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"Hide and Seek"

by White Queen

The radio crackled and snapped beside Lt. Hanley. "Say again, White Rook. Over," he said. He could barely hear its transmissions anyway, thanks to the shells falling on the town around him, but the radio's static made understanding Sgt. Saunders nearly impossible.

"Can't count them," came Saunders' voice through the static. "I estimate twenty to thirty. Over."

Twenty to thirty German soldiers where they'd expected maybe one patrol? "All right, White Rook, pull out. Pull out. Over." A shell landed somewhere nearby, and Hanley crouched down as dust and debris clattered around him. He needed to find a new CP fast – this building wouldn't last much longer.

"Yes, sir. Out." But the transmission didn't end this time. Either the button on the handy-talky got stuck or Saunders kept it pressed down by accident, because Hanley could hear the faint, far-away voice of the noncom bellowing, "Pull out! Pull out! Head back to the river!"

Then the sergeant's voice came close to the radio again. "King Two, King Two, this is White Rook. I am being overrun. Repeat, I am overrun. Over."

"Pull out!" Hanley ordered again. He realized he'd been gripping his radio microphone so tightly his hand had started to cramp up. Relaxing his fingers did nothing to lessen his anxiety. Saunders had sounded desperate at the end of that transmission. "Pull out!" Hanley repeated, his own voice raw with worry.

Saunders didn't reply, but the transmitting continued as before, and Hanley heard what sounded like rapid gunfire on the other end. Then Saunders' voice came again, one gasping word: "Lieutenant!" A burst of gunfire interrupted him, and the transmission dissolved into static.

Hanley stared at the radio, willing it to miraculously reveal why the transmission had stopped. What had happened? A thousand possible scenarios presented themselves, each more grisly than the last. One thing was sure – a couple miles to the east, Sgt. Saunders and his squad were in deep trouble.

Lt. Hanley ran over his options. He couldn't send second or third squads to help – they were both scouting to the south, too far out to do any good. The other platoons in King Company were too far to the north, and busy stopping a German counterattack anyway.

He and fourth squad were the only option for rescuing Saunders and first squad.

Hanley realized that the shelling around him had stopped. He walked to the door of the ruined café he'd appropriated and looked out at what remained of the village.

Sgt. Baldwin limped toward him. "Lang's dead," he reported, "and so's Phillips. Kerry an' me're wounded, but we'll live. Got caught by a falling wall." He smiled ruefully. "I just got a gash in my leg, but I think Kerry's arm's busted. Russow's okay, and he's got a prisoner." He gestured toward a small soldier prodding a German soldier with the barrel of his rifle. The Kraut held his hands high in the air as he tried to pick his way through the rubble-strewn street.

Two dead, two wounded. One prisoner captured. There went his brilliant plan to lead fourth squad to the rescue. Lt. Hanley tried to focus on Baldwin and push the image of a dead Sgt. Saunders out of his mind. "I just got word from Saunders – sounds like he's in pretty bad trouble." He needed to find a solution, not waste time imagining what might or might not have happened a few miles away.

"We headin' over to help?" Sgt. Baldwin asked.

Lt. Hanley shook his head. "No." It wasn't practical. Saunders was tough and so was his squad. They'd gotten themselves out of tighter spots before.

"No?" Baldwin asked, awkwardly lowering leaning against the wall beside Hanley. The gash in his left calf was bleeding freely. He pulled out a packet of sulfa powder and some bandages.

Then Hanley remembered the last time he'd left Saunders to fend for himself, just assumed that the sergeant could do anything. And the weeks of guilt he'd endured because of it. "No," he repeated. "You stay here. S2 needs that prisoner, and you and Kerry need patching up."

He couldn't endure that again, the gut-twisting guilt over letting Saunders down – Saunders, who would never have abandoned Hanley. Odds were, Saunders was fine. He'd shot his way out of incredible messes time and again. But just in case....

Lt. Hanley made the decision, not letting himself do any second-guessing. "I'll head east myself, see if Saunders' squad got out okay. Radio S2 about your prisoner." He smiled, trying to bolster his own confidence as well as Sgt. Baldwin's. "I'll be back by morning." Rifle slung over his shoulder, he headed east, the sinking sun casting his long shadow over the debris before him.

Sgt. Saunders was barely breathing. Not only did every breath send shooting pains up and down his back, but he wasn't sure it was safe to move yet. He'd counted three pairs of boots stomping around him, three harsh German voices saying words he couldn't understand, and he thought he'd heard three Germans leaving as well, but it was best to be cautious.

So he waited another couple of minutes before he took a really good lungful of air. The pains in his back made him grimace and squeeze his eyes tight, as if that could shut out the agony. When the pain lessened, he opened one eye, the one that wasn't pressed into the trampled grasses beneath him. He could see the sun dipping toward the trees and hills to the west. No Krauts over there. He raised his head a little and opened the other eye. Ignoring the pain this caused his back, he moved his head just enough to allow him to scan the area. It was clear. He was alone.

At least, he hoped he was. The grass around him was trampled flat from the skirmish. But a little farther down the valley the grasses stood tall. That grass had hidden Krauts before, and it could be hiding Krauts again. He really needed to get out of the open, make for those woods twenty yards or so behind him.

His men must have gotten away – at least, he hoped they had. Saunders knew he'd passed out for a little while right after the spray from a Schmeisser behind him wounded his left hand and back. And destroyed his handy-talky in the bargain. When he'd come to, the Germans were circling him, so he'd had to play dead. He hadn't heard his men talking, so either they'd been killed and the Krauts had removed the bodies, or they'd gotten away. If they'd been captured, he would have heard them nearby. Unless they'd already been marched away. But he couldn't have been unconscious very long – the sun wasn't *that* much closer to the horizon.

He gave his injured left hand the once-over. A bullet had sliced open a jagged line along back of it. It wasn't bad, but it was bleeding freely. He'd have to patch it up quick, then work his way back into those trees where he could find a safe place to try to tend to his back.

Saunders moved his right arm, trying to reach inside his jacket to find bandages and sulfa powder. He gasped at the added pain this caused and realized he couldn't get to them anyway while lying on his stomach. He'd have to sit up, but he knew the wounds on his back wouldn't be too pleased by more movement. At least he could feel his feet. Move them, too. The bullets hadn't damaged his spine. He clenched his teeth against the fresh wave of pain his next movements were sure to cause, and pushed himself off the ground with his good right arm. He rested in the half-sitting position and closed his eyes against the agony in his back and left hand.

Eventually the pain lessened a little, and he opened his eyes again. Time to bandage the hand, then see if he could feel the wounds on his back, gauge how deep they were, how much blood he was losing. Pouring sulfa powder on his hand and wrapping a bandage around it didn't take long, and he kept his movements minimal to cut down the pain from his other wounds. But trying to reach behind his back proved to be too difficult, and after two attempts, he gave up. His coat felt ripped up from the bullets, but it and his shirt would have to serve as bandages for now. Getting out of that open area and back to the cover of the trees was more important.

The handy-talky was shot to pieces, so no sense dragging it along. His helmet rested only a few feet away, where it must have rolled when he fell. He crawled to it, not daring to try to stand up, just in case there were still Krauts nearby. When he picked the helmet up, it seemed heavier than usual. As he settled it on his head, it bowed his neck toward the ground until it fell off again. Never mind the helmet, it was too heavy to deal with right now. Hiding was more important.

