard a small outcry, somewhere behind him. He'd only left Luc a few moments ago, *surely not...?*

He almost ran smack into the thick trunk of the hundred year old fir that marked Luc's position as the fog shifted and turned back on him once more. Ducking away from it, Cajé stumbled over something on the ground, something that hadn't been there only five minutes prior. He caught himself with one hand on the tree and reached with the other, tentative fingers making contact with rough, home-spun fabric. It only took a moment for him to identify the body

as that of the Frenchman, his throat cut so deeply he was almost decapitated. In the next instant, Cajé was gone, running silently through the forest.

#

Something woke Doc with a start, heart hammering in his chest. He hadn't thought he'd be able to sleep at all, ever again. But exhaustion took its toll, dragging him down to a place he couldn't escape, a dark world of endless screams and rivers of blood. Now wide awake, he stared with aching eyes into the white fog, trying to make sense of the shifting shadows. Rocking forward to his knees, he then stood, swaying as waves of vertigo swept over him.

Before him, Nelson dozed, bent over his knees, M1 at his feet.

"Billy, wake up!" Doc shook the kid, wincing at the aching pain that traveled from wrist to shoulder with every movement. With growing urgency, he circled the tiny glade, moving from tree to tree with unaccustomed clumsiness. Behind him, Nelson stirred, and Doc quickly returned to him.

"We gotta move, they're here, I, we..." The medic bent and picked up the M1, swearing as it tumbled from his nerveless fingers, and scooped it up again, shoving it into Nelson's hands. Grabbing the kid's elbow, he hauled him to his feet. "We gotta go!"

Nelson crouched automatically, still half asleep but used to following orders no matter his level of consciousness. His hands slid over the familiar contours of the rifle, fingers finding the safety, the trigger guard, and checking that the clip was in place. He blinked owlishly, stifling a yawn. "Where we goin', Doc?"

The medic looked back at the kid, suddenly aware that his own place in this world was no longer somewhere toward the back. Without hesitation, Doc took the point, plunging into the forest. He didn't look back, trusting that Nelson's training and hard-won survival in this God-forsaken war would keep him from questioning Doc's decision.

With a small sigh, Nelson followed him.

#

Kirby heard the footsteps, even with fog-muffled ears. He stepped back into the sheltering boughs of a huge pine, ignoring the rain of needles down the back of his neck and the slow drip of condensation sliding off the branches and pinging on the top of his helmet. He slid his index finger inside the trigger guard, thumbing the safety off. He fought to control his breathing, swallowing hard and holding each breath as long as he could. Tremors danced along his muscles. The BAR weighed a thousand pounds and he wondered if he'd be able to aim the blasted thing, let alone apply enough pressure to fire it.

*There!* The sound of boots skidding on the fine gravel of the roadbed slewed him around, and he went to one knee, holding the BAR in one hand and shoving branches out of the way with the other. A figure came into view, unsure of itself, stumbling to a walk and looking back the way it came. Kirby's finger tightened on the trigger and he felt his nerves settle, pulse fast but steady, circulating adrenaline through his body. As he brought the sight to bear on the man....

“Littlejohn!” Kirby almost dropped the BAR as he shoved the barrel skyward to avoid plugging his squad mate with a dozen rounds of automatic fire. He reached out from the protection of the pine, curling his fingers into Littlejohn’s jacket and hauled him in, dropping them both to the ground.

“What the hell are you doin’, wanderin’ around like that? I ‘bout shot you, you dumb ox.”

Littlejohn stared back, eyebrows twitching and his mouth working. His hands jumped up and down in meaningless gesticulation.

The BAR man leaned in closer, and suddenly smelled an odor he’d forgotten a thousand lives ago. *A jar of pennies he’d been saving to purchase a bike, pennies rubbed smooth from hours of patient counting.* His hands had carried the same scent for days, despite his mother’s insistence that he take a bath. Kirby shook his head, banishing the memory, and roughly cuffed the big man’s shoulder.

“What’s wrong?”

Littlejohn looked down at the rifle in his arms and hugged it tighter to his chest. “That kid. Alain. He’s dead.” He swallowed as he looked up again, eyes lost to the shadows beneath the brim of his helmet. “Knife. He never saw it coming, jus’ lyin’ there...”

Kirby was already on his feet, shoving the pine branches out of his way and stepping into the road. Behind him, he could hear Littlejohn swearing as the tree snapped back into place, raining needles over his head. He rolled his shoulders and resettled the weight of the BAR.

“Come on, we gotta find Sarge and the others.” Kirby waited the space of one heartbeat and then set off, not looking back to see if Littlejohn followed.

#

Caje and Saunders crouched at the edge of the small clearing, anxiety skating along their nerve endings and leaving them shaking and shaken. While the scout squinted uselessly into the drifting fog, Saunders’ attention was fixed on the small pile of rations and the abandoned canteen at the base of the oak.

“I told them to stay here.”

The words were no louder than a thought, and Caje glanced briefly at his sergeant, unsure if the man had actually spoken. The look of frustration on Saunders’ face confirmed it. Sinking even lower behind the sheltering undergrowth, Caje allowed his chin to rest for a moment on his upraised forearm. A growing ache bloomed in his chest, forcing him to finally recognize the fear he’d been denying all afternoon. He’d convinced himself that he was experiencing a fierce anger that could only be relieved by an act of revenge. That desire for vengeance still lingered, but now it was fueled by an equal amount of blind horror. Caje knew he’d never forget the sight of the child’s mutilated body nor would he forgive himself for not seeking out the perpetrators of such a cowardly act. Saunders may have given the order to move out in the morning, but the night had given Caje his chance. He glanced over at the sergeant, waiting for him to signal his intentions. For now, Caje was willing to follow orders. As for later, time would tell.

#

The whispers grew, echoing off the fog banks until they seemed to totally surround the two men crouching in a shallow ravine just off the river. Doc pulled his knees to his chest, in both an attempt to make himself smaller and to be in a position to readily scramble to his feet. The damp earth pressing against his back had sapped his strength in a surprisingly short length of time, although he could no longer tell how long he and Nelson had hidden there. It may have been only five minutes or as long as twenty. Doc shoved back the threadbare cuff of Christian's borrowed sweater, calloused fingers sliding over his bare wrist yet again as he sought the watch he no longer possessed.

Dirt cascaded into the gully, falling onto Doc's upturned face. He quickly looked down, resisting the urge to spit out the loamy earth from his mouth. Stretching out one aching arm, he gripped Nelson's shoulder, squeezing once in an effort to keep the young man from panicking.

