

A Promise Made

By: Miss Maquis



The poem used in the story was written by codemaster Leo Marks for Violette Szabo, a Special Operations Executive agent serving in France.

The rain drizzled down, making the alley cold and foreboding. A shadow was pressed against a wall, waiting. The sound of marching foot steps was getting closer, boot steps muffled on the wet street. Still waiting, the shadow held its breath and readied its weapon, a heavy wrench. Almost time.

The town clock struck midnight as the shadow struck the first German sentry. The second sentry rounded the corner and the shadow knocked him unconscious as well. A second, smaller shadow merged with the first, and the pair dragged the limp Germans into the darkness of the alley.

Working rapidly, the sentries were stripped of their uniforms, gear, and boots, and then neatly gagged and trussed. The two shadows dressed themselves in their newly acquired clothing and stepped out into the gloom. The clock was now ticking against them.

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It had been a week of rain. The precipitation had turned the dirt roads into endless stretches of mud which clung to every thing. The falling rain created new mires and failed to wash away the already established muck. Even the vast army of men and machines could not defeat nature's most depressing element. To make things worse, when the sun did appear it brought along energy sucking humidity.

During this depressing weather the first squad from the second platoon of K Company had been sent out on a recon patrol in German territory. They had been lucky on this assignment and were making their way back to their lines with the needed information.

Sergeant Saunders held the point position, followed by Cajé, Brockmeyer, Doc, Littlejohn, Billy, with Kirby bringing up the rear. Estimating their position, Saunders figured they would reach their lines if they continued going through the night, which was approaching fast. It would be a tough stretch, but they could make it. Images of a dry place to sleep and a hot supper made the long wet push worth while.

These thoughts came to the sergeant while he also kept a constant watch of the landscape surrounding them. In a few more hours the squad would be safe in Allied territory, but until then Saunders was about to let his responsibilities slacken. The patrol was moving along steadily through the wet, muddy forest. As they rounded a bend, Saunders saw something that momentarily threw him off his guard. Apparently the pair of Germans were just as surprised.

The enemies stared at each other for half a second. The Germans sat frozen motionless on a fallen tree, holding their partially eaten rations. Saunders was the first to react.

"Hands up!" he hollered, his Thompson leveled on the two.

Saunders was unsure of what happened next, but the closer, larger German suddenly moved, thrusting his companion to the ground. Finger tightening on the

Thompson's trigger, Saunders fired. The first German jerked as the bullets smashed into his body, and then he fell backwards to the earth, legs bent over the log.

The squad surrounded the Germans in record time, rifles ready.

"Don't move!" Saunders barked to the second German.

"Nicht schießen Sie! Nicht schießen Sie!"
the voice squeaked with urgency and fear.

"Caje, Billy, see if there are any others."
Saunders ordered. The two soldiers nodded and quickly moved out.

With Kirby, Brockmeyer, and Littlejohn covering the Germans with their rifles, Saunders removed the pistol from the wounded German, threw it into the brush, and then jerked the smaller one up to his feet. Roughly, he took the Luger out of its holster and tossed it after the first one. Two Mauser rifles propped on the log also. He unloaded them before throwing them into the brush as well. He started to search the smaller one for other weapons. Trying to twist away, the German exclaimed, "Hands off, you bloody Yank! I don't have any other weapons!"



Keeping a firm grip on the soldier's shoulder, Saunders knocked the German's helmet off with his other hand. The German was female. Pale, angry eyes glared out from under a fringe of cropped dirty blond hair.

"What in the blazes!" Kirby stared with mouth agape, but the Browning Automatic Rifle never wavered.

The prisoner and Saunders locked glares as if in contest, light blue against ice blue. Acknowledging the first round, the German broke the silence first.

"We are both subjects of the British Empire." the clipped English accent was slow, heavy. "We need your help."

"Like I'm supposed to believe that," Saunders growled. His grip tightened.

"Fine," she snapped. "Don't believe me. But let your medic look at my partner!" Her head jerked over to the shot German. In the silence that followed, the wounded man's ragged breath could be clearly heard.

"Doc," Saunders spoke after the lengthy pause.

The medic started from the sharpness in Saunder's tone, but he moved over to the wounded man. Kneeling down, he gently pulled back the uniform from the blood soaked chest, and then rummaged in his rucksack for bandages.

"Thank you." the woman said, in a voice that was a few degrees milder.

Saunders grunted, and then finished his interrupted shake down. The woman's face turned scarlet, but she bit her lip and didn't speak. Not finding anything, Saunders took a step back, locking gazes again.

"Satisfied?" she asked through clenched teeth.

Ignoring her question, Saunders shifted to his medic. "Doc?"

"He's bad, Sarge." Doc said softly. "I'm trying to stop the bleeding, but he's losing a lot."

Nodding, Saunders told him, "Patch him up the best you can."

"Well?" the woman demanded.

Saunders's arm shot out and grabbed her shoulder and pushed her down to the log. "Just you sit there and don't move." he growled threateningly. A frown tugged the corners of his mouth downward, and his countenance showed that the sergeant was contemplating his next course of action. Fingers moving on their own subconscious accord, Saunders performed a tactical reload by replacing the half empty magazine with a full one from his pocket.

After giving Saunders a final glare from her seated position, the woman in German uniform turned her attention to the wounded man. The medic was applying sulfa powder and bandages liberally. Most of the uniform jacket had been cut away, showing three bullet wounds high on the German's chest. The man's breathing was laborious, his face ashen, and he appeared to be unconscious.

"May I help you?" the woman's low voice cracked with worry and apprehension.

Doc glanced over his shoulder and received an affirming nod from the sergeant. There was no apparent harm in letting her help. "Hold this bandage in place." he instructed

Caje and Billy returned at that moment. Shaking his head, the scout informed, "No sign of other Krauts."

"Alright. Caje, watch the perimeter." Saunders had made up his mind on what to do next, "Littlejohn, Nelson, you two build a stretcher--we're leaving as soon as Doc's done."

Caje nodded and circled around the squad. His dark eyes had taken in the scene before him, yet he did not commenting on the peculiarities that presented themselves. However Billy couldn't help exclaiming, "A girl? How the..."

"Get going Nelson!" Saunders wouldn't stand for idle gawking.

Billy followed Littlejohn to help him cut two saplings they could use for stretcher poles.

"What's going on?" the young private enquired in a low tone.



Littlejohn shrugged his shoulders. "Sarge was shaking down that smaller German when she suddenly hollered out that she was a Brit and to take his hands off her. Sarge ignored her request, and then told Doc to patch up the wounded German. I guess we're going to take them with us since we're rigging a stretcher."

Billy's young eyes were wide with suspense and excitement. Chancing a glance toward the prisoners, he wondered aloud, "Do you think they're spies? I've never been this close to a spy before!"

Littlejohn tried to hide a grin. "Could be. Whole thing seems strange." He unrolled his rain slicker and folded it under and over the two sapling poles. "Help me button this up."

Continuing to stand guard with Brockmeyer, Kirby voiced the thoughts that were running through each man's head, "Sarge, what are we going to do?"

"We're going to report back to Company and deliver our prisoners," the sergeant stated. He had been scrutinizing a map and when finished, he folded and placed it back in his jacket pocket. Letting a quiet sigh escape from his lips, he absently pushed his helmet on the back of his head while surveying the working medic and two prisoners. No two ways about it, Saunders was unhappy about this new situation. He couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there was something running deep below the surface appearances. Though he couldn't place his finger directly on the problem, but a well-trained sixth sense was alerting him. Trouble lay ahead that was connected to this pair Germans, whoever they might be.

Before the squad and its two additions could move out, Doc approached Saunders. In his outstretched hand were several folded papers.

"I found these inside the man's jacket. She saw me take them but didn't try to stop me."

"Thanks Doc," Saunders accepted the papers and rifled through them quickly. One was a map, oddly unmarked, and three or four other papers were filled with a cramped script. Saunders couldn't make out the foreign writing so he quickly refolded them and stuffed them inside his jacket pocket. The papers could wait until he had a more suitable time and place to examine them further. He was anxious to be underway again as soon as possible.

Ten minutes passed before the squad left the area. Caje was on point, followed by Billy, the woman, Saunders, Doc, the stretcher carried by Brockmeyer and Littlejohn, with Kirby closing the rear. The group was moving as fast as possible, but the night would overtake them soon.

Calling for a brief rest, Saunders glanced up at the sky. The darkening clouds promised more rain, and soon. He sighed and pulled out his map to estimate their position. Stuffing the map back into his jacket pocket, he watched Doc and the woman prisoner check the wounded man's bandages.

After finishing his ministrations, Doc looked at his non-com. The Sergeant's blue eyes were constantly moving, searching over and through the landscape for threats and looking over his resting squad. Then Saunders' gaze always returned to the two

Germans and the problems they presented. Leaving the pair of prisoners under the watchful eyes of Kirby and Littlejohn, Doc walked over and crouched besides Saunders, knowing full well that the news he had to share was not going to be well received.

Doc stated bluntly, "Sarge, we need find a place to spend the night, or that guy isn't going to make it."