He couldn't find his Thompson. The Krauts had probably taken it with them. Without it, he was defenseless – he didn't even have a bayonet, and he'd used all his grenades during the firefight. He rose to his knees and looked around, suddenly frantic. If only the Thompson had just fallen a little way away when he got shot, like the helmet had. But no, it was gone.

Saunders started crawling again, desperate now to get to the cover of those trees that stretched away to the west and south, covering a little ridge of hills. A river ran through those woods. He could just float downstream to Hanley's CP. And to Doc. Doc

could bandage his back, give him painkillers so he didn't grunt in pain with every inch he moved toward those trees. Morphine even sounded like a pretty good idea right now.

If he could just get to the trees. He could hide in the forest. He could be safe again. But he didn't seem to be getting any closer to the trees. Why wouldn't his arms and legs move faster? Saunders blinked and tried to take a deep breath. It felt like someone had wrapped a thick rope around his chest and was pulling it tighter and tighter. And something was happening to the sun – it was sinking much too quickly. The world kept getting darker and darker. But all that didn't matter – he just had to reach those trees. Hide in the woods. He would be safe in the woods.

Trees at last, looming above him, offering their help and protection. Such friendly trees. Time to try standing up, now that he was safe from the Krauts. Safer, anyway. Saunders clutched at a slender tree, one strong enough to help support his weight, yet slender enough he could get a good grip around its trunk. Holding onto the tree with his good right hand, he pulled his feet under him and slowly stood up. Good. He'd make better time walking.

After four or five steps, his knees started disobeying him. He clutched at a nearby tree, but it was no use. As he sank toward the forest floor, his eyes closed. He lost consciousness before his body hit the ground.

Lt. Hanley moved east and a little north, working his way up and down the small wooded hills. Things had been quiet so far. Too quiet. Saunders had mentioned twenty or thirty Germans. Where were they? He couldn't be that far anymore from the valley where Saunders' squad had encountered them. Somewhere on the edge of the forest, where it blended into a lot of grassy meadows. He should hear firing or shouting, some sign of a skirmish going on nearby, shouldn't he?

It felt good to be out in the field again, carrying a carbine and intending to use it. He'd spent too much time behind the lines lately, dealing with maps and radios instead of men and weapons. He hadn't realized how unsatisfying an officer's job could be, at least if you'd been used to "real" soldiering. A lot of people might envy his battlefield promotion, not realizing the kinds of responsibilities and restrictions that came with it. Hanley took a deep breath of the fresh French air and smiled – he needed to escape his stuffy desk job like this more often.

But when he remembered why he was tramping through the woods, his smile faded. What good could one man do against twenty or thirty Krauts? If Saunders and his whole squad couldn't hold them off, what made him think he'd be such a big help?

Finally he heard rushing feet snapping twigs and scattering forest debris, bodies crashing through tangled foliage. There was no gunfire, so this was probably a group of pursuing Germans, and he'd somehow missed the retreating squad. Hanley stepped behind a large tree and brought his rifle up. He'd better be ready just in case.

A soldier darted into view a few yards away, and Hanley's eyes widened in surprise. He lowered the rifle a little and stepped out from behind the tree. "Kirby!" he called.

Kirby stopped so quickly he almost fell over. He turned toward Hanley, and raised a hand in acknowledgement. "Hey guys," he called, his breath coming in gasps,

"it's the lieutenant."

Caje and Billy appeared behind him, and finally Littlejohn and Doc. "Where's Saunders?" Hanley asked.

Caje shook his head. "He didn't make it."

"What do you mean, he didn't make it? Is he dead?" Hanley snapped.

"We don't really know," Billy said. His right arm was in an improvised sling, and he held his rifle awkwardly in his left hand.

"He got cut off," added Littlejohn. "The Krauts just came pouring up through that little valley. He moved to the left to try to get some crossfire going, and then they got between us and him."

"He told us to pull out," Kirby said. "So we did. He told us to head to the river."

Doc nodded. "He drew their attention away from us so we could make a break for it." He looked away, up toward the treetops, his forehead crossed with worry lines.

Billy agreed. "Yeah, and it sort of worked. Only a few Krauts followed us."

"Are they still after you?" Hanley asked.

"No," Caje said. "I haven't heard them behind us for a while now."

"And Saunders hasn't caught up with you?"

Kirby shook his head. "If you ask me, Lieutenant, I don't think he's goin' to."

"Kirby!" Littlejohn protested.

"Even Sarge couldn't handle that many Krauts on his own. If he coulda made it out, he'd be here by now."

Littlejohn glared at him, but didn't disagree. He was wounded too, one shoulder of his field jacket bulging oddly from the bandages Hanley could glimpse underneath. In fact, Hanley realized that all of them were wounded, all except Doc. Caje had a field dressing around one thigh, and Kirby's right sleeve was ripped and bloody.

"All right, men. Go back to the CP and get some rest." He briefly considered bringing Doc with him to search for Saunders, but the medic looked worn out and footsore. Besides, the remains of fourth squad were still back at the ruined village, needing Doc's attention.

"What about you, sir?" Caje asked.

"I'm going to see if I can find Saunders."

"Don't do it, Lieutenant!" Kirby protested. "You'll never make it through all those Krauts! Anyway, Sarge is probably gone. Even supposing he's still alive, they're sure to capture him."

Hanley looked at each soldier. They looked tired, angry, and, what was worst, defeated. He knew they had to be aching at the loss of their sergeant. If any of them thought there was the slightest chance that Saunders was still alive, they wouldn't be running back toward the CP. They'd be trying to find him.

But Hanley refused to give up. The last word Saunders had uttered was a plea for his help and Hanley was determined not to fail him. Not this time. If Saunders was alive out there, he would find him. He would not let the sergeant wander around, wounded and alone, not again. He would bring Saunders in, his corpse if that's all that was left.

"Shut up, Kirby," Hanley snapped. "You men get back to the CP. I'm going to find Saunders and bring him back." He stepped out of their path and ordered, "Move out!" When they'd reluctantly started trudging away toward the river, he headed off the way they'd just come.

When Saunders came to, it was dusk. His left hand throbbed, and when he shifted his position in an effort to stand up again, pain raked his back, so intense it didn't leave enough breath in his lungs to even let him cry out. He guessed the blood had clotted onto his shirt, then torn loose when he moved.



He stood up anyway, using a nearby tree as support until he was upright. His tongue felt thick, and his mouth tasted like an old sock. He needed water. Automatically, he reached for his canteen and gasped at the fresh pain this caused. He pulled the canteen from its pouch, but it felt unnaturally light. Sure enough, a bullet had pierced it on two sides, passed right through near the bottom. He unscrewed the cap anyway, his wounded hand making him clumsy. A little water still remained, down below the level of the bullet's entry and exit. He carefully moved the canteen to his mouth, plugging the holes with his fingers. When it was empty, he let it drop to the ground, worthless. No sense carrying the extra weight or going through the pain of putting it back in its pouch.

The river. He had to find the river. And hide. He stumbled forward, hoping he hadn't gotten too disoriented. He knew he had to move uphill before he found the river, but the way he felt, he could be walking across a level dance floor and still feel like he was going uphill.