<"Damn fog is getting thicker.">

Nelson jumped and Doc squeezed the kid's shoulder again, hoping the message would be conveyed. He fought to keep his breathing under control, despite the adrenaline surging through his body. Harder still was resisting the urge to look up, knowing that a German soldier stood on the edge of the ravine, smoking by the smell of it.

<"Dawn is coming, be patient.">

Now it was Doc's turn to jump, great shuddering spasms that jerked his arms and legs like a puppet on a string. Nelson grabbed the medic's boots and hugged them to his chest, trying to get more of his weight over the man before the Krauts realized that the wind couldn't account for all the movement of the bushes.

As the voices moved off into the fog, Doc threw Billy off, backing away from him and wrapping his arms around his knees. He shut his eyes for an instant and then immediately opened them again, more agitated than before. *That voice.* He knew he'd hear it in his dreams for the rest of his life.

*"Watch closely, medic, and remember. You are the only witness to history! Keep your eyes open and watch closely..."*

#

Kirby crouched at the top of the embankment, one hand absently massaging his right ankle while the other flapped at Littlejohn to join him. With a stealth that took him by surprise, the lanky private covered the last few yards and knelt next to Kirby.

"Whadya think they're doin'?"

Littlejohn simply shook his head. Below them several members of the Maquis band conferred in urgent whispers accompanied by frantic hand waving.

"Let's get down there." Kirby whistled softly, a birdcall painstakingly taught the Americans by the Frenchmen over the last week. Shifting his weight, he allowed his feet to slip out from under him, and slid down the incline on his rump. Behind him, Littlejohn copied the maneuver, cannoning into Kirby at the bottom.

The tall, dark-haired Christian hauled them apart, silencing them with one finger against his lips. He whispered to his men, dispatching them in two pairs into the woods. After a



moment, he gripped Kirby's arm, pulling him with him as he headed down-river toward a small bridge, Littlejohn bringing up the rear. They ducked underneath, and Christian scuttled to the far side, staring out into the still night before returning to the two GIs.

"They've killed Luc and Alain. *The bastards!* I've not seen or heard a thing. I sent the others to find your men. We don't stand a chance split up like this." Christian's hands patted down his pockets, finding several clips for his rifle. Nimble fingers checked that they were full, and he then slid them into his shirt where they'd be more accessible.

Kirby simply stared back at the man. Christian's voice had been as calm as if he'd been ordering lunch, even as he cursed the Germans. With a glance at Littlejohn, who had turned his back to them both and was keeping watch, Kirby frowned, shaking his head.

"I got a bad feelin' about this."

#

Four resistance men and two Americans skirted along the road, staying just inside the tree line. Trusting Cajé on point, Saunders dropped back to walk next to Etienne, Christian's younger brother. Keeping his voice lower than a whisper, the sergeant laid out his plan to the man, trusting him to translate it for the other three.

"Four hundred yards up, we'll cut north, cross the river at the weir, and then follow upstream, staying well away from the water. We'll meet up with Christian at the bridge in, oh—" Saunders consulted his watch in the weird half light. "About thirty minutes."

Etienne nodded, looking away from the sergeant. His Gallic profile, well-defined cheekbones, strong nose and full lips, made him a handsome man. A moment later he turned back, and the effect was shattered at the sight of his ruined eye and mutilated ear. He nodded to Saunders and slipped back to his own men.

Saunders watched him go, thinking not for the first time of his own younger brother, Chris. Chris the dare-devil. Chris who worshipped his big brother and would do anything to be just like him. Chris who could have been Etienne and captured by the Germans, tortured for information he didn't have.

Cajé paused, looking back at his sergeant. At Saunders' signal, he angled north, leading them all deeper into the woods. Still no sign of the blasted Krauts, other than the two bodies left sprawled in the dark. Cajé shivered, despite the warming air, slowing his pace to more carefully scope out the path ahead. Pausing beside a slender birch, he dropped to one knee, signaling those behind him to wait. Ahead was the weir, the roar of its tumbling water drowning out all other sounds. Cajé edged a little closer, sighting along the length of his Garand to focus his vision.

Sweeping the entire field of view twice, he saw nothing and slowly stood, tentatively raising his right hand to wave the men on.

BLAM!

Cajé hit the ground and vanished into the foliage.

#

The shots echoed weirdly through the forest, bouncing off the fog, followed by the unmistakable sound of a pitched firefight. Nelson slipped on the damp rocks lining the river and almost overbalanced into the water, saved only by his wind milling arms. Carefully reversing direction, he clambered back up the bank and ran for the ravine, panting heavily.

Doc was right where he left him. Nelson wriggled thru the underbrush and dropped into the gully, landing next to the shivering medic. Relief flooded through him as he realized Doc was staring at him with those weird blood-red eyes. When he'd left to recon the area, Doc was catatonic, curled up in a ball on the damp silt.

"Where's it coming from?"

Nelson shook his head. "I dunno. Seems like it's everywhere!" He checked his M1, adjusting the strap over his shoulder. "I didn't see nobody. It was all...quiet. An' then that first shot." He glanced at Doc. "We gotta do something!"

Doc nodded as he rose stiffly to his feet, wincing as the blood began to recirculate through his limbs. "We gotta find that bastard Kraut." He began to climb the clay wall, hands digging into the thick earth.

Managing to snag the back of Doc's borrowed sweater, Nelson spun the medic around. "We gotta find the Sarge, first."

Doc shook his head adamantly, refusing to meet Nelson's eyes. "I think if we find that Kraut, we'll find Saunders, too." He turned back to the embankment, glancing only briefly over his shoulder before heaving himself up and over the rim. "Billy, let's go!"

The kid only hesitated a second before grasping the proffered hand, and scrambled out of the ravine. By the time he situated his weapon and straightened his helmet, Doc had a good lead. Breaking into a jog, Nelson hustled after him.

#

Kirby leapt to his feet, smacking his thankfully helmeted head hard against the underside of the bridge. Now on his knees, he crawled over to Littlejohn who somehow managed to contort his body so that he could see the top of the bridge while leaving his legs safely sheltered underneath. Kirby shook his head in frank amazement and squeezed past his squad mate. Pausing for a second next to Littlejohn's knees, he scanned what was visible of the riverbank under the drifting fog, and then dove for a copse of cattails several yards away.

Littlejohn ducked back under the bridge, fumbling his M1 with sweat-dampened hands. He stared at Kirby, eyes wide with undisguised anxiety, waiting for the BAR man to look back at him. When Kirby finally did, Littlejohn had to clear his throat three times before he could get any words out.

"Ya see anything?"

The cattails rattled back and forth, their dry crackling drowning out Kirby's muttered reply. Finally Kirby stuck his head out, shook it once in an emphatic NO, and dropped back to his belly.