"Your point is?" The Sergeant's words revealed to Doc that the prisoner situation had gotten under his normally thick skin. "It would cut our problem in half."

Doc shook his head; it was no use discussing matters when Saunders was in this frame of mind. "If we keep going, I don't think the man will make it through the night."

"Doc, we have to get our report back," Saunders explained.

"So the prisoners are expendable?"

Saunders sighed and did not directly answer the question, "Look, I don't buy that cock-n-bull story she tried to sell us. Our mission is what's important," he paused a beat, "We'll continue on."

Doc saw the determination in Saunders' eyes, and he knew there was no use continuing the conversation. He returned his position at the head of the stretcher. Saunders gave the order and the squad moved out.

* * *

They hadn't gone very far when it started to rain. While the rain dropped at a steady pace, it appeared to be just a passing shower. Slickers were hurriedly pulled on by the men. The German lady was already wrapped in her slicker, which looked about two sizes too large. Her head was bowed, and her arms were crossed on her chest hugging the slicker close. The wounded German's slicker was tucked around him. The falling rain pooled on the prone man's form, running over him and finding a way to sneak its cold fingers down his neck. Doc attempted to pull the oil skin closer in an effort to ward off the infringing water. Soon afterwards, the rain tapered off and stopped.

The soaked, cold soldiers and "spies", as Billy silently referred to them, were pushing along in the ever-present mud, when the scouting Cajun ran back signaling for cover. Muscles acting on their own accord from months of familiar movements jerked their owners to the cover of brush and fallen logs. A tense anticipation touched each person as everyone willed their breathing to cease and trembling limbs to stay still. One accidental brush of crackling slicker against a foreign object, and the game would be up.

As soon as he saw Caje's signals, Saunders grabbed the woman and hustled her behind a couple of close growing bushes. Pushing her down and kneeling behind her, Saunders kept his left hand firm on her shoulder and elevated his Thompson at her. The look of disgust on her face made it clear to him that his silent message had been received, "any noise and you're dead". Having made his point, he looked ahead to Caje, who raised two fingers and then pulled a thumb back. There were two Germans heading toward their position.

The slop and suck of mud on boots announced the arrival of the patrolling Germans. In the darkening twilight, the pair were shadows until they grew closer. One was routinely scanning the dark woods around them with rifle held ready, while the other was banging a long, metallic object in the palm of his hand. As they drew near, their foreign conversation could be heard.

“Funktioniert es noch nicht?” (It still does not function?) asked the one with the rifle.

“Nein,” his companion answered, giving the object one last shake. *“Die Batterien sind hin.”* (The batteries are dead.) He placed the flashlight in his coat pocket and unslung his rifle from his shoulder.

“Glaubst du, dass sie so weit gekommen sind?” (“Do you think they have gotten this far?”) questioned the first German.

“Ich weiss nicht. Aber, wann so viele soldaten suchen sie, koennen sie nicht entfliehen. Wie weit koennen zwei Englaenderen gehen?” (I don't know. But when so many soldiers seek them, they can't escape. How far can two Englishers go?)

“Nicht so weit wenn das Gestapo sucht. Es gefaellt mir nicht unseren Platz zu verlassen um zwei ermoerderliche spionen zu suchen.” (Not so far with the Gestapo seeking them). I don't like leaving our posts only to seek two murderous spies.)

“Meuller, sprichst du nicht. Sei ruhig. Die Baeume haben Ohren.” (Meuller, do not speak. Be quiet. The trees have ears.) the one with the flashlight cautioned. *“Ich sah was mit Hans Brenner und Karl Liest geschehen ist. Es war nicht angenehm. Ihre Haelse waren gebrochen.”* (I have seen how Hans Brenner and Karl Liest died. Their necks were broken. It was not pleasant.)

Having not noticed the hiding Americans and their prisoners, the searching Krauts continued on their way. Silently rising, Saunders signaled for the group to move out, but on a course that lead north from their previously west traveled path. He kept everyone moving at a quick pace for fifteen minutes before allowing a pause.



“Caje, Littlejohn, watch the parameter,” he instructed. Turning back from giving the order, he found the woman standing directly behind him.

“Sergeant,” she spoke in a hurried tone, “listen to me. Those two Germans who passed us are looking for us. The Gestapo has called in the regular troops in an effort to capture my partner and myself before we reach the American lines. You have to keep us safe.”

Saunders glanced behind the woman to where Brockmeyer stood. The German-fluent private nodded his head once.

"Please Sergeant, just get us to your company headquarters." it was obvious the woman rarely begged for anything, yet she was desperately pleading.

While studying the woman in the drowning light, Saunders held his racing thoughts to himself. He was saved from making a definite answer when the wounded man whimpered a pain-filled moan. The woman was at his side in an instant, moving quickly but with the silence of a stalker. Tightly holding onto her partner's hand, she anxiously watched as Doc checked and replaced bandages.

Turning away from the medic and the prisoners, Saunders walked out of their earshot and over to Brockmeyer. "Well?" he questioned.

"Everything she said was right. The Krauts are looking for two Brits. But she held something back, one Kraut called them "murdering spies". Apparently the Gestapo organized a search including the regular army because two soldiers named Brenner and Leist were murdered."

"That would explain where they got their uniforms from," Saunders replied in a low tone.

Brockmeyer shot a glance at the prisoners. "Yeah, hers doesn't fit well, it's way too big."

Saunders resettled his helmet, a habit he had adapted and unconsciously did frequently. "Get Cajé and Littlejohn back, we're going to start out again." he told Brockmeyer.

"Right, Sarge." Brockmeyer moved off to locate the two sentries.

Saunders went back to the remaining members of the group. Billy was standing guard with his M-1 ready over the two prisoners. Doc had finished the bandage checking and was holding the semi-conscious man's head up so he could swallow a couple aspirins with the help of a canteen's contents. Easing the man's head back to the stretcher, Doc looked up to his leader. Saunders recognized the look in Doc's eyes immediately; Doc still wanted to stop somewhere.

Standing there looking at the prisoners, a jumble of thoughts ran through the sergeant's mind. He sought to coolly and logically put each one in its own place. This could be a trap, albeit an elaborate one, a trap nonetheless. Just because the woman in German clothing had the same story as the two searching Krauts didn't verify the tale. Naturally the two tales would coincide if they had been concocted previously. The searching Germans had made a lot of noise as they moved through, with the repeated banging of the flashlight.

On the always present other hand, the woman's story had the remote possibility of being true. The two could very well be fleeing from the Germans. But why be British subjects? And why take the pains to murder two Krauts and masquerade wearing their uniforms? And why exactly did the woman insist on being taken to company headquarters? If she was working for the Resistance, why didn't she say so? Of what particular use was all the cloak and dagger business? Did she really think he'd immediately trust them blindly?

However, what if they did have important information for S2? And if so, would the man survive the fast pace and bad weather of the now present nighttime?

Shaking his head, Saunders wanted nothing more than to be rid of the gnawing problem. It would be easier to leave the two German's behind while he and the squad returned with their vital observations. Instead, he continued to issue orders to pull out.

"Billy, help Doc carry the stretcher." Turning to the rest of the squad who had arrived, he reassigned positions. "Caje, front; Littlejohn, me, Doc and Billy, Kirby and Brockmeyer watching the rear. He pointed at the woman. "You, between me and Littlejohn." He met Doc's eyes and stressed his point from earlier, "We'll go a little farther."

Doc didn't answer, or nod his head. His lips thinned as he suppressed whatever he wanted to say. Taking his place at the foot of the stretcher, he remained silent as the men moved out.

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The rain continued to fall down in fits. The clouds emptied like a bucket that had been kicked over and then there was nothing, like the bucket was waiting to be filled. The unpredictable showers and the coldness of the night were taxing the rest of Sergeant Saunder's thin patience to its end. Caje had reported another small patrol of Germans, but luckily these two were moving westward while the squad kept pushing north.

At least something is going right tonight, Saunders mused with irony. And "pushing" was exactly how he would describe the squad's progress. Each step was becoming a harder effort. The mud refused to leave the men's boots and tired muscles strained to hold the body upright.

The rain bucket was full and was pouring its contents down with intensity on any unfortunate soul that had been caught out in it. The wind added its part to the storm by sending water slashing sideways, severely reducing visibility in the dark gloom. After picking their way forward, Saunders brought the squad to a halt. The miserable group gathered together in a rough circle to hear Saunders. Glancing at their tired faces, Saunders saw that Doc was right, they needed to find shelter.

"There's no use trying to make it back tonight," Saunders started. "We've moved far north to avoid the patrols and with the little detour we had to take, it'll take twice as long to make it back to our lines. We also can't see anything, so we'll find shelter and wait the night out."

Doc looked instantly relieved, and Kirby asked the obvious question.

"Where are we gonna find shelter?"

It was too dark for Saunders to look at his map, but he didn't have to ruin his night vision by using his lighter for illumination. The map had been committed to

memory, and he answered Kirby's question by placing the sheet of paper before his mind's eye.

"There is an abandoned farm house not far from here if my memory serves me right. We'll head toward it and spend the night."