After fighting his way through underbrush and trees for over an hour, Hanley decided to take a break. He found a nice big tree, wide enough to hide him from anyone approaching from the rear, and sat down with his back against it. Pulling out his compass and map, he checked his position to make sure he hadn't gotten off course. He was moving slower than the squad had when they came running back this way, since he was trying not to alert any nearby Germans to his presence, but he didn't think he had too much farther to go. Satisfied he was still heading the right direction, he stowed the map and compass in his pockets again and leaned his head against the tree. His helmet tipped forward over his eyes a little, and suddenly all he could think about was sleep. The two hours he'd managed to snatch the night before had been too little and too long ago. One of these days he'd make captain and finally get some rest.

Something very cold and very hard pressed against his neck, just under his ear. Hanley forgot about sleep. His eyes snapped open, and he raised his hands slowly. Several unprintable words ran through his head. Despite all his precautions, some German had spotted him anyway.

"Well, what have we here?" drawled a quiet voice. "A lieutenant caught off his guard?" It sounded American. Southern, actually.

Hanley frowned. That voice sounded vaguely familiar, too. "Looks like it," he

admitted. Months of practice kept his voice from revealing the familiar tangle of worry and fear inside him.

"How can I be sure you ain't just a German dressed up like a lieutenant?"

"How can *I* be sure *you're* not a German?" Hanley replied.

The voice chuckled. "Oh, you can be plenty sure about that."

"Then come out where I can see you, and take this rifle barrel out from behind my ear," Hanley ordered. His initial fear was giving way to irritation and anger. He didn't have time for this – he needed to find Saunders.

"Reckon that won't do no harm. But you keep your hands up there where I can see 'em. An' just 'cause this rifle ain't pressin' your flesh don't mean it won't be aimed where it'll hurt ya."

"I'll keep that in mind." Hanley squinted through the dusk at the gangly figure that stepped in front of him, rifle still pointed at his head.

"Well, here I am, Lieutenant. Now you can see me, how're you goin' to convince me you ain't a Kraut?"

Hanley peered up at his captor. This soldier looked like... it had to be! "Lovelace?"

"Hey, how'd you know my name? Tip your helmet back so's I can see your face a mite clearer. Careful, though; no sudden moves."

Hanley obliged and let the soldier get as good a look at him as the waning light would allow.

"Well, if it ain't Lieutenant Hanley! My first platoon leader!" A wide grin replaced Moseby Lovelace's scowl. "What in tarnation are you doin' way on out here?"

"I'm trying to find Sergeant Saunders," Hanley answered, lowering his hands.

Lovelace lowered his rifle as well. "He lost?"

"I'm not sure." Hanley rose to his feet. "He got cut off from his squad somewhere near here."

"Didn't figure him for one to just get plain lost."

"Say, what are *you* doing out here, this close to enemy lines? And isn't this a little out of Able Company's territory? I heard they were south of here."

"I ain't with Able Company no more, Lieutenant," Lovelace explained. "I been in the intelligence business for a while now."

"Intelligence? You?" Hanley realized how horrible that sounded as soon as he'd said it, but Lovelace answered before he could try to rectify things.

"Yeah, seems I make a pretty good scout. You know I ain't never held with all that duckin' and hidin' and sittin' in holes in the ground that y'all do."

Hanley smiled. "I seem to remember that."

"Some of them S2 fellers heard what a good shot I am, an' how I can sneak up on a wide-awake Cherokee warrior, an' how I ain't never been lost since I was eight years old, don't matter how far you take me out in some cane break or swamp or what have you. An' they figured I was the boy for them. I been checkin' maps an' scoutin' German positions an' meetin' up with them good ol' Resistance boys ever since." Lovelace smiled proudly and pointed to his sleeve. "I been promoted to corporal, an' I just might make sergeant before we win this here skirmish y'all call a war."

"Congratulations."

"Why thank you, Lieutenant," Lovelace grinned again. "And good luck findin'

Sergeant Saunders; I hope he's right as the mail."

Hanley nodded. "I do too. I don't suppose you could spare any time to help me look for him? I could use a sharp pair of eyes." He knew he couldn't commandeer an S2 man, much as he might want to just order the corporal to help him.

"I don't want to seem unfriendly, but I gotta make me a rendezvous with a French feller in just a few minutes, so I'd best be gettin' on to where we're supposed to meet up."

"Where're you meeting him?"

"Ain't far from here, just an' ol' fallen tree me an' d'Yae both know of. That's my contact, Marc d'Yae. He speaks right good English for a foreigner, even if he do sound like a Yankee most of the time." Lovelace shrugged. "Which way you headin'?"

"North and east."

"Same here. I tell you what, you can have the use of this here sharp pair of eyes 'til we meet up with d'Yae. There on out, you're on your own."

"Fair enough."

Saunders staggered on through the trees for a while, then tried crawling on his hands and knees when his strength ebbed further. Finally he knew he could go no farther, at least not without rest. He found a little hole of sorts to hide in, two trees that had rotted and fallen down, one crossing over the other to form a lopsided X. Saunders crawled into the space where the two trunks met and curled up there, lying on his right side and cradling his wounded left hand. Maybe after he'd slept some, he could keep looking for the river.

"This here's where we's supposed to meet," Lovelace announced, pointing to a big decaying log lying on the floor of the darkened forest. "How far you reckon you got to go 'fore you find where you last heard from Saunders?"

"Not far." Hanley pulled his map out again, along with a small flashlight. Shielding the light with his hand so it wouldn't attract the wrong kind of attention, he studied the map. "Maybe five hundred yards, maybe six – it's close. Too bad it's too dark to see if he left a trail."

"Shoot, it ain't that dark. We've got us more'n half a moon up there. 'Sides, I've tracked me many a wounded rabbit by starlight back home."

Hanley shook his head. "If you say so."

"*Bon soir*," said a deep, smooth voice above their heads.

Hanley looked up, startled. He raised his rifle, but Lovelace laughed.

"Hey there, d'Yae," the corporal said to the swaying branches overhead.

"I see you brought along a friend, Lovelace." The voice above them had just a hint of a French accent, as if the speaker had spent many years speaking English, yet chose to retain traces of French pronunciation around the edges.

"Bout time you showed up," Lovelace retorted.

Marc d'Yae dropped from a large tree and landed on his feet. He wasn't tall, probably a good six inches shorter than Hanley, but his broad shoulders and the easy way

he walked toward them indicated a man in complete control of every movement, more innately coordinated than purposely athletic. He was probably in his mid-thirties, handsome in a rather aristocratic way, with a thin, well-trimmed mustache. Although he was dressed entirely in black, his turtleneck sweater and close-fitting pants somehow looked debonair. Even his knitted black cap was perched at a jaunty angle. "I apologize for my lateness," he said, actually making the tiniest bow.

"No harm done," Lovelace answered. "Lieutenant, meet Marc d'Yae, leader of the Resistance hereabouts. And d'Yae, this here's my former platoon leader, Lieutenant Hanley."

"Nice to meet you, Tarzan," Hanley joked.

"A pleasure." D'Yae did not sound pleased, but he gave Hanley a polite nod.

"Will you be assisting us tonight?" He looked the lieutenant up and down, as if making an initial assessment the way Hanley had moments earlier. Then he knelt at the foot of the tree, moved some brush and weeds, and picked up a black knapsack. When it made a dull clinking noise as he stood up, d'Yae stuck his hand inside and rearranged things.