On the other side of the bridge, Christian returned from his quick recon of the opposite bank. Water ran from his clothing as he worked his way over to Littlejohn, but he ignored it, keeping his stolen German weapon at chest height against his dry shirt.

“I think it’s that way, to the north.” Christian gestured as he spoke, his long, graceful fingers as eloquent as his words. “We must move now, you...” He pointed over the bridge and formed an arc that curved in from the west. Pointing at himself, he went on, accented words tumbling effortlessly over each other. “I will go this way.” Again, he described an arc in the air, but this time with both arms, turning in toward each other and ending with two clenched fists. “Comprenez-vous?”

Littlejohn nodded while Kirby emerged from the reeds, hunched over, and made for the bridge.

“Yeah, I comprenez-vous all right.” He shuddered as the water rose to his knees and filled his boots. “I comprenez that we’re splittin’ up just when we need to be stayin’ together.” As the water rose higher on his thighs, he looked behind him, past Littlejohn’s shivering frame to Christian, who stood on the bank, silently watching. Kirby lowered his voice and spoke directly to Littlejohn. “He was already wet, why didn’t he come this way?”

Littlejohn just shrugged, intent on finding good footing beneath the water.

Behind them, the Maquis leader waited until they were out of the river and up the other side, well into the woods before he turned away.

#

“Hit it!”

Nobody heard Saunders’ words, but it didn’t matter. The sharp crack of the German rifle dropped them all to the ground, eyes wide and searching for targets. Saunders rolled to his left, seeking cover behind a small stand of trees. To his right, Etienne and his men opened fire as they cursed in rapid French. A fusillade of lead snapped into the foliage above their heads, raining leaves and sharp pieces of bark down on them.

Saunders kept rolling, blue eyes staring at the spot where Cajé vanished. Beyond that, the narrow barrel of a rifle peeked from behind the stone footing of the stair-stepped weir. He could hear the Frenchmen furiously returning fire, the stench of spent gunpowder filling his nostrils and stinging the back of his throat. The barrel swung slightly toward Etienne and his men, the edge of a sleeve coming into view. “Come on, come on...” Saunders kept his eyes open, lining up the shot, all the while muttering under his breath at the hidden Kraut. “Come on, come on...”

Just as the German chanced a look around the footing, his head snapped oddly to one side, and he tumbled over the stones and into the water. Saunders almost rose to his knees in astonishment, blinking hard. He rolled one more time away from Etienne and onto his feet, crouched over and slaloming his way through the trees on the left flank.

Cajé was just where Saunders thought he’d be. Staring down the length of the Garand, the scout flinched hard as Saunders dropped to the ground next to him, fumbling the rifle in shaky hands.

“Ya hit anywhere?” Anxious blue eyes raked the Cajun from helmet to boots, taking in the smear of blood beneath one eye.

Caje held out his right arm, indicating a small rent in the rough fabric of his jacket. "It's nothing, just a scratch." He dropped the arm back to his side, rubbing his face absently against his shoulder and transferring more blood to his cheek. "I counted five of 'em. Got *that* one..." His gaze slid to the man floating serenely in the middle level of the weir. "Etienne's men got another one." Caje shifted his weight from one knee to the other and glanced at Saunders, eyes dark with concern. "I think one of our guys got it."

The sergeant started to shake his head and then shoved Caje out of the way, the Thompson roaring in his hands. Only twenty yards away, a German spun to the ground, clutching his abdomen, a look of stunned disbelief on his pale face.

As Saunders checked the body, Caje continued past him, heading for the river. To his right, the deafening roar of the firefight eased off, until he could pick out the individual shots of the men on each side. He reached the flat rocks that abutted the weir's upper level and crouched next to them, curling himself into as small a target as possible. As near as he could tell, the enemy shooters were now a little ways downstream, exchanging an occasional bullet with Etienne's men but heading south and away from the Maquis and the two Americans.

Saunders scurried out from behind the nearest tree, sliding into the scant space behind Caje. "Ya see anything?" He stretched flat on his back, Thompson resting on his chest as he exchanged the clip for a fresh one. Rising up on one elbow, Saunders took a quick look across the river and then dropped to the ground again.

"Nah, I think they're runnin' south." Caje jerked around, the Garand in his hands already zeroing in on the man who stood not twenty feet away, half hidden in the trees. He blinked and then returned his attention to the opposite bank. "Etienne's here, Sarge."



With a grunt, Saunders rolled to his feet and ran to the safety of the forest, wondering just when this nightmare would ever end. Christian's brother and his two remaining men backed away, giving him room to get behind the cover of the dense foliage. Dropping to his knees, he took a moment, panting heavily, his lungs hitching within his chest. His mouth felt like it was full of dry sand, and he tried to work up a mouthful of saliva, wishing for a brief moment that he hadn't left his canteen with Doc. *Doc!* A dull headache roared behind Saunders' eyes, and he pressed the heel of one hand to his forehead, forcing himself to look up into Etienne's worried face.

"Raoul is dead, Sergeant. First our families, then Luc and Alain. Now Raoul."

Saunders felt the pain in Etienne's voice, but there was more. He swallowed hard, finally catching his breath and looked the man straight in the eye, not flinching away from the scars. His blood ran cold, chilling him far more than the damp night air.

Whatever may have been passionate or determined or even merely human had vanished from the Frenchman's dark eye. An icy anger burned there, waiting impatiently for vindication. "The Boche are running. I wonder are they setting a trap?" He raised one considering eyebrow. "It doesn't matter. My men and I..." Reaching out, Etienne clasped the shoulder of the man next to him, fierce expression faltering momentarily. "My men and I will cross the river, following. You and Caje, follow this side, no?"

Saunders looked away. Cajé glanced back at him, catching his eye. The scout shrugged, questioning his sergeant. Saunders shook his head, turning back to Etienne. "Okay. But we need to find Kirby and Littlejohn, and Nelson and Doc."

"And Christian."

Saunders frowned, blue eyes staring at the young Frenchman, aware that the other two were staring also. He couldn't be sure, but there seemed to be something other than frank concern in the man's voice. He nodded his head in assent, then signaled Cajé, waving him to the point as they set off downriver. Unable to resist, Saunders looked back as the three resistance men crossed the weir, their shadows fading into the trees on the far side and dissipating entirely.

#

Nelson lay in the bottom of the hollow, fingers dug into the rich loam on either side of him as Doc gently peeled back the torn fabric over the kid's knee. "I didn't see the vines, Doc, I swear I didn't see 'em!" His voice rose an octave, cracking even more than usual.