Another bit of luck played their way; the farmhouse was closer than Saunders had expected. The barn had been completely decimated but the small house, minus one wall and the roof was standing. Among the ruins was the entrance to an enclosed cellar, and the squad piled in. Saunders posted Kirby as sentry in the almost barren shelter of the old house.

Broken furniture and boards littered the cellar floor. A couple of odd candles were found and lit. The small flames valiantly beat back the dark shadows. Clearing space, the stretcher was set down and Doc immediately started to check the German's condition. Without a word, the other prisoner sank down next to her comrade and watched Doc. The cellar was rather dry, except for a small corner where rain leaked in from the floor above. The only way out of the cellar was up the shaky steps that led into the house.

After shaking the water off their slickers and ponchos, the men settled down among the rubble. Remembering the papers Doc had given him, Saunders extracted them from his jacket. He spread them on a table to study under the feeble light of a candle. Parts of the map looked vaguely familiar, but he was unable to reference the positions with his own map. The four other papers were written in what appeared to be French, so Saunders called Cajé over to the table.

"Look at these," he said, handing two papers to Cajé and shuffling the others over on the table. "Can you make anything out of them?"

The lean scout accepted the papers and bent over them, scrutinizing them in the candle light. After a moment, he spoke, "It's some kind of poem,

The life that I have
Is all that I have
And the life that I have
Is yours.

The love that I have
Of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours.

A sleep I shall have
A rest I shall have
Yet death will be but a pause.

For the peace of my years
In the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours."

When Cajé had finished reciting the lyrics, he paused. "It doesn't make any sense why this is included with the papers."

"Must be some sort of code." Saunders guessed.

"The other papers have similar poems as well." Cajé had looked through the remaining papers and picked up the last one on the table. "This one is different; it's not a poem. Instead it's just a lot of random, meaningless words. I wonder what they mean."

"Yeah," Saunders agreed as he looked across the room to where the woman was crouched next to her wounded companion. Cajé followed Saunders' gaze, but the woman seemed oblivious to the examination.

"Yeah," Saunders repeated as he picked up a piece of the coded paper and then tossed it back onto the table. He let out a sigh and then gathered, folded, and stored the odd papers. The maps were still spread on the table. "Thanks, Cajé."

"Sarge," Cajé's voice was hushed to a whisper. "Do you think I should go and try for the lines? We need to get that information through."

Saunders thought for a moment, and then shook his head. "No Cajé, not yet. We need you here."

Cajé nodded and left Saunders alone. The sergeant looked around the dilapidated cellar as each member of his squad was settling down for an uncomfortable night. Glancing over to the hospital corner, Saunders saw Doc was checking the wounded man's bandages. After finishing, Doc approached Saunders.

"How's he doing?" Saunders nodded to the German.



"His chances will improve now that we're in shelter." Doc tried to be optimistic but the strain was catching up even to him. "I don't know how long he'll hang on."

"You're doing fine, Doc, don't worry." Saunders tried to sooth the medic as he directed his attention to the captured map on the table.

"I guess that means I should start saving my bandages for our guys," Doc bitterly blurted out.

"I didn't say that Doc," Saunders' low voice cut hard.

"I'm sorry Sarge," Doc sighed. "I wasn't thinking. I guess I'm just edgy."

Saunders relaxed and reached out a hand to touch Doc's arm lightly. "We're all tired Doc, but we're going to make it back."

“‘We’ meaning the squad, or the prisoners as well?” Doc pressed his point one jot further.

“We all are.” The last three words were so low that only Doc heard Saunders utter them. They were earnest, a promise.

The look in Saunders’ eyes was one Doc had become accustomed to. Saunders was determined to carry out the original mission and bring the German prisoners back safely. Doc knew that Saunders was human, but when he spoke like he did, whatever he promised usually came true.

“Right, Sarge.” Doc nodded and walked back to his patient. Only after making sure there was nothing else he could do to ease the man’s pain did Doc attempt to wring out his soaking jacket and shirt. Then he sat down, leaning his back on the wall.

Finally giving up trying to make sense of the map, Saunders looked around the room at his men. All had looked up and listened when Doc was talking to him, and now they hurriedly returned their attention back to their previous tasks. Littlejohn was searching his pack for rations while Brockmeyer, Cajé, and Billy were drying their rifles off. Then Saunders’ gaze moved over Doc and fell on the two prisoners. The man was still lying on the stretcher, breathing laboriously. Sensing his gaze for the first time since entering the cellar, the female looked up and locked eyes. A mass of emotion exploded through her eyes: anger, tiredness, grief, and accusation.

Suddenly the air in the cellar grew close and the responsibility of the eight lives entrusted to him settled heavily on the sergeant’s shoulders. Keeping his face an emotionless mask, Saunders coolly refolded the maps, shrugged back into his poncho and picked up the Thompson.

“I’m going to check on Kirby. Nelson, you’ll relieve him in an hour. Meanwhile, everybody try and get some sleep.” Leaving the shelter, Saunders climbed the stairs thinking about what he had promised Doc. However there was no comfort in dwelling on what course of action he should take in the morning. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

It was well past midnight when Saunders was relieved by Cajé. The falling rain kept the air chilled, and the dampness seeped into everything. Rubbing his cold hands together, Saunders was glad to get back to the shelter of the cellar. Casting glance around the room, he saw that five occupants were asleep. Billy, guarding the prisoners, was fighting back massive yawns. Saunders waved at him to go to sleep, which private promptly did.

Settling down with his back against a steamer trunk, Saunders felt his tired eyes drawn to the German prisoners. The candle near to them had been replaced, casting its light on their figures. Wrapped in the folds of a wet slicker, the woman was lying down curled into a ball near the man’s head. The man’s shallow breathing was nearly drowned out by the rest of the squad’s gentle snores.

Digging out a cigarette, Saunders lit it, drew a breath, and exhaled slowly. They'd be moving out when dawn came, no matter what fell from the sky. Contemplating the journey back, Saunders knew it would be full of Krauts, no matter which path they took. He also knew it wouldn't be easy going back with two prisoners, if the man made it through the night. Also there was something about the pair of Germans that wasn't right, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

A small sound tugged at his ear, bringing him out of his thoughts. Glancing around, he saw that its source was the woman. She was muttering and twitching, as if fighting an invisible battle. Saunders couldn't catch the words she was mumbling, and he was about to move to wake her when the woman bolted up abruptly--scared awake from the dream. She looked panicked, not remember where she was. Staring at the flickering candle as if it were a life line back to reality, recognition dawned and she turned to the wounded man. Silently, Saunders watched.

Taking a wet handkerchief, she gently sponged the man's forehead. The hardness and anger were gone from her eyes, and her touch was tender and careful as she stroked him with the cooling cloth.

For the first time all day, Saunders got a chance to really look at her. Marked with dark circles and pale cheeks, her face was not overly pretty but almost haunting as well as haggard. In better circumstances, the sergeant doubted she'd stand out in a crowd of people, but seemed the type who could easily move on and leave behind only a faint remembrance. This ability would have been perfect, had it not been for the woman's expressive eyes. Saunders had already received their burning intensity of anger, and yet now he saw the light blue irises soften and filled with love as they gazed down upon the feverish face of her wounded partner.

The touch of the wet cloth on his forehead and cheeks must have roused the wounded man from his sleep, because he stirred for the first time since arriving in the cellar. Slowly moving his head, the prisoner searched for the source of his awakening.

"Qui est là?" the feeble voice reached Saunder's ears.

"It's me, Johnny." The woman reached for the wounded man's hand, holding it tightly. Her eyes were now anxious, but she tried to keep a smile on her lips. She looked tired, scared, and lost, but put on a brave show for the wounded man.

"Lisette, pourquoi parlez-vous en anglais?" the man focused on the woman's face, and it was clear he didn't remember the day's earlier events.

"Because we're with friends, Johnny. It is safe," she answered and assured him.

"With friends?" Johnny's voice cracked.

"Yes, we're with Americans. They're taking us to their headquarters."

"Lisa," Johnny's voice came stronger with a barely noticeable English intonation. "Lisa, you have the information?"

The woman smiled for the first time that day. She hadn't heard that name in a long time. "Yes, I have it."

Satisfied, Johnny closed his eyes. "Good. Don't forget it." he trailed off, entering a world in between sleep and wakefulness.

"I won't, Johnny." Lisa whispered.

But one last imperative thought pulled the wounded man back to the reality. "I'm sorry," he asked for forgiveness.

"For what?" Lisa softly countered.

"For not being able to protect you better. These uniforms, the running, and now this." He feebly gestured to his bandage-swathed chest.

"It's alright; we'll make it through." she promised him. But Johnny was now asleep, and she held on to his hand for a while before slowly releasing it.

Even in the dim light, Saunders could tell that during the conversation that the woman seemed to be stronger. But now, after her partner lost consciousness, the strength seemed to crumble. It appeared that the slightest mishap would send her over the edge.

"How's he doing?" Saunders asked quietly.