The noise stopped, and he slung the pack over one shoulder.

"I'm afraid not," Hanley replied. "I'm searching for a missing squad leader. I was kind of hoping Lovelace here could help me find him." Marc d'Yae reminded him of too many people back home, polished and charming but never entirely sincere. He probably came from a long line of rich playboys gleefully handing down their money and power to each succeeding generation. Hanley wondered what was in the knapsack – it looked too heavy and bulky to just be the Frenchman's lunch. And that clinking sounded like glass. Glass bottles, in fact. A little light refreshment for the journey?

D'Yae raised his eyebrows. "Is it usual for an officer to personally search for missing soldiers? I mean no offense, it is just that I know so little of the workings of the American army."

Hanley shook his head. "It's not usual." In fact, he knew he could get into some serious trouble for this. He should be back at his CP studying the next day's plans and getting ready to meet with Captain Jampel, not traipsing around in the woods completely cut off from communication with the entire U.S. Army.

"I see. So he is a friend." For a moment the Frenchman's voice lost a little of its reserve.

"Yes."

"Where was he when you last heard from him?"

"Somewhere near here. He and his men were supposed to go see what lies beyond these trees, find out if there were any Germans patrolling that area to the east. They encountered more opposition than we'd expected."

"Out in the valley beyond these trees?" D'Yae frowned.

"Yes."

Marc d'Yae paused, thought for a moment, then said, "You understand we have very little time to spare, Lieutenant Hanley. The darkness lasts only so long."

"But he can't be far from here –" Hanley started to protest.

D'Yae held up a gloved hand, peremptorily cutting Hanley off. "I said we have little time to spare. But we will help you find your sergeant, your friend."

Hanley didn't like the way this Resistance fighter took charge so automatically. And he wasn't used to taking orders from civilians. "Oh, I wouldn't presume to ask *you*

to help me search." He smiled, the most charming and insincere a smile he had ever managed. "I'm sure you have much more important things to do."

"He may have seen things that will help us, so I wish to question him."

"He may not be in any condition to be questioned," Hanley snapped, forgetting his feigned politeness. Prowling around Nazi-infested woods in the middle of the chilly French night was probably d'Yae's idea of fun and excitement, a chance to escape the family mansion and play hero. And if that was the case, Hanley wanted as little to do with him as possible.

Marc d'Yae pretended not to notice the lieutenant's momentary loss of poise. "Do you believe he is wounded?"

"I'm afraid so."

Lovelace finally interrupted them. "Well, if he's wounded, then he can't have gotten very far, an' it shouldn't take us long to find him. Let's quit all this yammerin' and get searchin'!"

Hanley nodded, but made sure he walked behind the Frenchman as they moved out. There was something about this guy he just didn't trust. For one thing, he seemed always on guard, always considering just what information he should reveal before he spoke. And he seemed so artificial. He was too cold, too polished, like a marble statue of a Resistance fighter, not the real thing.

It didn't take long to reach the edge of the woods, where the trees gave way to a broad, sloping meadow. The moon shone down on the long blades, turning the valley into a swaying sea of grassy waves tossed by a faint breeze. Lt. Hanley gazed across the empty expanse and felt a shiver run up his spine. He felt as if unseen eyes stared back at him, unfriendly eyes that watched every breath he took. He turned to the others to see if they had the same reaction.

Moseby Lovelace was peering up and down the darkened tree line, now in one direction, now in the other. His expression was one of mild curiosity, not fear.

Marc d'Yae stared out over the meadow as Hanley had done, but his impassive face held no fear either. His eyebrows drew together over his dark eyes, and he pressed his lips together as he squinted to make the most of the moonlight.

"Do you see anything?" Hanley whispered.

D'Yae shook his head. "I am not sure."

Lovelace nodded. "Looks like there's been some tramplin' goin' on yonder." He pointed along the tree line to the north. "Could be signs of a struggle."

Hanley led off toward the patch of broken grass Lovelace had spotted. When they reached the spot, Lovelace grunted in satisfaction. "Sure enough was some kind of tussle here." He pointed to bullet marks in the trees, ripped-up grasses, gouged turf. If it hadn't been for those bullet marks, Hanley might have merely assumed a herd of enthusiastic cows had passed through. But Lovelace walked with confidence around the area, pointing to places where he declared men had lain or crawled. Marc d'Yae stood a little way off, still scanning the open valley beyond.

Lovelace stopped and knelt. He picked up a mass of tangled wires and metal. "Look familiar, Lieutenant?" he called softly.

Hanley approached slowly, although he didn't really have to be any nearer to know what it was. "It's a handy-talky," he said.

"That's what I thought. Sergeant Saunders have one of these on him?"

Hanley nodded, and reached for the broken radio. It felt sticky, and when he looked at his fingers he saw congealed blood smeared across them. He forced himself to examine the radio more closely, hoping to find some sign that it wasn't Saunders' after all. But when he saw the way the talk-button was jammed down into the receiver, stuck in the "send" position, he knew it was the one. That malfunctioning talk-button was the reason he'd been able to hear the firefight as it had happened.

Hanley dropped the useless radio and wiped his hands on his trousers, leaving sticky smears of blood. Saunders' blood, maybe. "Find anything else?" he asked, his whisper fainter than he'd intended.

Lovelace had moved off behind him, crouching, studying the ground. "Whoever had that radio wasn't killed," he announced.

Hanley turned around slowly, mistrusting this chance for hope. "How do you know?"

"Well, he lay here a good while by the handy-talky, and a lot of Germans walked around him. Got their boot prints all around, but none there under where his body must've stayed. An' they left, went back out into that valley. Whoever was lyin' here, he sat up and crawled off this way." Lovelace stopped, bent down, and picked something up. "He left this here."

It was a helmet covered in camouflage parachute fabric. Hanley could remember the day Saunders had sewn that cloth over his helmet. Said it would make it easier for his men to recognize and follow him in the confusion of battle.

Slowly, Hanley took the helmet from Lovelace and turned it over and over in his hands, feeling the worn material shift a little over the hard metal surface underneath. There was a little blood smeared on the outside, but none inside. Somehow that small fact allowed Hanley to trust the hope that flickered and sputtered within him.

Lovelace kept following the trail back into the woods. He stopped by a massive tree, studied the bark, then knelt and peered at the ground below. "He walked over here, leaned against this tree, an' fell down." Lovelace picked up another small object, held it out to Hanley. "He dropped his canteen."

"No wonder," Hanley replied as he fingered the two bullet holes. One entrance and one exit. One more bullet the sergeant had escaped. But how many had found their mark?

"He was moving faster now," Lovelace commented. "His footsteps are farther apart." He led off into the woods, traveling slightly uphill. Lt. Hanley and Marc d'Yae followed.

A noise awakened Sgt. Saunders. He held his breath and listened again, trying to identify the sounds around him. A rustle. A twig snap. Someone, or something, was coming nearer and nearer.

He reached for his Thompson, then remembered it wasn't there. No grenades either, although he searched his jacket pockets just in case. And no knife, as usual. He was helpless and he knew it. He fought the onslaught of panic, willing his breathing to remain shallow and noiseless. It was plenty dark in the forest – maybe he would remain undetected.

The noises came closer. It sounded like footsteps for sure now, and from more than one pair of feet. Maybe it was a deer out for a midnight stroll. Or a lost cow. Or, of course, just a few German soldiers hunting for him.

