

## FOOLS OF FORTUNE

By: White Queen and Thompson Girl



*This is the story of how Billy Nelson joined the squad. It takes place early in Season One, before "The Celebrity," and includes characters such as Braddock, Brockmeyer, and Grady Long who eventually faded from the show. And the regulars, particularly Saunders and Kirby, behave as they did in those early days, having yet to grow into their more established selves.*

"Gosh, Littlejohn, I can't believe it!" With a smudged face that looked as eager as his voice sounded, Pvt. Billy Nelson seemed on the verge of throwing his helmet in the air and shouting 'Yippee!'

"Believe what?" answered the tall GI beside him. They began walking down a grassy avenue between the camp tents heading for Lieutenant Hanley's headquarters. It wasn't even seven in the morning yet. The rising sun slanted through the trees at the eastern edge of camp, casting alternating sunrise gold with the tree shadows. It would be a hot one later, but it was still early enough to be chill. Too early, Littlejohn thought, and hid a yawn, though the hour didn't seem to be dampening Billy's enthusiasm at all.

"We're together again!" Grinning up at his friend Littlejohn, the young soldier seemed even shorter than he really was. In fact, the two of them walking together seemed like the perfect set-up for some Bob Hope joke.

"Well, why can't you believe it?" Littlejohn asked. "It's obviously true."

"I know." Billy pressed his lips together and shook his head. "But I still just can't believe it!"

"I see." Littlejohn had to smile at his friend's exuberance. "So what will it take to make you believe it?"

"I don't know! It's all so perfect. At least, it is now." Billy Nelson frowned. "Remember how mad I was when they split us up?"

"Yup." Littlejohn stopped walking in front of a large tent. "This is the CP."

"So we're just supposed to wait here?"

"Yup." Littlejohn lowered his lanky frame until he was sitting on the grass to the right of Lieutenant Hanley's tent. He glanced around, but there was no sign of the rest of the squad yet, and he checked his watch.

Billy settled cross-legged next to him and continued his reminiscing. "I mean, I was so angry! How could they split us up? After all we'd been through? After Omaha Beach? After Charlie and the rest of our squad got wounded or killed? Why couldn't they put us both in the same outfit? They knew we were buddies."

"I remember. I was there too, you know."

"Yeah. Boy, was I mad."

"You sure were." Littlejohn grinned at the memory of baby-faced Billy getting so angry he almost yelled at an officer.

"And that squad I got stuck in—let me tell you! Didn't know their right boots from their left. Completely green!"

Littlejohn nodded sympathetically.

"What about you?"

"Well, I've been in King Company for a while. They keep moving me around though."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes I'm in one squad, sometimes another. Sometimes I'm practically on MP duty—it's like I'm the extra guy that gets to do whatever's left over."

"Gee, that can't be fun."

Littlejohn shook his head. "Not really. But it's been better lately. I think they're gonna leave me in this squad permanently."

"I sure hope so! If they split us up again, I don't know what I'll do." Billy sighed. "I mean, who'll help me put my rifle back together again when I can't remember how? Who'll wake me up when I sleep through reveille?"

"Who did all that when I wasn't around?"

"Well, I guess I did," Billy admitted. "But it was tricky! And I never had nearly as much fun."

"One thing, Billy," Littlejohn said solemnly, looking down the tent-lined path at an

approaching group of soldiers. "You can't goof off in this squad. The sergeant's pretty tough. Strictly by-the-book."

"Oh no!" Billy looked genuinely worried. "Does he yell a lot?"

"You ever meet a sergeant that didn't?" Littlejohn stood up. "Here they come."

Billy Nelson stood too, looking at the soldiers following a grimy blond sergeant. They looked like seasoned veterans; compared to them, Billy looked about twelve. Littlejohn figured he probably felt that way too.

"Hi, Sarge," Littlejohn greeted them.

"Littlejohn." The sergeant nodded, then looked at Billy. "You one of our replacements?"