The medic studied the wound, a wicked laceration that began just above the kneecap and swung around the side of Billy's leg, continuing downward for a further five inches. Blood welled as Doc explored the joint, saturating Nelson's pants and Doc's hands.

"I know ya didn't, I know." Doc sat back, wiping his hands on his thighs before searching for the medical ruck that no longer swung from his shoulder. "Dammit! You still got your field dressing?"

Nelson opened his eyes, swiping his nose with the cuff of one sleeve. "Yeah, it's...it's here." He pulled the small package from his web belt and handed it to the medic.

Doc deftly applied the dressing, ignoring Nelson's protests that he was tying it too tight. When he finished, he helped the kid into a more comfortable position, propped against the heavy roots of the tree that had caused the problem in the first place.

"You still got your ammo?"

Nelson nodded, a frown spreading across his face as he realized Doc's intent. "You can't leave me here!"

Doc nodded, not meeting Nelson's anguished eyes. "Yeah, I gotta, Billy." He stood, hesitating for a moment as he stared into the thick forest. "I can't let 'em down again...I gotta go." He rapped the top of Nelson's helmet with his knuckles as he moved past the kid, breaking into a trot and disappearing from view.

#

Kirby danced down the embankment, nimble feet making short work of the slippery gravel. Behind him, Littlejohn grunted in concentration, arms spread as he worked his way to the streambed. Dropping to his knees, Kirby scooped up a handful of tiny pebbles, letting them spill through his fingers while he studied the terrain. He looked up at Littlejohn, tipping his helmet back off his forehead.

“I think this is the old track of the river, you know, before they built that dam thing.” He dragged the back of his hand across his mouth, a gesture that belied his calm appearance. The BAR man was almost trembling in his anxiety to get the squad back together and out of this place.

Littlejohn glanced up and down the gully. “Weir, it’s called a weir.”

Kirby chuffed under his breath, reseating the BAR and rolling his shoulders. “It’s called *weird*, that’s what it’s called.”

The sudden clatter of gunfire dropped them both to their bellies, scrabbling in the loose shale as they sought cover behind whatever they could find.

“What the—“ Kirby clicked off the BAR’s safety and turned his head to look back at Littlejohn. “Where’d they come from?”

Littlejohn didn’t answer as he crabbed away from his squadmate, looking to increase the field of fire. With only two of them, every inch counted. He settled behind the upturned roots of a large tree, kicking with his knees at the damp earth, and chanced a look at the Germans. It only took a heartbeat for the deadly stream of bullets to come his way. He ducked down a second, then rose and began returning fire.

Kirby stared at him for a brief moment. Finally, he bobbed his head and rolled to his knees, BAR already up and firing. Sarge or no Sarge, this he knew how to do. Unfortunately, it seemed the Krauts did, too.

#

Ducking beneath the canopy of a small oak, Doc sank to his knees, thankful for the meager cover the tree offered. He was fairly certain where he was going, although if questioned, he’d have been hard pressed to give a reason why. The fog lifted momentarily, giving the medic a good view of the path ahead. He knew the river bent around to his right, flowing south toward the village and its series of weirs. The sun rose lazily in the east over the German lines and the remains of the power plant Saunders and the rest had sabotaged yesterday. Somewhere behind him, Nelson waited. Ahead of him...Doc swallowed hard and forced himself to his feet, swaying momentarily before struggling on, his muscles spasmed in tight knots of pain.

He didn’t see the hand that snaked out and grabbed his ankle, yanking his foot out from under him and slamming him to the dirt. A knee ground into his spine as his head was jerked backward and the cold hard steel of a knife slide up under his jaw. Doc froze, gulping air, as stars danced along the periphery of his vision.

Rough hands patted him down, pulling Nelson’s bayonet from his sleeve, and thoroughly searching his layers of borrowed clothing. The toe of a jack-booted foot dug into his ribs, shoving him over on his back. Doc blinked, staring up into a face he’d hoped he’d never see again.

“So, private, you’re out of uniform.” The German casually returned his knife to its sheath, and then pulled a Luger, making a show out of checking the safety. “I thought you and your squad would be far behind your lines by now.” He waved the pistol at Doc and moved back a step, indicating the medic should stand. The barrel never wavered as Doc slowly regained his feet, pointing directly at his chest.



“Hands up, private, let us take a walk.”

Doc shook his head. “I can’t lift my arms like that.” He demonstrated, raising his arms a little ways from his body, and then stopped, grimacing. Doc never saw the lightning fast swing of the pistol as the German smacked it against his temple, pain exploding in his head and dropping him to his knees. Retching helplessly, Doc crouched in the dirt, blood running down the side of his face.

The Kraut grabbed the back of Doc’s sweater and hauled him to his feet. “I’ll only repeat myself once. Now *walk!*” He indicated the direction with the Luger and a tilt of his head, and then a hard push to the middle of Doc’s back.

Doc stumbled along, caroming off trees and tripping over rocks. His vision remained blurred and without the ability to see local landmarks, he had no idea where he was going. He thought he heard the rushing currents of the river but couldn’t be sure that the noise wasn’t due to the roaring in his ears. Eventually the random path widened into a clearing, and the Kraut shoved past him, knocking the medic to the ground.

Eyes closed, Doc lay there for a long moment, fighting the desire to just let go of the tenuous grip he had on his consciousness, just let go and sink into that black hole where pain couldn’t touch him. Only the thought that he might still have a chance at keeping the others safe kept him in the here and now. He shifted slightly in the soft loam, rolling onto one side and untangling his boots from one another. Doc could hear the Kraut softly muttering to someone, and forced one eye open, afraid to find himself surrounded by an entire enemy squad.

It was a radio. Doc allowed himself a sigh of relief as it became apparent that the German wasn’t getting through to anybody. He winced as the man slammed the handset down and abruptly stood, hands on hips.

“So, my friend, did your superior like your story, eh? Did the French peasants enjoy hearing of their families’ bravery before they died, hmm?” The German stared down at him, eyes glittering. “Oh, I’m very sorry. You must have just cleaned up and yet here you are again, bloody. Tsk tsk.” He brought the toe of one boot up under Doc’s chin, lifting until the medic coughed and twisted his head away.

“I didn’t tell ‘em nothin’.” Doc eyed the boot warily and then glared up at the German.

The Kraut stood there a moment, his hands contracting into tight fists, and his eyes dark with rage. A muscle jumped in his jaw as he bared clenched white teeth. “You told them nothing?” His voice rose on the last word, betraying the German’s unraveling self-control. “Did you not understand the cost of my allowing you to live?” His knife was once again in his hands, flashing in the watery sunlight of the new day.