The footsteps stopped. Saunders stared out into the darkness, both afraid and morbidly curious about what would appear. He clenched his sweating right hand, determined to take one final swing at his doom before it claimed him.

Then Sgt. Saunders heard the last thing he was expecting: the voice of a friend. "Saunders!" Hanley whispered. "Saunders, is that you?"

"Yeah," the sergeant replied, his voice hoarse from fear and lack of water.

Lt. Hanley appeared at the mouth of the little crawl space formed by the two fallen trees. "Finally," was all he said as he knelt beside the wounded Saunders.

"You said it," Saunders agreed, closing his eyes.

By the light of Hanley's flashlight held in d'Yae's steady hand, Lovelace and Hanley bandaged up the wounds on Saunders' back. "You were mighty lucky, Sergeant," Lovelace commented. "You must've ducked just in time – these are all just grazes."

"You're kidding," Saunders groaned. He sat huddled on the ground, hugging his legs to his bare chest as they dressed his back.

"Naw, not one of them bullets is still in you. Just sliced you up like you got yourself caught on some real thick barbed wire is all."

Saunders straightened up so they could wind cloth around his torso to keep his bandages secure. "I meant you actually approved of me dodging a bullet or two? I seem to recall you were set pretty firmly against all forms of hiding." Saunders tried to smile, but it turned into a pained grimace.

"I reckon hidin's got its uses now an' then," Lovelace conceded, his own grin spreading wide.

They gently pulled Saunders' tattered shirt back on over his bandages, and his jacket over that.

"What are your plans now, Lieutenant Hanley?" It was the first time Marc d'Yae had spoken since they'd asked him to hold the flashlight.

Hanley stood up and brushed the dirt from his trouser knees. "I need to get him back to our lines – these bandages are only temporary."

"May I ask him some questions?"

"You could talk to me, you know," Saunders put in, looking up at them from his seat on the forest floor. "I'm not dead, or hadn't you noticed?"

To Hanley's surprise, an actual smile spread across d'Yae's face. It made him look much younger, maybe still in his late twenties. "I had. I apologize for my lack of manners, Sergeant."

"What do you need to know?"

"Anything you saw when you reached the edge of the woods, where the trees meet the open valley." D'Yae squatted beside Saunders so they were at eye level with each other.

Hanley frowned, noting that d'Yae's voice sounded soft and kind now. Deferential, almost. Not at all like the abrupt aristocrat who seemed reluctant to deal

with Hanley. Why the change?

"We didn't see much of anything," Saunders answered. "It was pretty empty when we got there, and we started out a little, since it looked safe. Then ten or twelve Krauts started firing from where they were hidden in the grass. We'd've been okay just fighting them, but more kept coming, maybe twenty or thirty, all told. Most of them had Schmeissers and grenades. And they kept crawling forward. Like they were trying to push us back into the woods."

D'Yae narrowed his eyes. "Interesting."

"When they got closer, they jumped up and ran toward us. That's when I called you, Lieutenant."

Hanley nodded. "Right." He felt suddenly left out, as if d'Yae and Saunders didn't particularly need him anymore. They had things under control on their own. Of course, that was ridiculous – Saunders probably couldn't walk two feet without assistance. But then, the sergeant often made him feel unnecessary, as if Hanley was only there to relay orders from Capt. Jampel to Sgt. Saunders, then pass information back again. While he had to sit at his desk and study maps, Saunders was out there in the real war, actually doing something constructive. Making a difference.

"About that time, I got hit and lost consciousness," Saunders continued. "When I woke up, my squad was gone, but there were still some Germans around. Finally they left too." Saunders looked over at Hanley. "Did the squad –"

"They made it," Hanley reassured him. "At least, I met up with them on their way back to the CP, and they were fine then. Except for some minor wounds. Doc had them patched up already."

"Right." Saunders nodded. "Good."

"You said it was as if the Germans tried to push you into the woods?" d'Yae asked. "Why do you think that?"

Saunders answered, "Because they didn't try to flank or surround us. They just spread out in a line and came forward, forcing us to fall back. They had plenty of men; they could have gotten into the trees behind us and caught us in a crossfire, totally wiped us out. But they didn't. It was more like –" he paused.

"Like what?" d'Yae persisted.

"Like they were guarding something."

D'Yae nodded. "The Germans are hiding something down in that valley. We have suspected it for a long time, but we can never get close enough to find out what."

"So that's what you're doing out here tonight? Trying to find out what's down there?" Hanley asked.

D'Yae looked up and nodded. "Corporal Lovelace has shown a remarkable ability to move without being seen. When he managed to creep up on me in a stretch of woods I have known all my life, I knew he had a good chance of finding out what the Germans are hiding."

"Now I don't feel so bad that he got the drop on me today," Hanley commented.

Lovelace grinned. "I gotta admit, I'm a sneaky devil. My mama never did find out who it was kept stealin' all them fresh peach pies off her windowsill."

"Well, good luck," Hanley told them.

"And what about you?" asked d'Yae, rising to his feet and settling his knapsack over one shoulder. "How do you plan to get your sergeant back to your position on the

river? It is at least two miles from here."

"We'll manage," Hanley said. He wasn't sure how, but finding Saunders had to be harder than getting him back to the CP. "And how do you know where our position is, anyway?" He narrowed his eyes, suspicious again.

D'Yae shrugged. "I know. After all, I am the leader of the Resistance in this area – I do not have merely one pair of eyes and ears, but many." He paused, then added, "I have a proposed solution for you, Lieutenant."

"I'm listening." Hanley tried to remain polite, but he had trouble hiding his impatience.

"We help you to hide Sergeant Saunders in a secure place; you accompany us on our errand. When we return, we make a litter and help you carry him back."

"And what if we get killed or captured?" countered Hanley. "Then what happens to Saunders? He just dies out here alone?"

"Go with them, Lieutenant," Saunders said, his voice quiet yet firm.

"No!" Hanley struggled to control his rising anger. What right had this Frenchman to ask him to abandon a wounded friend and march straight into dangers unknown? Getting to do more than sit behind a desk was losing its attraction. As tired of he was of riding around in jeeps and sending messages out over the radio, as good as it was to feel useful again, to make a difference in the "real war"... he wouldn't abandon Saunders. He wouldn't!

"I'm too weak," Saunders said. "I'd never make it back anyway. You'd have to carry me, and it's too far for you to do that."

"It's only a couple miles – we can make it that far."

"Up and down the hills? Through the trees?" Saunders shook his head. "They're our best chance. My best chance."

"No. I won't do it, and that's final."

Saunders shook his head but didn't say anything else. He just gave Hanley one of those stern looks that meant, *We both know that's not true.*

Hanley argued, "What if we got caught?"

"I'm aware of the dangers, Lieutenant," Saunders said dryly. "It's not my head that's wounded."

"There is a cave near here," d'Yae interrupted. "You should be safe there, Sergeant."

"How far?" Hanley demanded.

"Not very far. A few hundred yards; you can almost see it from here."

"And you know this because – ?"

"Because I grew up here. I almost lived in these woods when I was a boy."

"And yet you still can't find a way into that valley on your own – you need Lovelace and me to do that."

"There were no Nazis guarding it when I was a child."

Saunders frowned. "Lovelace, d'Yae, could you give us a minute?"