The woman jumped at the sound of his voice. Surprised fear rose in her eyes and then was quickly masked. She saw the sergeant was the only one awake. "He's sleeping now. That will help the fever." she spoke matter-of-factly, neatly brushing the sergeant off as she turned her shoulder to him.

Saunders felt anger stir at the blatant dismissal his prisoner had given him, but he was determined to keep the building steam under control. He knew that the best way to combat the prisoner was to not let her annoying barbs penetrate his carefully built defenses. So, he pulled out something from another jacket pocket, rose, and walked over to the prisoners. Offering her the tin of k-rations, he said indifferently, "You better eat something."

Grudgingly, she accepted the container of cheese, but didn't open it. "Thank you." she added a question that came across as a challenge to the turning sergeant who already had his back to her. "You heard us?"

"Yes." the affirmative word was just that, nothing less or more.

She sighed, and then opened the ration. She knew he had to be as curious as a cat, but was too stubborn to say anything. "Perhaps I should tell you. I doubt you'll believe me though."

Interested, but still cautious, Saunders sat down, his Thompson across his knees. He was close to the prisoner, but there was still ample room between them should he have to move quickly. He lit a cigarette and waited. Keeping her voice low so not to disturb the sleeping soldiers, the woman began.

"My name is Lisa Martin, and as I told you earlier, I'm British. The organization I work for is top secret. We're called the Special Operations Executive; though I'm sure you've never heard of us. Along with basic espionage skills, I was trained to code messages and operate a wireless radio. I successfully completed all my courses and

tests and was sent to France to work as a courier.” she shrugged her shoulders as if to give the impression that it hadn’t been a big deal.

“This is actually my second and longest mission in France; I’ve been here for nearly two years. Circuit leader Johnny Parks, radio operator Douglas, and couriers William and I were responsible for setting up a circuit that worked with the underground to carry out subversion, generate sabotage, and relay information to London.”

Here she paused, wiping down Johnny’s forehead with the wet handkerchief. Saunders shook out another cigarette. Lisa looked up at the sergeant.

“Finding this hard to swallow?” Her blue eyes just dared him to make a statement to the affirmative.

Saunders glanced over the flame of his lighter but refused to be goaded into a battle of words. “Go on.”

Lisa inclined her head to the sergeant and then looked down at Johnny’s silent form before continuing. “Our circuit was successful in its raids, sabotage attempts, and distribution of firearms. One day last week we made a particularly heavy strike against the Germans. William and I were to rendezvous with Douglas so he could radio our success to London, along with information concerning planned troop movements. I stayed in the town of Vaccon, but the radio was kept in a farm house close to St. Monique.

“Since William lived in St. Monique, he should have been there before me. However, when I arrived, I found no one. The houses had been searched and the radio found; somehow the Germans had found out.

“The only thing I could think of was that I needed to get back Vaccon to find Johnny. I was scared and tried very hard not to panic. Once I found Johnny, then everything would be alright. Johnny always knows what to do.

“Somehow I made it back through the woods to the village, and by now it was early evening. I was still upset, but I found Johnny. Leaving me inside the house, he went out to see if he could gather any news from the villagers.

“When he came back almost as soon as he left, I knew the news wasn’t good. Johnny had talked with one of our circuit members and learned that the Gestapo had acted on a tip and found our hideout. William and Douglas had been tortured, shot, desecrated, and left in the town square as a demonstration. Continuing their destruction, the Gestapo in St. Monique were tearing apart the village in attempts to find other Maquis. The Germans soldiers in Vaccon were starting to do the same.

“Johnny decided we needed to leave. The information I was taking to be radioed to London is very important. They’re in your possession now, and the poem is the key to the code.” Lisa broke her narrative to emphasized, “Hundreds of lives will be saved if it reaches Intelligence on time.”

“How did you leave the village?” Saunders changed the subject.

“Johnny killed two patrollers, and we took their uniforms. We were able to blend in and reach the forest. That was two days ago. Our intent is to reach your lines and

make radio contact with our headquarters in London.” Lisa completed her story, but then added a postscript before growing silent. “I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

The silence grew, and once again Saunders could hear the gentle snoring of his men contrasting with the ragged breathing of the wounded intelligence agent. Lisa again took the damp rag to wipe sweat off Johnny’s pallid face. Her hand was noticeably shaking and not being able to tolerate the tension filled silence, she implored,

“Please Sergeant, get Johnny to your headquarters so he can receive treatment! I know your medic is doing everything he can, but Johnny will die because he’s losing too much blood. Our information is accurate and it’s imperative that it reaches London in time! Please believe me!”

However it appeared that her pleas fell on deaf ears; Saunders remained silent as he contemplated the burning tip of his cigarette that hung loosely between two fingers. Going from anxious to angry, the woman waited a full minute before speaking up.

“Do you even intend to bring us back to your headquarters alive?” her voice slashed the air like a well honed blade.

Saunders reacted to the accusation like he had been struck across the mouth. His head jerked up while he slowly tensed his left hand into a fist. Again the battle of glares flamed between the two.

“I made a promise to Doc that we would make it back to company.” Saunders couldn’t restrain the animosity from his tone and his next words were harder than granite. “All of us.”

Red patches blossoming on her cheeks, Lisa listened in prickly silence as Saunders gave his promise again.

“And,” Saunders gave reply to her earlier plea, “it’s not my place to believe your story. That falls to the higher ranking brass.”

Once again, Lisa’s face flooded with color, but this time it wasn’t from embarrassment. “I knew you wouldn’t believe me!” she angrily retorted. Twisting around so her back again faced the sergeant, she once more laid down next to Johnny’s stretcher, ending any attempt for further conversation.

* * *

Roughly two hours after the conversation with the woman prisoner, Saunders awoke when he felt someone touching his shoulder. Immediately alert, Saunders snapped his eyes open, reached for his Thompson, and sat up.

“Dawn’s starting to break,” Caje informed him.

“Good, we’ll move out in fifteen minutes.” Saunders was on his feet with a yawn as he ran a hand through his unruly hair.

Caje added the weather report before going back up the creaking wooden stairs. "Looks like the rain stopped, but it's going to be hotter than a brick oven."

Nudging Brockmeyer awake, Saunders told him, "Get everyone up and ready to go."

"Right," the burly corporal rolled to his feet, strapped on his gear belt, collected his helmet and rifle, and started going around the room.

Saunders hid another yawn as he replaced and tightened his belt and did a perfunctory check on his equipment. Brockmeyer had woken the occupants of the crowded room and was now making his way back to the sergeant, stepping over broken furniture and around stirring limbs. Kirby's loud exaggerated yawns filled the cellar; Littlejohn shuffled to his feet to stretch his arms wide, cracking his back in the process. Billy looked sleepy and was rubbing his face absent mindedly; Doc immediately moved to his patient once he was up. Lisa was also awake and sitting next to Johnny as Doc tended to his wounds.

Smoothing a hand over his jacket, Saunders felt the weight of the papers in his pocket. Pulling them out, Saunders again scrutinized the meaningless French papers and the doubtful coded rhyme. He looked up when Doc walked over and said a low voice,

"Sarge, that German, he's pretty bad."

"How so?" Saunders asked in an equally quiet voice.

"He's really weak, lost too much blood yesterday and last night. I doubt he'll make it a few more hours."

"Isn't there anything more you can do?" Lisa left Johnny's side and interrupted, "more medicine or something?"

Doc replied patiently, but it was evident that he had exhausted his meager remedies and limited skills. "I've put fresh bandages on his wounds. I'm not going to give him any more morphine, he's already had two and one more might be too much. I can't do anything else."

But before another word could be said about the patient, Caje swiftly re-entered the room. "Krauts!" he warned, and then was back up the stairs.

The single word sent everyone in to a controlled frenzy. Saunders shot up the stairs on Caje's heels while the men bumped into and tripped over the cellar contents in an effort to get back to their rifles and equipment. Doc was back by his patient's side in a flash. Lisa was the only one who stood stock still in the middle of the cellar. If anyone had chanced a look at her face, they would have noticed her ashen countenance and fearful expression. But no one bothered to glance at the woman prisoner, and she was back beside Johnny's side making an effort to control herself.

Above the cellar among the wreckage of the house Caje quietly pointed out the approaching Germans. Saunders observed the enemy who fanned out in a staggered parallel line, obviously searching for something or somebody. Counting eight enemy soldiers, Saunders wondered how many others the woods concealed.

"Are there any behind us?" Saunders whispered.

"I didn't see any," Cajé replied.

Saunders nodded. He had seen enough and a hundred thoughts, plans, and worries were racing through his head. "Stay up here until I send Kirby up."

"Right," Cajé answered, his gaze never wavering from the moving line of Germans.

Ducking back into the cellar, Saunders caught everyone's attention. "Kirby, take Cajé's position. The Krauts haven't seen us yet, so stay low."

Kirby acknowledged the order with a jerk of his head and was gone. Within seconds, Cajé rejoined the group. Brockmeyer voiced the question everyone in the room had, "What are we going to do, Sarge?"