Doc swallowed hard and held the man’s cold gaze, resisting the impulse to close his eyes and fall into the darkness. He could feel the warm blood trickling down his cheek and soaking the collar of Littlejohn’s spare shirt. His body shook with both fear and anger. And quite suddenly, hope, as he caught sight of Christian, submachine gun in hand, on the far side of the clearing.

“Herr Hauptmann.”

The German tensed but didn’t turn. He glanced over his shoulder at the Frenchman, nodded once, and then returned his attention to the prostrate medic.



<"Took you long enough, my friend.">

Doc's heart hammered in his chest, unable to catch his breath, as Christian lowered the barrel of the weapon and walked forward to stand beside the German. He stared up at the two, the German's features slowly relaxing into a self-satisfied grin and at Christian, whose face was a terrible mixture of grief and anger.

<"Leave the medic alone, he has no part in this."> Christian flicked one hand at Doc and then stepped away, staring pointedly at the German Captain. His plundered rifle rested across one hip and he thumbed the safety on and off, on and off.

Doc closed his eyes, ears filling with the incessant click, click, click until it assumed the proportion of a bass drum hammering away inside his skull. Clenching his teeth together, he managed to stifle the moan building in his chest. He'd thought for one brief, buoyant moment that Christian's arrival had spelled his deliverance from evil. Now he knew better: the hell in which he swam surged ever deeper, threatening to drown him.

"Ah, ah, my little witness, no sleeping while we have things to discuss." The Luger waggled back and forth in the German's gloved hand as he jammed a boot into the medic's abdomen, smiling grimly as Doc silently curled in on himself.

"HUBER!"

The Kraut cocked his head toward Christian, gaze still firmly fixed on the American's contorted face.

<"You killed Manon, Huber, and my child. This was not part of the bargain."> Christian's voice wavered, breaking over his wife's name. The submachine gun swung up, the barrel wavering wildly in every direction.

Meuller's lips curled upward and he nodded, rising to his full height as he adjusted his jacket and holstered the pistol. <"Bargain? We had but one bargain, and that was to kill the traitors."> He quickly raised one hand as Christian began to protest, one finger falling on his own lips to hush the resistance man. <"All the traitors, Christian.">

The Frenchman's hands tightened on the weapon. <"Manon was no traitor."> His gaze flickered to the medic, flinching at the anguish he saw reflected in Doc's bloody eyes. *Eyes that witnessed his wife's final moments...and his child's.* He ached with a thousand questions, most of them for the hapless GI. He ached also with the grim regret that he would never learn the answers that mattered most. Turning away from Doc, Christian repeated himself, trying to put more confidence in his voice than he felt.

<"Manon was no traitor...and neither was our son.">

Huber grinned, thin lips exposing narrow, yellowed, wolf-like teeth. <"So, you think you had a son, eh? And why not a little daughter, beautiful like her mother?">

Christian abruptly turned away, dark eyes sweeping the perimeter but seeing nothing beyond his own pain and outraged betrayal. Behind him, Huber's voice rasped on.

<"Saved her for last, your Manon.">

Doc stared at the back of Christian's head, steeling himself for the moment when the Frenchman would break. He wasn't sure he could make it to his feet, and if he did, he had no guarantee that he'd remain that way for long enough to make a difference. *It would have helped if he'd known what they were saying...*

Another volley of gunfire commenced in the distance, snapping through the dawn stillness. Christian whirled around, dark eyes fixing on Huber. <"That was yours.">

Huber shrugged, his own gaze dropping to the submachine gun clasped against the Frenchman's chest. <"Or yours."> He reached into one pocket and extracted a silver cigarette case, flipping it open with one hand. A lighter followed, appearing in the German's hand as smoothly as a magician's wand. As he inhaled the white smoke and returned his implements to their respective pockets, he pointed at Doc, still prone on the ground, face pale as milk under the splashes of blood. <"Definitely not his."> Huber paused, allowing Christian to process that piece of information.

The Frenchman frowned. <"You'll tell me now, or so help me, Huber, I'll kill you where you stand. Why Manon?"> The barrel of the submachine gun swung up, wavering only slightly in Christian's trembling hands.

Huber snorted, dissipating the drifting smoke with one lazy wave of his gloved hand. <"If you didn't have your own doubts, you'd have killed me already."> He smiled again at the Frenchman and sat down on a log, stretching long jack-booted legs out before him.

The end of the gun wobbled, inscribing a growing spiral in the air between the German and the Resistance man before Christian finally let his arms drop, the weapon falling to his side. He looked past Huber, eyes dark and unreadable.

Between the two men, the medic sprawled in complete incomprehension, bleary gaze bouncing back and forth between the two like a drunk at a tennis match. In that instant when it seemed Christian would shoot the German officer, Doc's heart threatened to jump out of his chest. Now that the moment had passed, he could only lie shivering in the damp grass and wonder what the hell was going on.

#

Kirby crouched behind the deadfall, wincing as chips of bark flew off the rotting tree trunk and flew into the air. Tiny shards caught him across the face and he quickly turned away, hoping he'd avoid catching one in the eye. His hands felt clumsy to him as he yanked out the empty clip from the BAR and slammed another home. Fifteen feet away, Kirby could hear the perfectly spaced shots from Littlejohn's M1, so uniformly timed he knew the big man couldn't see what he was aiming at and was firing in the hopes of suppressing the enemy's efforts.

"Littlejohn?" Kirby took a deep breath and rose with the BAR ready, laying down a withering stream of lead that momentarily silenced the Germans. He sensed rather than saw his squadmate fumbling to reload his M1, and then return to the fray, wondering if Littlejohn felt the futility as keenly as he did himself. It was funny, he thought, with a growing sense of detachment from the battle, but somehow you just knew when things were all going to pieces. Kirby didn't see any possible way out of this one, trapped as they were with the river at their backs.

The unmistakable chattering racket of a Thompson submachine gun sang through the air, silencing the determined German guns. Kirby dropped to his knees behind the deadfall and held up a cautionary hand to Littlejohn, hope racing through his veins with each beat of his hammering heart. For a moment, he held still, listening hard with ears numbed by the firefight. Finally, he couldn't stand it.

"Sarge?" His voice cracked on the single syllable and he cleared his throat harshly, and opened his mouth to try again.

"Kirby, that you?"

Kirby's legs gave way beneath him entirely, dumping him on his rear in the cool sand. He dropped the BAR in his lap, his hands shaking too hard to support the weapon's weight. A shadow fell over him, its long arm reaching out toward him and Kirby flinched away, crabbing awkwardly beneath the tangle of the BAR's webbing and the snagging branches of some thorn-laden bush.