"Certainly." D'Yae again lost the annoyed tone he'd been using with Hanley. "Call me when you have made your decision." He moved away without further comment.

"Be right over yonder if you need me," Lovelace added, following d'Yae.

As soon as the others were a few yards away, Saunders asked, "What's this all

about?"

Hanley knelt on one knee beside him so they could keep their voices soft. "You mean, why don't I want to go with them?"

Saunders gave him another stern look.

"I don't trust him, that's why."

"D'Yae?"

"Yes."

"Why not?"

Hanley looked up at the dark patches of sky crisscrossed with tree branches. "I just don't. I grew up with people like him, I know his type, so smooth, so correct. I don't know why he wants me to go with them, but you can bet it's got nothing to do with helping you. Or me. He's got some mission of his own, and he'll use anyone and anything to accomplish it."

"Wouldn't you?"

Hanley ignored that. "Besides, I think he's hiding something."

"Of course."

"What?" Hanley's shock sharpened his tone more than he'd intended, so he added, softer, "What do you mean?"

"Of course he's hiding something. Probably a lot of things. He's the leader of the Resistance around here, right? He has a thousand secrets, and who knows how many lives depend on him keeping those secrets. And sure, he's smooth. The German's haven't caught him yet, have they? You've got to be either very slick or very lucky in the game he's playing, you know that. He strikes me as both."

"You trust him, then?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" Didn't Saunders see through the Frenchman's polished façade? Hanley felt certain d'Yae had more on his mind than just investigating a guarded valley.

"He's seen enough war to know what he's doing."

"How do you know?"

"Look, you don't want to trust him? Fine." Saunders was obviously growing exasperated. "I do. So does Lovelace."

That was true – Lovelace obviously trusted the Frenchman, just as Saunders did. Why couldn't Hanley? Had he been in this war so long that he had lost the ability to accept strangers without constantly suspecting their motives? He shook his head. "You really do, don't you. Enough to stay here in pain for a couple of hours, maybe longer, while we go out there and – I don't even know what he expects me to do, how he thinks I can help."

Saunders nodded.

Hanley frowned. "Fine." He stood up again and in a low voice called to the others, "Okay, let's go."

Lovelace and Hanley carried Saunders to the cave, following d'Yae. The cave was small, really just a fissure in some rocks at the base of a hill surrounded by a small clearing. None of them could fit inside along with Saunders; they had to let him crawl in on his own.

"Here, you'll need this." Hanley handed in Lovelace's canteen. "It's nearly full." Saunders had drained Hanley's canteen when they first found him.

"And this." D'Yae reached inside his right boot and withdrew a slim pistol. "Here, take a few extra rounds as well." He pulled those from his knapsack. "I hope you will not need to use them."

"Me too." Saunders accepted the pistol, examined it in the dim light. "You sure you won't want it where you're going?"

"I have another."

"We shouldn't be gone long," Lovelace said. "Couple hours at the most, I figure."

"You'd better get going. Won't stay dark forever," Saunders reminded them.

D'Yae led the way now, picking a careful path along the edge of the trees. They moved steadily down a gentle slope until the valley began to widen out into a level plain. D'Yae motioned for them to drop to their bellies. He signaled for Lovelace to come closer and whispered something in his ear. Lovelace nodded and crawled away into the tall grasses.

Five minutes passed. Then ten. Twenty. Hanley and d'Yae ignored each other. But Hanley eyed d'Yae's knapsack, trying to tell what it might contain. Judging by its lumpy bulges and the clinking it had made earlier, there were at least two glass bottles stashed inside. And of course, there'd been the extra ammo d'Yae had loaned Saunders. But that didn't account for all the bulges.

Nearly half an hour after he'd left, Lovelace suddenly appeared on their left. He crawled close to d'Yae, and they held a whispered consultation. Hanley wondered if they'd ever care to let him in on their little secrets. He was just about to crawl over and ask what was going on when they seemed to come to an agreement. D'Yae beckoned Hanley to follow them, and they crawled away until they reached a shallow drainage ditch. Lovelace whispered in Hanley's ear, "Hope you don't mind gettin' a little dirty."

Hanley rolled his eyes. Not only did he not want to be here in the first place, but this was his last clean-ish uniform. He couldn't show up at the Company HQ tomorrow covered in mud... but he had no choice. He'd agreed to help them; he hadn't wanted to, but as usual, Saunders talked him into it.

They slid down into the ditch, which had an inch or two of soupy mud at the bottom. The slippery mud let them crawl a little faster than before, their bodies sliding forward instead of dragging on the ground. But after only a minute or so of slithering in the muck, the three men looked like creatures from some second-rate horror serial that made girls in movie houses squeal and clutch at the arms of their obliging boyfriends. But Hanley realized the mud probably made them less noticeable – clean white faces and hands tended to reflect moonlight a little too well.

Eventually, Lovelace stopped. D'Yae carefully peered up over the edge of the ditch, then motioned for Lovelace and Hanley to do the same. Lovelace pointed back the way they'd come, toward the hills.

Hanley squinted, trying to find anything of



interest in all that dark countryside. Beside him, d'Yae gasped. Evidently he'd seen something Hanley hadn't. The lieutenant kept staring and slowly realized that there was a very square patch of darker blackness in the side of the nearest hill. Corners that sharp must be man-made. But what could it be? It was much too big for a door.

Lovelace motioned them close, this time letting Hanley in on the whispering. He barely breathed the words, "Guards pass through here every five minutes. Keep to the ditch bottom an' don't move, an' they won't see you."

D'Yae nodded. "You desire a closer look?"

"Yup." Lovelace was gone before Hanley could argue.

Hanley and d'Yae flattened themselves in the muddy ditch. Although there hadn't been a hard frost yet in that part of Normandy, the ground was cold, and soon Hanley and d'Yae were too. Guards did indeed pass them every five minutes or so, but none of them bothered looking into ditch.

Hanley considered just crawling back the way they'd come. He obviously wasn't needed here – Lovelace and d'Yae had things well in hand. He was more worried about getting Saunders back to the CP in one piece than finding out what the Krauts might be hiding in this valley. In fact, he had only one real reason to stay on his belly in the ditch: d'Yae. He had to admit the Frenchman could handle himself when it came to crawling in the mud under the Nazis' noses. But Hanley still didn't particularly trust him. Might be a good idea to stick around and see what he was up to.

Lovelace wasn't gone nearly as long this time. He slid back into the drainage ditch just in front of d'Yae. "Y'all're never gonna believe this," he whispered. "You know what them Krauts've done? They've gone an' built themselves an airfield."

"An airfield?" Hanley whispered back. "Here? How?"

"They hollowed out that hill an' they've got four or five little airplanes in there. That big ol' black square you see's the door. An' they've made a cement runway on down through this flat stretch."

"Our reconnaissance planes would have seen a runway and a door," Hanley objected. This kept getting more and more ludicrous. An airfield? Absurd. Next thing you knew, d'Yae would decide they should commandeer one of the planes, fly to Germany, and bomb Hitler in his big Nazi bed.

"The door's got grass on the outside so's it'll look like the hill when they swing it shut. An' they painted all kinds of little stripes on the cement, makin' that look like the rest of the ground. Don't look like they're quite done with everything – some of the planes is missin' a few parts an' such."