"We're pulling out of here. Those Krauts will be on top of us in minutes, and this cellar is the perfect barrel for shooting fish. Cajé," he turned to the scout and handed him the papers he had hastily pulled from his jacket, "take these to Lieutenant Hanley. My map is in there too; go southeast, it's the most direct way. Billy will go with you. The rest of us will head northeast and then cut over to our lines. You'll probably get there before we do, and we'll try to keep the Kraut's attention away from you two. Got it?"

"Yes Sarge," Cajé slid the papers into his own jacket pocket.

"Then get out, and good luck." Saunders didn't watch as Billy followed Cajé up the stairs, he was already starting the cellar evacuation. "Doc, Littlejohn, get the stretcher. Brockmeyer take point, Kirby and I will be in the rear. Move out!"

"Sarge," Doc's voice was quiet but authoritative. "Sarge, he can't be moved."

"What?" Saunders spun around to his medic was standing by the patient's side.

"He can't be moved," Doc repeated. "He's so weak that the slightest jolt will kill him."

"Doc, we have to go now, or none of us are going to make it." Saunders insisted and turned to the stairs.

"Wait!" Lisa cried out in a half strangled voice, "You can't just leave him here!"

Looking back with incredulous eyes at his medic and the two prisoners, Saunders saw something that hit him with the impact of a high velocity shell. *Doc meant to stay behind!* He didn't audibly state his choice, but his face was set and his mind was made up.

"No," Saunders whispered. The invisible tension snapped and flexed, writhing around every person in the cellar. No one dared to breathe, the slightest movement would set off the inevitable explosion.

"Sarge, he'll die if we move him." Doc restated. He neither pleaded nor demanded, he stated his case plainly. "I'll stay with him while you all make a run for it."

"Are you crazy Doc? What do you think the Germans would do to the both of you when they arrive? There's no way they'd miss you." Saunders vehemently shook his

head. "Littlejohn, get the stretcher with Doc. We are all leaving, and we will all make it back."

The end of the stand-off concerning the movement of the prisoner was swift when Kirby's harsh whisper was heard. "Sarge! The Krauts!"

The three little words sent shock waves that pushed everyone back into action and up the stairs in close semblance of the order Saunders had prescribed previously. As the sergeant cleared the steps and motioned for Kirby to precede him, Saunders glanced over his shoulder and knew that the chance to escape detection was probably shot over the moon. The Krauts were close, and the rising sun casts its beams upon the American soldiers' backs. Just when Saunders thought their thin luck had held, one of the Germans raised the cry.

Twisting and crouching so fast that he felt his knee muscles scream in pain, Saunders snapped off a couple bursts from the Thompson in reply to the German's bullets. *That'll hurt later*, he thought as he pushed off his twisted knee to move further back. Kirby was also returning the Kraut's fire as he worked his way back.

The Thompson and BAR sang in deadly symphony as Saunders and Kirby took turns leap frogging away from the Germans. Two of the enemy soldiers were hit and went down, and the rest were forced to duck for cover. The two GI's were finding it difficult to move due to the lead rain that was falling. The rest of the squad with the two prisoners had moved ahead so that they were now unseen and hidden in the dense forest.

Hurriedly exchanging his spent magazine for a fresh one, Kirby caught a glimpse of one of the Krauts. "Sarge!" he shouted above the battle noise, "They've got a radio!"

"Take it out!" Saunders hollered.

Chambering the round, Kirby lifted the BAR and took an extra second to get a clear aim before squeezing the trigger. He wished Caje was here with his M1; Kirby was no sniper and he knew it. However the numerous .30 caliber rounds found their target and Kirby saw the radio man reel under their impact.

When Kirby had eliminated the German, he heard Saunders shouting for him to pull back. Firing one last time, Kirby ducked down and moved through the brush while the sergeant covered his back. Turning to provide cover fire so Saunders could move as well, Kirby saw him momentarily stop firing, reach into his jacket, and pull out a grenade.

Reloading the BAR again, Kirby kept such a continuous rate of fire that the remaining Germans were forced to keep their heads down. Eons--which were actually seconds--later, the grenade thrown by Saunders exploded in the midst of the enemy.



Not bothering to make individual body checks to ensure each German soldier was dead, Kirby and Saunders left from the battle scene with haste to find the squad.

* * *

When Saunders and Kirby caught up with the squad, they didn't stop to catch their breath but kept pressing further into the forest. Everyone was moving at a ground-eating, muscle-straining lope. Pushing the hard pace, Saunders finally called for a brief break when even his well trained body was starting to feel the strain.

Breathing heavily, Saunders attempted a quick compass check as the men fanned out on the grass. Doc was bending over the patient while Lisa was collapsed to her knees, trying to catch her breath.

After thrusting the compass back into his pocket, Saunders wiped away the sweat on his forehead, massaged his aching knee, and glanced at his watch. He decided to chance one more minute of rest before moving out. Turning his head when he heard Doc give a weary sigh, the sergeant asked offhandedly, "How is he?"

Doc's pause was so long that Saunders twisted around to view the medic's face. "He's dead, Sarge." came the quiet statement.

Saunders didn't say anything but sat motionless on the grass, his face impassive while the torrent of thoughts surged through him. Doc's voice had been low, but the squad had heard him clearly and each glanced around at the others. It seemed like the only person who didn't have an immediate reaction was Lisa, who was stock still. Then, she stated in an apparently calm yet unconvinced tone,

"No, you're wrong. He can't be dead. Johnny can't die."

"I'm sorry, but he's dead." Doc's soothing voice also had an air of finality.

"No!" this time her voice was pitched higher and her body jerked with conviction. "No, Johnny wouldn't leave me! He is not dead! Do something; give him some more medicine, bandages, anything!"

"I can't," Doc's tone was full of the pain from trying and being defeated. "he's beyond my help. I can't bring people back to life!"

"You can't say that! He's not dead!" she cried, tears streaming down her face. With a scream of grief she leaned over the dead body of her partner to pound her fists into Doc's chest.

Doc merely stayed in his kneeling position, taking the vent of frustration from the hysterical woman. The rest of the men started forward in alarm and Saunders jumped to his feet and pushed Doc away, interposing himself between the medic and Lisa's slapping hands. Bending down to her level, the sergeant grabbed her arms, holding on with an unbreakable grip.

"Stop it!" he growled, shaking her back and forth.

"It's your fault! You killed him!" her eyes brimming with hate as she gave a vehement cry.

"Stop it now!" he added one last shake which caused her head to snap back and forth.

Catching Saunder's glare through her tear filled eyes, Lisa was over come by the heat and fury in his eyes. She froze as her own hate was replaced with fear.

"Do not scream again."

The woman jerked a nod and tried to suppress the sob that rolled through her throat. Saunders released her arms and she settled back on her heels looking scared and lost. Immediately her attention was drawn to the dead man in front of her, and she started shaking uncontrollably.

"Johnny, no," she whispered as she bent forward to touch the body. "I can't live without you." Tears welled from her eyes, rolled down her cheeks, and splashed onto the uniform of the dead man.

The men stood in awkward silence as they watched the woman grieve over her dead friend. Saunders rose slowly and backed away, his anger dissipating as fast as it had come upon him.

After a moment or two, Saunders cleared his throat. "We need to get going before the Krauts get here. Brockmeyer, check if everything is clear. Doc," he paused, meeting the medic's eyes and silently asking for help.

Doc nodded. He walked around the body and knelt down next to Lisa. Gently placing a hand on her shoulder, he began to speak in a soft tone.

"We have to go."

The woman shook her head and began to tense under the pressure of Doc's hand. "I am not leaving him."

"We have to. If we stay longer, the Germans will find us. Johnny would have wanted you to make it safely back."

She again shook her head in opposition. "I can't leave him behind."

"We'll send someone back on burial detail. But if we don't leave, burial detail will have to take care of us."

Lisa didn't reply. Her head was bowed, and she was trying to calm down. Her tears were still falling, but the sobs and shaking had ceased. Then she utter one soft word, "Alright."

Doc gave her shoulder a final pat, stood up, and stepped away. "Let's move him over into the brush," he intoned to Saunders.

However, before Saunders could move, Brockmeyer rejoined the squad. "Krauts coming up behind us, Sarge. They're getting close."

While everyone's attention was focused on Brockmeyer, Lisa saw she and Johnny were temporarily forgotten. The expression on her face changed, from one of

mourning to that of one who was aware of her surroundings and was fully in control of her emotions. Reaching her fingers into the dead man's left boot, she deftly withdrew a small folding knife. Then she casually brought her hand inside her pocket to slip the knife inside while masking the movement by searching for a dry handkerchief.

Guessing she was unable to find a handkerchief, Doc pulled out one of his own and handed it to her. Lisa jumped guiltily at Doc's movement, but she took the offered cloth. The numb and blank look returned to her face when Saunders stepped over to help Doc hide the body under the brush. The hurried task completed, Doc returned to Lisa to help her to her feet. Taking her arm lightly, he guided her as the squad started forward again.

* * *

"How's your ammo, Billy?"

"I've got a couple more clips."

"Okay. *Merde*, they're everywhere!" the scout exclaimed and then snapped off a few rounds at a flash of gray material.

"We're so close to our lines, I thought we had left the Germans behind us." Billy woefully commented.