"Kirby, take it easy." Cajé knelt before him, his rifle clamped between his right elbow and his ribs. Reaching out with his good left hand, Cajé patted Kirby on the shoulder. "Take it easy." He took the BAR from Kirby's unresisting hands and backed away, giving Kirby room to follow him out from under the sheltering undergrowth.

Littlejohn stood, unfolding his long frame from his cramped position, and ambled over to where Cajé stared down at the silent BAR man. "Boy, am I glad to see you!" He slung his rifle over his shoulder and extended one long arm, hauling Kirby to his feet. "Where did you come from?"

Cajé shook his head and returned Kirby's weapon. "From the weir. We ran into a Kraut patrol, got some of them. The rest of them got away." He turned at the soft footfall behind him, nodding once at Saunders, who shoved his way through the thick brush to join them.

"They got as far as here, Cajé." Saunders glanced back at the copse of trees that hid the bodies of the German patrol. His blue eyes flicked toward Littlejohn and then over to Kirby. "You two okay?"

The tall man started to answer, dipping his head in affirmation, but Kirby suddenly found his voice. "Okay? Oh yeah, we're okay, we've just been wandering around in that God forsaken fog, trying not to get ourselves lost or killed, or...or...and then Christian! We find Christian an' his brother an' the boys, havin' themselves a picnic by the river." He threw his arms in the air, almost smacking Cajé in the face with the butt of the BAR. "And then *they* wander off an' we hear shots..." He shook himself like a dog, D-rings jangling. "Oh, yeah, Sarge, we're okay."

"Wait, what did you say about Christian's brother?" Saunders withdrew a cigarette from his pocket, lit it and handed it to Kirby. "We just left Etienne and a couple others." He lit another cigarette and inhaled deeply, the nicotine racing from his lungs through his bloodstream. "You didn't see 'em?"

Littlejohn managed to answer this time. "No, we were workin' our way up the river when we ran into those Krauts. We didn't see nobody else."

Saunders frowned and stared into the woods, turning slowly in a circle. "How about Doc an' Billy? You seen them?"

Kirby puffed furiously on the cigarette, smoke drifting from his mouth and nose and curling around his ears. "Doc an' Billy? They missin', too? Just what the hell is goin' on here, Sarge?"

The sergeant stood there, the butt of the Thompson resting on his hip. "I wish I knew, Kirby, I wish I knew."

#

Huber continued to smoke silently, apparently enjoying every inhalation with great pleasure. He glanced once at Doc, satisfying himself that the medic was still incapable of

disturbing the proceedings. *A witness once again.* Huber sighed, disappointed that the young American hadn't passed on an account of Huber's work in the village. *Never mind, never mind.* Perhaps he could make use of Doc's memory now.

A slight breeze wound its way through the trees, dissipating the last of the fog and rattling the leaves. A few fell from their branches, floating serenely toward the ground. Christian caught several, crushing them in his fist, as he took two deliberate steps that placed him squarely in front of the German captain. <"My child was no traitor.">

The German shook his head slowly, an amused smile playing about his lips. He stared up at Christian, crystal blue eyes meeting darkest brown. <"Why do you think it was your child, Christian?">

Face flushing madly, the Frenchman's eyes slowly closed as pain lanced through him, and he choked back a small cry, swallowing hard.

<"You knew this, Christian, your wife, she had many...how would you say it...many friends."> Huber flicked dried mud from his boots with mild distaste, using his thumb to buff the area back to a dull shine.

Christian sat down abruptly, almost toppling from the broad log. He leaned the submachine gun carefully at his side and buried his face in his hands.

Doc blinked, wondering what the German could have possibly said to so totally unnerve the fierce resistance man. The growing light of day wasn't helping his headache any, making rational thought difficult. He knew opportunity was slipping away but couldn't quite figure out just what it was he should be doing. Fighting a rising nausea, Doc managed to get an elbow beneath his aching ribs and levered himself into a shaky sitting position.

<"She...she did what she had to do. The SS would have killed her."> Christian sucked in a shaky breath, glancing at Doc and then looking away again.

The naked pain on the Frenchman's face shook Doc to his boots. In the weeks preceding the raid on the power plant and also, as it turned out, the massacre of the families, Doc had found Christian to be a supremely disciplined young man, devoted to both his wife and brother, and to the resistance. That he obviously was in some sort of cahoots with the German officer was almost impossible to comprehend. The friction between the two baffled the medic and he wished for not the first time that he understood German.



Huber crossed his arms, his face carefully neutral. <"She did what she wanted to do. Willingly."> Gaze fixed on the top of Christian's bowed head, Huber rose, his long legs unfolding gracefully beneath him. He stepped toward the medic, and then past him, putting Doc between Christian and himself. His voice lowered to a hoarse whisper. <"Wantonly, Christian.">

The Frenchman's head snapped up, dark eyes blazing. Through some supreme act of will, he remained perched on the log, although one trembling hand reached for the submachine gun. <"No, Huber, you're wrong. Maybe...maybe at the beginning...we were so, so scared."> His voice broke on the words and Christian faltered for a moment. A bird sang somewhere in the woods, its call answered by another and yet another.

<"Not just the beginning, but still. She's a great favorite of Colonel Reisling, oh, and we cannot forget Captain Mahrlin. Oh, I am sorry, I should say she was a great favorite..."> Huber

smiled as Christian swung the weapon up, raising his hands slightly at his sides. <"Shoot me now and you'll never know the truth."> His smile grew wider as the Frenchman wavered, fingers bleached white with tension wrapped around the trigger guard. <"Shoot me and I can't tell you what she said, Christian, her last words.">

Doc stared up into Christian's tortured face. If he only knew what was going on, who he could trust... Pain lanced through his head, blurring his vision and his thoughts. Shaking his head, he tried to clear the muzziness, tried to see the Christian he thought he'd known. Doc opened his mouth to speak and then froze as Huber's gloved hand grabbed him by the collar of his sweater.

"Tell him about the child, Amerikaner. The child he thinks is his."

The medic's eyebrows pulled together in puzzlement. "What do you mean..." The coarse wool of the sweater pulled tight across his throat as Huber twisted it behind him. Doc grabbed at it, choking.

"Now, now. No need to ask questions. Just tell him about the baby." Huber abruptly let go of the garment, shoving Doc forward onto his hands and knees.