D'Yae nodded. "They must plan to attack the bombers you Americans send over every night. This would explain why so many trucks moved in and out of this valley a few months ago – they must have been carrying building supplies and airplane parts."

Hanley whispered, "Do you think you could pinpoint this exact spot on a map? We'll call in an air strike from my CP and –"

D'Yae cut him off. "Two Resistance men gave their lives trying to find out what was in those trucks. I'm not going to wait."

"If we just call in an air strike, they can pulverize this whole valley."

D'Yae countered, "But we can't be sure the planes under the hill will be destroyed. They have probably reinforced the hanger, expecting just such an attack. And the runway would be easy enough to repair, as long as the hanger and planes remain intact."

"Well, what do you suggest?" asked Hanley, not bothering to hide his annoyance. If d'Yae wanted to win the war single-handedly, let him.

"I will go take care of those planes. But I am not quite so adept as Lovelace at making my way unseen across open fields."

Lovelace grinned. "You just didn't have no opportunity to learn right, that's all."

"I will need a diversion. Give me five minutes, then crawl back toward the trees as noticeably as you can."

"And have thirty or forty Germans on our backs?" Hanley objected.

"If they continue their previous behavior, they will simply push you back into the hills. Make your way back to the sergeant and I will meet you there if I can. If I have not returned by dawn, leave without me."

"And just what are you going to do?" asked Hanley.

With a grim smile, d'Yae answered, "What we in the Resistance do best. Merely a little sabotage." He rolled the edges of his knitted cap down until it covered his entire face, with holes cut only for his eyes.

"You're crazy!" Hanley shook his head. "Just leave now with us and we'll call in an air strike. I'm sure our bombers can destroy that hill and everything in it. Even if it takes a couple runs to do it."

"I cannot take that chance. Too much is at stake here. Five minutes." With that, d'Yae slid up over the edge of the ditch and slithered away.

"He's crazy!" Hanley repeated, shaking his head in disbelief. "Why won't he just wait for an air strike?"

"You know them two men he said died?" Lovelace whispered.

"Yeah?"

"One of 'em was his younger brother, Luc."

"Oh." That *would* make a difference, Hanley supposed.

Lovelace waited for one of the German guards to pass, then continued, "The Germans thought it was Luc that was leadin' the Resistance. They came to the d'Yae home and shot him in the family parlor. Right in front of Marc an' their father an' their youngest brother."

Hanley couldn't think of anything to say. They sat in silence for the remaining four minutes, Hanley trying to decide whether he trusted d'Yae more now that he knew some of his history. Revenge for a brother's death could be motive enough for a lone, suicidal attack on the German airbase. Saunders might have been right – maybe d'Yae had seen enough war to know what he was doing. Or at least to know why he was doing it. Maybe he wasn't just some spoiled rich boy out for a lark after all.

Finally, Hanley caught Lovelace's eye, tapped his watch, and mouthed, "Let's go." They clambered out of the drainage ditch and moved back to the trees, not crawling this time, but crouching down and running.

A harsh German voice called something unintelligible through the darkness. The Kraut sent a spray of bullets chasing after the two Americans, then started running after them himself. He shouted something else, and more Nazi soldiers joined the chase.

Hanley half-turned and shot two rounds from his rifle, then kept running. A few seconds later, Lovelace turned and fired too. They neared the trees, but at least twenty pairs of German jackboots pounded the ground behind them. Hanley turned and fired again just as he reached the edge of the woods. The Germans returned fire but, instead of

pushing forward toward the Americans, they dropped to the ground, disappearing into the waving grasses.

Lovelace and Hanley dropped too. Hanley thought Lovelace yelled something through the noisy gunfire, but they were at least ten feet apart now and Hanley was too busy firing and reloading to ask the corporal to repeat himself.

It wasn't long before Hanley was down to his second-to-last magazine. Some of the Germans were crawling closer in the grass, and he and Lovelace couldn't drop all of them. "Time to pull out!" Hanley shouted, still firing.

"Think it's long enough?" Lovelace hollered back.

"Let's hope so!" Hanley began crawling backwards, farther and farther into the trees. Sure enough, the Germans stayed on the valley's perimeter just like Saunders had reported. "Let's run for it," Hanley told Lovelace. They sprinted away, making as much noise as they could to let the Krauts know they were leaving. Once they figured they were out of earshot of the German sentries, they stopped crashing through the brush and crouched behind a couple of large trees. There they waited for several minutes to see if they were being followed. But it seemed the Krauts had once again stayed in their valley instead of pursuing the interlopers. So Hanley and Lovelace quietly worked their way back toward the cave where they'd left Saunders, confident they weren't bringing any German tagalongs back with them.

It seemed to take a lot longer to get back to the cave than it'd taken to reach the valley. But as they finally neared the cave, Hanley and Lovelace realized their problems were far from over. Loud voices spewing German words came from the area of the cave. Lovelace and Hanley dropped to the ground. "I'll take a look," Lovelace whispered. "Stay here."

"Nothing doing," Hanley retorted. "I'm going too."

"But – "

Hanley scowled. "Who's the lieutenant here?"

"Suit yourself." Lovelace crawled forward, inching his way through the underbrush with Hanley close behind.

It didn't take long to get close enough to see what was going on, but to Hanley it felt like several hours passed. He was itchy with impatience and kept berating himself for leaving Saunders. He should have stayed with him, let Lovelace and d'Yae go play spies on their own. If only he'd started back with Saunders like he'd wanted to. Now Saunders was either a prisoner or dead and it was all Hanley's fault.

At least a dozen Nazi soldiers formed a semi-circle in the open space at the mouth of the little cave. In the middle of the clearing, an officer stood looking down at something on the ground and talking loudly. Hanley wasn't close enough to make out the words, but the snatches he did hear told him that the officer was speaking English. Saunders must still be alive.

Hanley tapped Lovelace on the shoulder and pointed first to himself, then off to the right. Lovelace nodded, pointed to himself and to the ground ahead. They moved off in their self-appointed paths, each hoping to get close enough to find some way of rescuing the captured sergeant.

When he was close enough that he could make out most of the officer's English words, Hanley stopped. He could see more clearly now. Saunders knelt in front of the Nazi, his hands behind his head. His coat looked bloodier than Hanley had remembered

– he must be bleeding through his bandages. But he had that stubborn expression that Hanley had long ago learned meant there was no use trying to persuade him. Threats, promises, violence – nothing would sway Saunders.

Of course, the Nazi didn't know that. "Tell me where the rest of your men are," he ordered, his nasal voice shredding every word. "This silence is pointless – we will find them with or without your help! They will never escape us!"

Hanley could see Saunders raise his eyebrows in that cocky way that never failed to infuriate Hanley, or anyone else receiving the look. Saunders spoke, his voice thin and tired but not defeated. "If you're gonna find them anyway, why bother asking me where they are?"

The Nazi officer slapped Saunders, the blow sending the sergeant sideways onto the ground. Hanley grimaced. Saunders landed on his injured left hand, then rolled onto his back. That had to hurt like fury, but Saunders hadn't made a sound. He just slowly righted himself and put his hands back behind his head. This time he splayed his knees a little further apart to give him better balance.

Hanley had to find a way to kill those Germans without any stray bullets hitting Saunders. He edged his way a little more to the right, but had to stop short of the small clearing. If only he could get around up that hill, he could fire down at them over the sergeant's head. But it was bare and rocky, with no cover anywhere. He hoped Lovelace was having better luck forming a rescue plan.