"I guess not." Cajé said dryly. He mentally ran through their options. The Germans had them pinned down on three sides. The only way they could wiggle out was to turn and head back into the woods, deeper in to German territory. Cajé was sure he and Billy were nearly on top of the American lines; he couldn't have read the map wrong. In all the Western movies the Louisianan had seen, this was the time when the cavalry rode to the rescue.

Almost as if on cue, the sound of firing M1s' and shouts of surprise from the Germans reached Cajé and Billy. Within minutes, most of the Germans had been dispatched and the rest fled back into the woods.

"Identify yourself!" a voice rang out.

"Privates LeMay and Nelson." Cajé replied.

"Anyone else?"

"No, just us two."

"Alright, step forward."

Billy and Cajé rose together and watched as four other Americans also showed themselves. One wore corporal stripes; his had been the voice giving the commands.

"What's the password?"

Cajé inwardly rolled his eyes, but calmly replied with, "Catfish."

The corporal shook his head. "That's the old one."

"We were on a recon and delayed a night."

Harrumphing, the corporal decided what to do. "I'll have to clear this through my superior. This way."

"Our recon information is very important and Lt. Hanley needs it right away." Cajé urged.

"I'm sure if you are who you say you are, it won't take long." The pompous corporal smiled thinly. "We're wasting time, let's go."

Cajé and Billy had no choice but to fall in between the corporal and his men.

* * *

With Johnny's body left behind, every member of the squad was pushing through the forest. The muggy air was close and still. Each person's nerves were tight and muscles poised.

"Cover!" Saunders shouted. Ramming into Lisa, the sergeant pushed her to the earth and landed on top of her. "Stay here!" he hollered in her ear as he moved away.

Even if she had wanted to move, Lisa found that she couldn't. Her breath completely knocked out, all she could do was lay still and vaguely watch the skirmish through brush that obscured her view. Eventually the iron bands clamped around her chest began to loosen and her wheezing breath began to circulate more oxygen. The pounding in her head lessened and as her vision cleared she could see that Saunders was off to her left firing his Thompson from a prone position.

Not sure how long she had been aware of anything besides her inability to breathe, Lisa wondered how much time had passed since the fight started. She could hear the deep reports from the B.A.R., but wasn't able to distinguish if more than one M1 was being fired. Slowly piecing this information together, she was about try to move her limbs when she caught something out of the corner of her eye. Her skin crawled; she knew someone was behind them.

Willing her tense muscles to work, she twisted her head around to see something that made her freeze harder than marble. She was looking down the barrel of a small, but very effective Walther P38. As the muzzle blossomed with fire, she jerked to the side and felt the bullet rip across her arm. "Saunders!" she screamed.

The sudden movement and scream told the sergeant he had been flanked. Turning with his Thompson ready, Saunders saw the enemy soldier not ten feet away. With his finger pulling on the trigger, one of Saunders' worse nightmares was coming true. The Thompson was jammed.

* * *

"Good job with the recon information, Cajé. Now where is Saunders?" Lt. Hanley had waited long enough and was impatient to know what happened to the NCO and the rest of the squad.

"We captured some spies, sir." Billy eagerly chimed in.

"Spies?"



"We captured two people in German uniform," Cajé hastily filled in. "One was a female and the male got wounded. The lady claimed that they were British secret agents and were running from the Germans. Doc found these papers;" he handed them to the lieutenant, "I think this poem is a code key."

Hanley ruffled through the papers and then picked up his field telephone. Speaking briefly into it, he hung up. As he rose and gathered the papers, he spoke. "Let's go, I want you to tell Captain Miller in S2 everything that's happened."

"Yes sir," Cajé and Billy responded together.

Within half an hour, the story had been cross examined, repeated, and retold to the S2 captain. Satisfied that the privates had given him everything they remembered, the captain said,

"Well gentlemen, I think that covers it. You were right in bringing them straight to me, Hanley. Oh and, one more thing before you go," he motioned to an orderly who escorted in a man dressed in dirty clothing and a faded beret. A ragged beard was growing on his face and uncombed hair pepped out from under the beret. The man also had a stoop in his shoulders that attested to a lifetime of hard work.

Captain Miller introduced the Frenchman. "This is Michel, a member of the Resistance who has worked with British agents. I want you to describe the man and woman your squad captured.

Cajé obliged and finished with an observation, "The woman seemed very fatigued. It was odd, one moment she would be arguing with the Sarge, and the next she was silent and listless."

Michel the Frenchman listened in rapt attention. “*Oui*, it could be them.” he said in accented English. “*Mon capitaine*, it sounds very much like them.”

“Who, sir?” Hanley questioned.

“Michel worked closely with a group that was run by a man and woman. Their French aliases were Jean and Lisette, but they were British agents named John Parks and Lisa Martin. Parks and Martin sold out to the Germans and the entire underground cell was executed. Michel was the only one who escaped and he’s been looking for the two traitors.” Captain Miller paused. “Sounds like your sergeant found them.”

“You say the man was wounded?” Michel asked.

“Yes, badly.” Cajé replied.

“And *la femme*, you said she behaved strangely?”

Cajé hesitated before answering. “Well, I think she had a lot on her mind. One minute she would act angry and the next she was kind and caring.”

“Yes,” the Frenchman stroked his chin thoughtfully. “These agents are put under a lot of stress and things become worse the longer you’re on the field. The lying, the hiding, the never ceasing surveillance and reconnaissance missions; it is dangerous, hard work. It breaks you down and makes you easy prey to the enemy.”

A brief silence filled the room. Michel shifted uncomfortably and then spoke again. “I must go. Thank you for calling me in, *capitaine*. Please let me warn you to be careful, Jean and Lisette, or rather John and Lisa are very dangerous people. They will lie and kill if they have to.”

“Thank you, Michel. I’ll be in contact with London and we’ll be ready whenever Saunders arrives. The word will be passed to the line sentries to look out for the squad; we don’t want them delayed with old passwords.” The captain stood, signaling the end of the interview. “None of you are to remember this conversation. Dismissed.”

* * *

The German was temporarily ignoring the sergeant and was aiming the pistol at Lisa for the fatal shot. Not having time to clear the jam, Saunders reacted with the first action that came in to his mind. He threw the Thompson at the German.

The eleven pounds of wood and metal connected with the German’s arm just as he was squeezing off the shot. The flying Thompson knocked the pistol out of the German’s hand, sending the bullet ricocheting off into the woods. Leaping forward, Saunders tackled the enemy soldier with force that would have secured his place on any football team.

The two combatants landed heavily on the forest floor, each trying to gain the upper hand. Punches and blows were exchanged, and then the German settled his hands around the sergeant’s throat and started to squeeze. Trying to pry the man’s hands off, Saunders was also kicking up with his knee. Grunting from the pain, the

German tried to shift away from the knee blows, but maintained his death grip around the non-com's throat.

With his breath coming in shorter gasps and his throat burning in the hand vise, Saunders knew he had precious few seconds to do anything. Flinging his right arm out and balling up his fist, the sergeant attempted to inflict damage on the German's left kidney. His ears full with the rush of his blood, he vaguely heard a voice calling his name. Then as he pulled his fist back for another blow, something hard and metallic smacked his knuckles. Clutching for the object, he felt the cold, smooth metal slide into his palm. It was a knife, and his anxious fingers found the release catch. With a snap, the three inch switchblade opened.

Thrusting the knife into the German as hard as he could, Saunders pulled his knee up and kicked the attacker off him. His arm outstretched, the sergeant pushed off the ground, grabbed the dropped Walther, and spun back to face the German. The speed in which the movement had been executed was unnecessary; the knife was buried in the man's upper left side. With arms flared out the side and the blond head lolled over, the enemy was dead.

Saunders looked down at the body of the man he had just killed. The black gabardine uniform was stained darker with blood, and the jagged runes on the man's collar stared back at him. Raising his head while massaging his aching neck, the sergeant looked at Lisa.

"He's Gestapo!" Saunders croaked.

Shocked, she stared back at him with her mouth hanging open. That he had uttered the statement clearly floored her, and a couple seconds passed before she was able to stammer a coherent word. "Of, of course he is!" she was getting over her shock and warming into indignation. "I *told* you that the Gestapo was after us!" her good arm gestured with wild exasperation. "By the prime minister, we are *spies*! Don't you understand?"

Her tirade didn't have any affect on Saunders. He was unhooking his canteen and gingerly trying to swallow without spitting up the refreshing water. Bruises in the shape of fingers were forming on his neck.

Taking a breath and pausing, her eyes grew dark and she stood down her defensive posture. "We are spies," she repeated and then finished in a lifeless voice, "and Johnny is dead.

Slowly, Saunders reached his hand forward and lightly touched Lisa's shoulder. "Even with the Gestapo hunting us, we will make it back to company."

However, the long awaited words of belief didn't seem to touch her. She sat on the ground with the air of an automaton. Saunders noticed the bullet wound on her arm and he started working on it with sulfa powder and bandages. The brush around them cracked and parted to admit Brockmeyer and Kirby.