Doc let his head hang for a moment, gulping air, eyes tightly closed. The birds were still singing, the sun warm on his back. A breeze floated up from the river, smelling mildly sulfurous and stinging Doc's raw throat. When he finally looked up, he found himself staring into the Frenchman's dark eyes. *Madness...*

"Well...it was a long labor, about fifteen hours. She was hurtin', begging me for something, but all's I had was morphine. I didn't think that would be good for the baby." The medic worked his legs under himself and managed a sitting position, his arms out for balance while his vestibular system equalized. "Finally she pushed the baby out, she was screaming, Christian, but it wasn't pain, it was...it was like she'd won a race or somethin'." Doc smiled at the memory of the young woman's face, marveling that she could be so sweaty and exhausted and yet so very beautiful. The smile lingered but a moment, and then he continued on. "It was a girl, so tiny, so perfect. An' she was hollerin', boy, she had some lungs on her."

Christian's breath caught in his chest. "A girl?" His voice was no more than a whisper. Falling slowly to his knees, the Frenchman stared intently at Doc, oblivious to the cold glower of the German.

#

*two days earlier...*

Doc held the infant close to his chest, surprised at her warm weight and flailing limbs. Entranced, he counted the tiny toes and fingers before bundling her into a small blanket. With arms and legs now swaddled snugly, the baby settled against him, finally revealing eyes of a startling midnight blue. "Oh my, Manon! It's a girl, she's beautiful." He handed the child to her mother and sat back, fatigue flooding his limbs and the small of his back. The labor had been hard and Doc felt as if he'd gone through every muscle contraction right along with the young Frenchwoman.

"Docteur..."



The low whisper from the other woman in the room pulled Doc out of his fugue. He turned to see bright red blood spreading over the blankets underneath Manon's hips. He jumped to his feet and flipped back the sheet, flinching at the amount of fluid escaping the young mother's body. His training screamed at him to apply pressure to a bleeding wound but he couldn't see how that could possibly be helpful in this situation.

The sound of automatic gunfire ripped through the silence of the ruined village, shattering the calm serenity of the birthing room. Doc swung to the window and back to his patient, the knowledge that he was the only soldier in the town warring with the fact that he was also the only medic. Screams erupted outside, forcing the issue. He ran to the open window and crouched to one side, peering out from behind the cover of the torn and billowing curtain.

A squad of German troopers edged down the street, herding the sobbing children ahead of them. A small boy tripped, sprawling in the debris. A vicious kick from a thick-set soldier got him on his feet again, howling and holding one arm against his thin chest.

"Doc?"

Pulse pounding in his ears, the medic barely heard the woman's call. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the thin white arm extended toward him, beckoning him. With one last look out the window at the advancing Krauts, Doc swore under his breath and hurried to the bedside.

Manon stared up at Doc with eyes widened by pain and panic. She lifted the baby toward him, her arms trembling. "You must take her and hide, please, Doc."

"No! I'll distract them, I'll lead them off!"

Shaking her head, Manon gently placed the baby in Doc's arms, falling back on the bed with a moan. "Please Doc, tell him...tell him the family name will live on in our child. She will be the mother of a new generation...one that knows peace."

Doc stared at her, the baby squirming against him. "Manon, come on, you've got to hide!" Behind him, the screams of the children grew louder.

The Frenchwoman shuddered in pain, her arms curling around her empty belly. When she looked up again, her beautiful, dark eyes blazed against her pale skin. "I'm not hiding but when they find me I will not be here."

Doc fell to his knees beside the bed, clutching the infant. "Manon!"

One delicate hand reached out, caressing the child's head and then fell back again. "Tell him...please tell him..."

"Manon!" Doc's voice broke in despair and he grabbed blindly at her wrist, seeking the pulse he knew was no longer there.

#

It had been almost ten minutes since he'd heard the firefight. A firefight that had ended with the distinctive rattle of a Thompson submachine gun. Since then, Nelson had done everything he could to get himself upright, but the leg wouldn't hold him. Dragging himself under a stand of thick bushes, he resigned himself to waiting for Doc's return. *Assuming Doc DID return...*

Nelson stared at his knee, watching the faint pink tinge grow darker and, more ominously, wetter. The pain he could deal with. *Bleeding to death, maybe not.* Around him, the forest grew lighter and greener with the advancing morning. A family of rabbits appeared as if by magic, their smooth grey bodies blending with the underbrush. The largest stood on its hind legs, pink nose quivering and whiskers twitching. Nelson grinned as three tiny kits edged their way around their mother, falling over each other as they explored the great, wide world. Suddenly, they all froze, ears swiveling.

A twig snapped at Nelson's six o'clock and the rabbits ran in blind panic, disappearing one after the other down a hole he hadn't seen before. Itchy sweat popped out on his forehead, trickling down his cheeks and into his ears. Now he regretted lying on his back. He couldn't roll to look behind him, not without the bushes rattling like castanets. A voice murmured softly, answered just as softly by another. Nelson held his breath, straining to hear the words.

"Sarge, we've searched this whole damn forest, I been on my dogs for hours."

"Shut up, Kirby."

Nelson blew out an explosive sigh of relief. Before he could call out, the bushes parted and the business end of Cajé's Garand appeared in his face.

"Sarge!" Cajé vanished as he turned away and the branches snapped back into place.

Now Saunders' face loomed above him. "You hurt?" Fatigue lined his face, darkening the shadows under his eyes. The sergeant reached one arm into the foliage and hauled Nelson out, supporting him on one side as Littlejohn moved up on the other. Shuffling between them, Nelson managed to sit on a log, his injured leg stretched before him.

"What the hell happened to you? Where's Doc?"

Nelson squinted up at Saunders while Littlejohn tended to his knee. Wincing, he swallowed hard before answering. "He's gone looking for some German, the one he said was in the village." He looked down for a moment as Littlejohn finished tying off the dressing. "We heard them talking. Doc recognized the guy's voice, he went nuts, I could barely hold onto him. After they went away, Doc said we had to go find him."

Saunders exchanged glances with Littlejohn, both clearly disturbed at the image of their medic losing control. Saunders pulled his helmet off and wiped the sweat from his forehead, ruffling up his filthy blond hair. "Are you sure?"

Nelson shifted his weight on the log, seeking a more comfortable perch for his rump. He nodded. "Yeah, we were followin' 'em when I tripped over a root and ripped my knee open."

"Which way did he go?"

The young private looked around, orienting himself, then pointed off toward the river. "That way, Sarge, he went that way."

Saunders straightened up and plonked his helmet back on his head. "Littlejohn, stay here with Nelson. Cajé and Kirby? On me."

As the three moved off, Nelson watched their departing backs with a growing sense of loss. Turning away, he met Littlejohn's questioning gaze and for once had no words for his good friend.