A muffled boom and a burst of light to the south interrupted Hanley's planning. The ground shuddered, throwing the Krauts a little off-balance, although none of them lost their footing. Saunders managed to stay upright as well. Most of the Krauts lost interest in their prisoner as they looked back in the direction of their hidden airfield. The blast had obviously come from that vicinity.

The Nazi officer pulled out a Luger and pointed it at Saunders' head. Then he shouted some orders in German and most of his soldiers started off through the forest, undoubtedly to reinforce the airfield.

Hanley figured this would be their best chance – with only five Germans left in the clearing, he and Lovelace might just be able to free Saunders. He started crawling forward, but stopped as three Krauts reemerged from the woods. Stumbling in front of them was a chagrined Lovelace, hands on his head.

"I told you we would find your other men!" the Nazi officer said triumphantly.

Saunders said nothing.

"Well," the officer continued, "if you will not cooperate with me, perhaps he will." He holstered his Luger and motioned for his men to push Lovelace closer. "On your knees," he ordered the corporal.

Lovelace knelt, his back to Hanley. "My name is Corporal Moseby Lovelace," he drawled. "You want my rank and serial number too, or can you read 'em off my dog tags?"

"I care nothing for who you are," the officer snapped. "I only want to know where the rest of your men are hiding. And what you have to do with that explosion."

"What explosion?"

"The one over there just now." The officer gestured in the vague direction of the valley.

"Is that what that was? I thought it was some kind of earthquake or somethin'.

You tellin' me somethin' over yonder exploded?"

Hanley almost smiled. When Lovelace wanted to play dumb, he went all out. But now Hanley was in a fix. Eight well-armed Krauts versus himself and two prisoners were not exactly what he'd call attractive odds.

Something tapped Hanley's foot. He froze for a moment. They'd caught him too... and he'd never heard them coming. He'd been out of the field for too long, he'd lost his edge. Everyone could sneak up on him. Now how would they escape? They'd surely be blamed for that explosion in the valley. What else would three American soldiers be doing out in those woods in the middle of the night?

Hanley raised his hands a little and looked behind him. There, crouched in the shadow of a large tree, was Marc d'Yae, his mask rolled up into just a cap again. He put a finger to his lips, warning Hanley not to speak. Then he motioned for the lieutenant to follow him and crept off into the darkness.

Hanley felt torn – should he follow the Frenchman? He didn't want to move out of sight of Saunders and Lovelace. What if the Krauts returned to their valley while he was gone, taking their prisoners along? And what did d'Yae have in mind, anyway? Did he want to just sneak off and leave Saunders and Lovelace to the Nazis?

But Hanley couldn't do much rescuing on his own anyway, so why not find out what d'Yae was up to. Hanley crawled after the Frenchman. After putting some distance between themselves and the Nazi-filled clearing, they stopped. "You call that a *little* sabotage?" Hanley whispered.

"It worked, no?" d'Yae whispered back. "No more planes, no more hidden hanger. It even got some of these Germans to leave."

"But they captured Lovelace when they left."

"So we will rescue him and your sergeant."

"I suppose you have a plan all worked out." It's hard to make a whisper sound sarcastic, but Hanley thought he managed rather nicely.

D'Yae nodded. "I will come in from the left, you from the right, and we will catch them in our crossfire."

"And kill Saunders and Lovelace too? Nothing doing."

"We will aim high. They are kneeling; they will be safe."

"No." Hanley was through following orders from this Frenchman. It was time to start giving some instead. "The Germans might shoot the prisoners. It's too risky. I have a better idea."

D'Yae made a low kind of growling noise in his throat. He obviously wasn't any happier than Hanley about being told what to do. "A better idea? What?"

"You set off some of your explosives near here and draw their fire while I rush in from the opposite direction."

"No good."

"Why?"

"I am out of explosives." D'Yae held up his empty knapsack as proof.

At least now he knew what'd been in the knapsack. "Okay, then use these." Hanley dug three grenades from inside his jacket and held them toward d'Yae.

"Maybe. I could throw these on the edge of the clearing."

"But away from Saunders and Lovelace," Hanley reminded him.

"While they are confused, you could climb up that hill and fire from above."

Hanley grinned. "Now you're talking."

"There's a good tree back where I found you. I'll throw from there."

"Fine. Give me a couple minutes to get closer to the hill."

"Right." D'Yae took the grenades and crawled away.

Hanley made his way to where the trees ended as the hill sloped sharply upward. He crouched there, cradling his rifle and waiting.

With a satisfying crack and whoosh, the first grenade burst behind two soldiers standing on the opposite side of the clearing from where Saunders and Lovelace knelt. The remaining Germans wheeled in alarm and began firing into the woods, and the two American prisoners fell to the ground and covered their bare heads with their hands.

Hanley started up the side of the hill, trying to remain as quiet as he could. The Germans kept firing into the woods in the direction they thought the grenade had come. A second blast on the other side of the clearing confused them, and the officer ordered several soldiers to fire in that direction instead.

It didn't take long for Hanley to reach the top. He slid forward on his stomach until he could look down into the mayhem caused by eight Krauts trying to locate and eliminate their attacker.

Hanley sighted along his rifle and fired. The Nazi officer stopped shouting mid-order and collapsed. Hanley dropped two more Krauts before the others could realize his shots came from atop the hill. They began firing at him, stumbling back toward the trees in an attempt to find cover. They were ignoring their prisoners, and Hanley could see Lovelace crawling back toward the protection of the cave and dragging Saunders with him.

The last grenade killed three Germans all trying to hide behind one tree. The remaining two Krauts turned around and ran into the woods, making a lot of noise in their hurry to return to what remained of their airfield.

Hanley slid down the hill and rushed into the clearing, jumping over two dead bodies in his hurry to get to Saunders. He dropped to his knees beside the motionless sergeant, certain he had failed. Failed more completely than even in his worst nightmare. He had practically gone AWOL to find Saunders, but when he did find him, what did he do? Why, he left Saunders alone and followed an unknown Frenchman on some fool crusade. He'd lost the closest thing to a brother he'd ever have and it was no one's fault but his own.

Lovelace sat up beside the sergeant. "Hey there, Lieutenant," he said.

Hanley kept staring at Saunders. "He's dead."

"Dead? I don't see no fresh wounds. Just them we bandaged up earlier."

Lovelace leaned forward and gently turned Saunders' body onto its side. "Could be he's just stunned from that last grenade – it threw a good bit of debris this way."

Sure enough, Saunders' eyelids fluttered, then half-opened. He looked up at Hanley and asked, "What happened?"

"Oh," Hanley said, glancing over to where d'Yae was swinging down out of his tree, "just a little sabotage."

Saunders opened his eyes again. "D'Yae?" he asked.

"Naturally," d'Yae answered as he walked toward them.

Hanley rolled his eyes. Of course d'Yae would have good hearing to go with his excellent eyesight and innate agility. Not to mention a grenade-throwing arm that would

rival Saunders'.

"The planes?" Lovelace inquired, getting to his feet.

D'Yae nodded. "Gone."

"Planes? What planes?" Saunders asked, his voice stronger.

Hanley smiled. "It's a long story." He stood up. "Let's make a litter and get you out of here. We'll have plenty of time to explain when we get back."

end