"Just finished checking the Germans, it was a small patrol." Brockmeyer reported.

"Sheesh, what happened here?" Kirby asked and then hollered over his shoulder, "Doc!"

"Coming!"

"You alright?" the concerned corporal asked the sergeant.

Saunders nodded, his neck would ache for days, but he didn't think any damage had been inflicted. Lisa had gotten the knife to him in the nick of time. Meanwhile his rescuer seemed unaware of the wound she had received, even though Saunders knew his poor bandaging attempts must hurt.

"C'mon Doc," Kirby harangued, "What's taking so long?"

"Littlejohn had a bullet graze his leg," Doc explained as he came through the trees. "He's okay, though how in the world a bullet hit him while he was laying down facing the Germans, I don't know."

"Well the big ox does have long legs!" Kirby laughed, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

Saunders moved away so Doc could kneel next to Lisa. The medic tidied the bandage that was already in place and then supplemented pieces of his jacket to form a sling. When he finished, Doc checked the sergeant.

"Take these," the medic offered some aspirin Saunders swallowed. "How much further do we have to go?" Doc questioned, "It looks like her arm muscle got hit, so she needs to see a real doctor."

"Not far," Saunders wheezed as he bent over to retrieve his Thompson.

"Good," Kirby muttered within the earshot of Brockmeyer. "Cause that girl gives me the creeps."

"There's a first for everything," Brockmeyer slyly countered.

* * *

It was late afternoon when the squad made it back to American lines. Leading the tired troops was Kirby, then Brockmeyer and Doc assisting Littlejohn, and closing the rear was Saunders and Lisa. The sergeant was supporting the spy, who to all appearances had practically shut down. Her face blank, her steps wooden, she was past the point of caring.

Having been forewarned, the sentries let the squad pass. A radio call was put into headquarters announcing their arrival, and two Jeeps that were driven over.

Saunders should have suspected something was up when he saw two Military Policemen riding in the Jeeps. However he was more tired than he realized and the significance of the MPs' presence didn't quite register.

"We're under orders from Captain Miller of S2 to take charge of the prisoners," one of the policemen spoke. "Where is the other?"

"He didn't make it," Saunders informed them.

"We'll take her to the hospital first, we can give your man a lift as well." the MP gestured toward Littlejohn.

Saunders nodded; he was ready to make his report to Hanley and find a place to sleep.

Littlejohn was helped in to the back of the Jeep first, then Doc and one MP perched themselves next to him. Saunders assisted Lisa to the passenger seat and then turned to get into the other vehicle.

"Sarge," the medic intended to make Saunders go to the hospital as well.

"I'll report to Hanley and then go straight over," the sergeant replied as he climbed into the front passenger seat of the Jeep where Kirby and Brockmeyer were already waiting.

Knowing this was another point he couldn't win, Doc relented. The two vehicles lurched forward, one following the other through the town until the road split. Riding behind the Jeep carrying the wounded, Saunders suddenly saw Lisa twist in her seat, staring at a native on the lane. Even through the dust the Jeeps were kicking up, Saunders could tell that something had startled her out of her stupor.

Following her stunned gaze, the sergeant saw a man in dirty clothes and faded beret who was looking back at Lisa. His expression looked a little surprised, but then indifference filled his features. Tucking his head down, the man turned and shuffled off in the opposite direction down a side street. The entire thing had happened in seconds, but it was enough to let Saunders know that the two knew and recognized each other. Saunders' thought was cemented to fact when Lisa suddenly jumped from the moving Jeep.

Landing lightly on the cobblestone road, Lisa sprinted down the alley. The Frenchman took one glance over his shoulder and then was off like a track star. When the MP driving the Jeep saw Lisa exit, he jammed the brakes and skidded to a stop that nearly threw the rest of the occupants out. The other Jeep narrowly avoided a collision and was still shuddering to a halt when Saunders leapt out as well. The two MPs were a fraction behind him as they joined the pursuit.

Dodging debris and broken masonry, the hunt ended when the street suddenly stopped in front of a large, gated courtyard. There was no way to turn as the connected row of houses stopped at the tall courtyard walls. Knowing he was backed into a corner, the Frenchman spun around and fired off questions at Lisa.

"Qui êtes-vous? Que voulez-vous? Pourquoi m'avez-vous suivi?" (Who are you? What do you want? Why did you chase me?)

"William! Don't you recognize me?"

"Who is William?" the man switched to broken English. "My name is Michel. Who are you?"

Saunders and the MPs caught up at this point in time to hear the Frenchman's answer. The policemen moved in to take custody of Lisa, each grabbing a hold of an

arm. Seeing Lisa was taken care of, Saunders turned his attention to the man she had been chasing.

“Hey!” Saunders raised his Thompson to cover the Frenchman who had been looking for an escape while Lisa was diverted. Knowing he couldn’t get away yet, he stood still, nervously tugging on his beard.

“Easy on her arm! She’s been shot!” Doc’s voice sounded angry; Saunders realized the medic along with Kirby and Brockmeyer had followed them down the alley.

The MP holding Lisa’s left arm glanced down and saw the blood starting to seep through the bandage. Letting go, he stepped back but brought his rifle up. Lisa ignored the policemen. Staring intently at the Frenchman, she exclaimed,

“I thought you were dead William! What happened? Johnny said the Gestapo killed you and Douglas.”

Ignoring Lisa’s questions, the Frenchman focused on Saunders and protested his innocence. “Thank goodness you are here! This *femme folle* chased me; I was just walking down a street!”

“Saunders, this man is William, I know it is!” Now Lisa was pleading with the sergeant.

“Look lady, I don’t care who it is, don’t try to run from us again!” one of the military policemen spoke roughly. “We’re going back to headquarters *now*.” The two started escorting Lisa down the lane with Doc following them.

The Frenchman relaxed. “*Merci, monsieur*. I must be on my way.”

“Not so fast,” the Thompson didn’t waver in Saunders’ hands. “You’re coming back with us, too.” Kirby and Brockmeyer had their weapons ready and trained on the Frenchman as well.

“But *monsieur*!” a touch of fear briefly showed itself.

“Move out.” The two words left no room for argument.

Knowing he had better comply, the truculent Frenchman slowly walked in front of the three soldiers. Back at the Jeeps, they saw found an anxious Littlejohn and the curious driver.

“What happened? Is everything okay?” Littlejohn asked.

“Everything is under control.” Saunders replied. He watched quietly with Thompson ready as everyone climbed back into the Jeeps. The MPs’ were not taking chances again, one sat behind Lisa with his rifle trained on her. Saunders did the same thing with the Frenchman, and the vehicles resumed their journeys to the different destinations.

* * *

“I don’t see why we had to let him go!”

"We have no proof this man did anything and have nothing to hold him on." Hanley tried to be patient with the stubborn NCO. He could understand Saunders' frustration and knew that the sergeant was tired as well, but the lieutenant's hands were tied.

Saunders shook his head and pushed his helmet back in annoyance. He and Hanley had just exited Captain Miller's office and stepped out on to the street. After reporting the events of the patrol and the capture of apparent spies, Saunders had listened to Miller's brief summary of Michel's tale. The captain congratulated him on sending the coded papers back to him. "Parks and Martin didn't destroy them because there were Allied positions and movements marked as well. The Germans would have loved to get their hands on them."

Nevertheless, the sergeant could barely contain his surprise and anger when Captain Miller dismissed Saunder's suggestion that Michel detained until either his or Lisa's respective stories could be verified. Once released, the Frenchman had burned a path to the door in his haste to get away.

"There was no reason to let him walk away!" Saunders refused to relinquish his point. "She recognized him and that S2 captain won't look past his own special theory for new ideas."

"Now just a minute!" Hanley answered sharply, "Captain Miller knows how to gather intelligence without your opinion. That woman betrayed her own people to the Germans and you're defending her."

"I don't believe that." Saunders was adamant. "She is not a traitor."

Kirby and Brockmeyer were waiting outside as well, and they drifted silently toward Hanley and Saunders in an effort to catch everything they were saying. Glancing at each other in surprise, they couldn't believe Saunders' complete change in attitude toward the prisoner.

Hanley checked his angry rebuff. He had come to trust the sergeant's intuition; past experience had usually proved Saunders to be right. Instead of pulling rank and reprimanding the noncommissioned officer, Hanley merely talked to his friend. "Saunders, go get some rest. The situation is out of your hands. You've done the best you can do."

Pursing his lips, Saunders slowly huffed out his breath. He readjusted his helmet again and glanced down the street. When he spoke it was in a soft voice that outwardly masked his anger, but didn't fool Hanley.

"Alright." Saunders started walking down the street, but not in the direction of the barracks. He was heading for the hospital.

* * *

When Sergeant Saunders arrived at the field hospital, it took him some time to locate Doc and Littlejohn. He found the squad mates together. Littlejohn was comfortably relaxed on a cot while Doc was seated on a camp stool.

"You doing okay, Littlejohn?" Saunders saw the private's leg was bandaged.

"Sure am, Sarge." Littlejohn grinned cheerfully. "It wasn't a bad wound and the nurses here are nice."