#

Christian stretched out his arm, resting one trembling hand gently on the medic's bowed head. As Doc looked up, cheeks wet with tears, Christian sat back on his heels, eyes dark and unreadable. A long moment passed while they stared at one another, the wiry dark-haired Frenchman and the utterly exhausted American, whose borrowed clothing was now just as bloody and disheveled as his own uniform. A muscle jumped in Christian's jaw as he finally spoke, voice thick with misery and grief. "My name. She said, *my name will live on.*"

Doc nodded, not trusting his own voice for a moment. "Yes. She said the family name will live on." He winced, clamping one arm against his aching ribs as he struggled to his knees.

"Well, then, Huber. I guess you didn't kill her after all." Christian slowly stood, gaze still fixed on the shaking medic.

The Captain stepped back, right hand falling to the butt of the Luger in its unbuckled holster.

The submachine gun whipped up, barked once, and Huber spun to the ground, howling in pain and outrage. He clutched at his shoulder, blood seeping between his fingers and staining his spotless jacket.

Christian stepped closer, the weapon still raised. "But you did kill *my child, my child, Huber.*" He squeezed the trigger again, again only a single shot.

The German jerked as the bullet penetrated his thick leather boot and buried itself in his calf.

"And why, Huber, why did you desecrate her body, Huber, why did you..." Christian sobbed, pausing to swipe the sleeve of his free hand over his face. "You were only supposed to kill the others, not my...not my Manon...my child..."

Doc stared in horror as Christian jammed the barrel of the gun up under the German's jaw. And closed his eyes as Christian pulled the trigger.

#

"Christian?"

The clearing was completely silent after the shock of the gunshots. The birds were gone, leaping into the air and winging away at the first shot. Other, more earthbound creatures remained still, blending into the variegated foliage. Except for the ragged hitching of his shoulders with each hoarse breath, Doc made no movement, either, his knees pressed into the damp earth and his eyes squeezed tightly shut. The Frenchman stood alone, the submachine gun dangling forgotten from his right hand. Overhead, a few wispy clouds skated in front of the brightening sun, their dappled shadows passing over the men below.

"Christian?"

Etienne stepped into the clearing, taking in the scene with his one eye. He moved to the German, flipping the body over with the toe of his boot, and then drew his head back and spat on the dead man.

"Etienne?" Christian stared at his brother, dark eyes wide and disbelieving. He dropped the gun, taking one step forward.

The other two Frenchmen came out of the woods, wary and nervous. They circled the perimeter of the clearing, before taking up positions on either side of Doc, flanking him.

<“Etienne, my brother. My baby, my daughter, they killed my daughter, oh, my Manon, dearest Manon...”> Christian fell against his brother, throwing his arms around him, not noticing that Etienne failed to return the embrace.

<“You filthy traitor.”> Etienne shoved him hard, throwing him to the ground. <“You think we didn’t hear all this?”> He produced a glittering blade from his sleeve. <“It was *your* fault, Christian, thinking you could play both sides against the other. Your fault Manon is dead. But you need to know one thing.”> He stood over his brother, panting hard. <“They didn’t kill *your* daughter, she was *mine!*”> Etienne dropped to one knee and sank the knife to the hilt in his brother’s chest.

#

It wasn’t until the next afternoon, amid the arrival of Lieutenant Hanley and a back-up squad, and the somber burial of the massacre victims and the resistance men, that Saunders heard the rest of the story. About how Christian and Manon had been forced into collaborating with the Germans and how Manon had wanted to stop while Christian found the rewards far too tempting. And how Manon had confided in her brother-in-law and then had taken comfort with him, resulting in a pregnancy the timing of which would have been difficult to explain had Christian given it a moment’s thought. As it turned out, he’d been too busy currying favor with the Germans to pay any attention to his own family. And, also as it turned out, none of it mattered anyway.

Saunders sat on the remains of a stone wall that lined the little road leading to the weir. The warm sun felt good on his shoulders and he removed his helmet, allowing the breeze drifting off the river to ruffle through his hair. His squad sprawled in the shade of a huge tree on the other side of the road, silently eating the rations delivered by Hanley and stalwartly avoiding any conversation with anybody, including each other. It just seemed that the last few days had offered up far too much wartime angst. Talking about it made it too real, thinking about it was bad enough, dreaming about it, well, no doubt they’d all have a disturbed night or two.



A shadow fell across his face, and Saunders looked up, squinting, to find Hanley standing there, a dusty bottle of wine in one hand. He held it up, arching one eyebrow in silent question.

“Thanks, Lieutenant.” He took the bottle and carefully removed the crumbling cork.

Hanley perched on the wall beside the sergeant as he took a long swallow of the wine. “So, what happened here, Saunders?” He nodded as Saunders returned the bottle to him and took a swig himself.

“I don’t know. I don’t think we’ll ever know.” Saunders watched two figures appear down the end of the main road, walking toward them. At this distance they almost merged into one, so close were they together. As they approached, it was easy to see that one wore the uniform of an American GI, the other, civilian homemade. The gleaming crosses on the GI’s helmet glowed in the afternoon sun, unlike Doc’s original head gear, scuffed and battered by

months of combat. They'd found the helmet in the candy store, full of blood. Nobody considered cleaning it.

Etienne and Doc made an unlikely pair, but the one desperately needed information and the other had some of the answers. Saunders could only hope it would be enough for Doc, although privately he wondered how anyone could continue on after the hours of horror he'd endured. As they reached the corner, Etienne reached out and grasped Doc's shoulder, holding him at arm's length for a long moment before nodding, and then turned and walked away. The medic stared at the ground, one hand absently rubbing his injured ribs, before he continued on up the road.

Hanley cleared his throat, speaking softly. "Third Squad's medic says he's got a couple of broken ribs, probably a concussion, maybe a break in his cheekbone. Lucky man, considering."

Saunders snorted, reaching for his cigarettes. "Not so lucky, Lieutenant. He's seen more in two days..." His voice trailed off, uncertain how to finish the sentence. He started again. "It's one thing to face an enemy with a gun. But Doc, he did all he could to protect that baby and none of it helped. And then to be forced to witness it all..." He snapped the lighter open and lit up. He smoked for a moment, savoring the calming effects of the nicotine. "I mean, how do you forget that?"

Hanley stood, dusting off the seat of his pants and straightening his jacket. He watched the medic join the squad, dropping gingerly down on the soft grass. Billy handed him a canteen which he accepted. Cajé patted his boot from his position stretched out flat on his back, and Kirby held up a can of biscuits, which the medic refused with a polite smile. They seemed more relaxed now, now that they were all together again. Hanley shook his head.

"Maybe that's the point, Saunders. Maybe we aren't supposed to forget all this...this stuff." He glanced over his shoulder at the sergeant, and then started to walk slowly away, beckoning the man to follow him.

"Maybe we're supposed to remember."

The end