"That's good," the sergeant briefly smiled back. "Doc, have you seen Lisa?"

Doc wasn't happy when he answered. "She's in an isolated place under guard."

"Where?"

Doc pointed him in the right direction and Saunders threaded his way around cots, orderlies, and medicine trays. He reached part of the hospital tent that was partitioned off and where a policeman was stationed. It was one of the two MPs' who had earlier escorted the prisoner in.

"Can I help you, Sergeant?" the MP kept his voice neutral.

"I'd like to see the prisoner." Saunders posture was defensive, waiting for any argument.

The MP gave him one. "Sorry, but no one is allowed in. Orders from Captain Miller and the doctor."

"Five minutes?"

"Sorry Sergeant, but I can't."

Turning away, Saunders gave up. He knew the MP was doing his job. Maybe Hanley was right, perhaps there wasn't anything he could do to help. As the sergeant left the hospital, he felt the fatigue of the past few days settle on him. What he needed now was sleep.

* * *

The next morning dawned, and Saunders was surprised at how soundly he had slumbered. Though up with the sunrise, he felt refreshed. Gathering his equipment silently so not to wake the rest of the snoozing squad, Saunders left the building they were assigned. Following the delicious aroma of coffee, he found a mess hall and got a cup of the dark, hot joe.

After a quick breakfast, the sergeant started asking soldiers and villagers if they had seen the Frenchman Michel. However, he soon gave up the search when he realized that it would be useless to attempt to search for one man in a town that was so full of people, vehicles, and the general busyness that accompanied the Army headquarters where ever it went.

Saunders had a hunch that if the Frenchman really was William as Lisa claimed he was, the spy would eventually return to where she was. Thus instead of spending his

off duty hours searching for a lone man, Saunders decided to let the hunted come to the hunter. And if William or Michel failed to show, then perhaps the story Lisa had recounted truly was a tall tale and she was the traitor S2 intelligence believed her to be.

Finding a camp stool and situating himself in front of hospital where the prisoner was kept in isolation, Saunders settled comfortably with his Thompson beside him and another cup of coffee. From his position he could look out onto the bustle of the camp and had an easy view of the main approach to the hospital.

As they woke up, the men of his squad drifted over to the hospital. Littlejohn was to be released later that day. Billy and Kirby sat with him to entertain him and to flirt with the nurses. It was midmorning when Hanley arrived. Having heard rumors that his NCO of first squad was camped out in front of the hospital, the lieutenant wanted to see for himself what exactly Saunders had in mind.

After having his greeting returned, Lt. Hanley quietly surveyed the sergeant. Then, he offered a tidbit of information he had picked up. "They'll be moving the prisoner today. A transport is coming to take her back to England."

Saunders nodded; if the supposed Frenchman would show up, it would be when they were moving Lisa. He knew something would happen then, though he wasn't sure what it would be.

Receiving no verbal response from Saunders, Hanley knew his next words probably wouldn't make a lot of difference. "Be careful Saunders, what ever it is you're planning on doing."

"Yes sir," a small smile accompanied the reply. Looking at his superior, Saunders knew that Hanley had just given him the silent "go ahead", but with the warning that the lieutenant would be unable to help if the situation blew up.

Hanley wished he could put the endless paperwork on hold and stick around to see if anything would happen. He glanced across the street and saw Cajé and Brockmeyer reclining in the shade of a building, and then Kirby came out of the hospital tent. Lighting a cigarette, the BAR man shouted something to the guys about the new nurses "didn't know a good thing when they saw it." He sauntered across the street to join his squad mates who were snickering at his failure. Hanley smiled; it appeared that Saunders had plenty of back up.

Saunders had also seen his men gather around in a loose, offhanded manner. He couldn't quite describe the feeling, but he was glad they were waiting with him. They might not understand the sergeant's reasons, but they voluntarily came to watch his back.

As the sun climbed over head, Saunders shook out a cigarette and lit it. Doc stepped out of the hospital to join his sergeant, "I heard the MPs saying the transport should be here soon." Doc informed him.

"Good," removing the cigarette from his mouth, Saunders exhaled.

Doc went back into the hospital. Shortly after Doc had left, an open Jeep pulled up. Inside were two more well armed MPs. While looking outwardly calm, Saunders felt his nerves begin to tighten in anticipation. It would come soon.

The arrival of a Jeep caused little excitement among the passing GIs and townsfolk. Vehicles were constantly arriving to pick up or drop off patients. The presence of the MPs' was odd, but no one stopped to question or comment. The only natives Saunders saw walking down the street were a French couple who passed through the scrutiny of his three men. The man and woman were each carrying a bucket of water and moving at a steady pace. Dressed in neat but patched clothes, the man was clean shaven and walked with good posture, so Saunders turned his attention away when an MP stepped out of the Jeep with rifle ready.

Watching the door, Saunders saw a third MP exit the hospital. Lisa stepped out between the two guards. Without calling attention to themselves, the MPs quietly guided her to the Jeep. Her face was as pale as the bandage that incased her arm, yet she seemed to have enough strength to walk without support. She appeared resigned to her fate as the MPs motioned her into the passenger seat. Saunders hoped they had been informed about the Jeep jump stunt she had performed yesterday.

As he watched the loading process, Saunders caught something from his peripheral vision. The couple he had noticed earlier had split up, the woman was continuing down the street holding both buckets of water. Caje let out a shout and Saunders saw the man was close to the Jeep. Holding his left hand around his right arm as if something were hurt, he was about to pass by the passenger seat where Lisa was sitting in a frozen stupor. Saunders could see the Frenchman was hiding a knife in his right hand and the sergeant knew it was William.

Caje's shout had alerted the MPs, but it had also spurred William into action. Leaping forward, the spy rammed into one policeman which sent him sprawling into another. The two MPs knocked out of the way, William was thrusting his knife forward when Saunders jumped him from behind.

Saunders struck William squarely on the back, and the would be murderer dropped to the pavement. Going down with William, Saunders landed on his bad knee and grimaced in pain. Nevertheless, he kept a hold of the man's shoulders. When he tried to rise, Saunders grabbed a handful of hair and slapped William's forehead onto the paving stones, knocking him out cold.

By this time the MPs had recovered and two were yanking Saunders off the unconscious form of the spy. The two policemen in the Jeep had rifles squarely aimed at Lisa while the driver was ready to swing the Jeep around at a moment's notice.

A crowd of startled townsfolk, GIs, and hospital staff started to form around the Jeep and the squad rushed up. Questions filled the air as people inquired about what had happened and eye witnesses tried to fill the others in. Unsure of what to do, the MPs were holding Saunders securely when a shout to clear the area was heard.

"What is going on?" the angry tone clearly sounded as the S2 captain pushed his way toward the Jeep. Lieutenant Hanley was right behind him, anxious to find out what had happened.

Saunders answered the irate captain's inquiry. "William came back." He nodded to the still form of the man. "He was going to finish the job he started, selling out and

murdering his fellow agents. He tricked you into believing Lisa was the traitor when it was him all along.”

While the speechless intelligence captain assimilated this information, Hanley ordered the MPs to release Saunders. The sergeant continued,

“My guess is the story he told you about agents cracking under pressures is exactly what happened to him.” He rolled William’s limp body over and confiscated the knife.

“But this man isn’t the person I talked to!” the Captain finally formed words.

“Any agent worth his salt can alter his appearance in minutes,” Hanley interjected, “This man had all night.”

Captain Miller nodded and made his decision. He spoke to the MPs, “Arrest this man.” The two complied, pulling the groaning man off the street as he started to come to. Turning to Saunders, Miller finished with, “Good work, Sergeant.”

* * *

After the verbal pat on the back, Captain Miller requested that another Jeep be brought so he could personally accompany the British agents to the transport plane and hand them over. He wanted to be rid of the complicated problem and have no more backfires.

Saunders had started to leave with his squad when he stopped and walked back to the Jeep. Lisa hadn’t spoken at all, and she stared at the floorboards without seeing them. Stopping by the Jeep’s side, the sergeant pulled an object out of his pocket and held it out to her. It was the switchblade that he killed the Gestapo man with.

“Here. I forgot to return it you gave it to me.”

Lisa’s hand uncurled and Saunders gently dropped the knife into her hand. Walking away, he had taken a couple steps when Lisa called him back. Pulling out another cigarette, Saunders turned back to the Jeep.

“Thank you,” Lisa whispered as tears filled her eyes, “for believing me and for stopping William.”

Saunders nodded. “Have a safe trip,” he said as the Jeep pulled away.



He knew it would be a long journey for her, though. It would take time to recover from the wounds of betrayal, the loss of her fellow operatives and Johnny, and the mind breaking dangers of espionage.

As the Jeep rounded a corner and sped out of his vision, Saunders was silently thankful to be apart of the fine group of men in his squad. He knew he could always rely on and trust each individual. In return he intended to keep the promise he made every time he lead the squad out. He intended to do his utmost to safely bring the men back and to keep his pledge to them.

Rejoining his squad, Saunders was glad the mission was truly completed. The squad was home, and any new assignment would wait until tomorrow. Today was a promise fulfilled.

The End