"Yeah." Billy swallowed. It was like this guy could look right through your forehead and see what you were thinking. Except Billy wasn't thinking much at all, other than remembering Littlejohn had said this sergeant was tough.

"Well, what's your name, soldier?" The sergeant smiled. He *seemed* friendly, sort of.

"Billy." No, no, that was wrong. "Private Billy Nelson," he added, hastily.

"Nelson? I'm Saunders." The sergeant stepped away from his squad and pointed at each of them in turn. "This is Cajé." A dark man, thin, and wearing a strange black hat. "Doc." Also dark-haired, but with sympathetic eyes. "Braddock." A large guy, wearing the ugliest camo pants Billy had ever seen. "Williams." A big pale red-headed soldier, nearly as big as Littlejohn. "And Grady Long, our BAR man." A friendly face, one that looked like it perpetually held a smile. "And that's Littlejohn by you."

"Yeah, I know Littlejohn."

Saunders glanced around. "Where's Kirby and the other guys?"

"Here, Sarge," a new voice said.

Billy glanced over his shoulder to see two soldiers approaching from the other direction.

"Found our other replacement," the first one said, with a smug smile, and jerked a thumb at a short younger blond man standing beside him. "This is Renz."

Saunders nodded to Renz.

Kirby looked a little older than the other squad members, and Billy thought he seemed edgy, never standing completely still. Always moving, looking around.

"You were supposed to draw our extra ammo," Saunders reminded Kirby.

"Yeah, well, Garzoni and Ames are taking care of that."

"That was your job." The edge in Saunders' voice was unmistakable.

"Well, Renz here was lost," Kirby said. "Thought I'd better get him over here."

Saunders just looked at Kirby, saying nothing. Billy glanced surreptitiously at Littlejohn, wondering if this was what Littlejohn had meant about their sergeant.

Kirby glanced around uncomfortably, then shrugged. It looked to Billy like Kirby was used to getting on the sergeant's bad side.

Saunders looked around at the rest of his squad and said, "You guys wait here while I go see what the lieutenant has for us." The sergeant pushed aside the tent flap and disappeared inside, and Littlejohn sat back down on the grass. The other soldiers stretched out nearby, most pulling out packs of cigarettes and lighting up.

Renz smiled tentatively at Billy, then sat down self-consciously nearby. Billy knew that outsider feeling all too well and couldn't help being grateful he had gotten lucky enough to join a squad where he knew someone. He looked up to see the dark soldier the sergeant had called 'Cajé' looking between him and Littlejohn. "So, you two knew each other before?" Cajé asked. Cajé had an accent Billy couldn't quite place.

"Yup." Billy Nelson couldn't help grinning at the man. "We rode together some."

Littlejohn shook his head. "Billy, what is that supposed to mean?"

"You know, like cowboys. Went on trail rides together. Saved each other's lives now and then. Fought off Indian attacks!"

Littlejohn looked as serious as he could manage. "Billy, have we ever been cowboys?"

"Well, no, but—" Billy fidgeted.

Caje and Williams exchanged amused looks. Braddock chuckled, as did Grady. None of them had seen this solemnly teasing side of Littlejohn before.

"Have you ever even met a real Indian?" Littlejohn inquired gravely.

Billy shook his head. "Not a *real* Indian, but—"

"Did you get all that stuff from a movie?"

"Well... yes."

Littlejohn nodded, trying hard not to smile. "I thought so."

"But you *did* save my life!" the younger soldier protested.

"True." Littlejohn nodded.

Kirby rolled his eyes.

Caje asked again, "So, you two knew each other before this?"

"We hit Omaha Beach together," Billy confessed.

"That's more like it." Littlejohn finally allowed himself a small smile.

"Hey," said Grady Long, "you two oughta be on a U.S.O. tour doing comedy routines, not slogging around in the mud with us."

"Ha ha, very funny," Littlejohn retorted. "You sure you're not talking about yourself and Braddock?"

Braddock laughed, his round face lighting up at the thought. "You kill me, Littlejohn," he chortled.

"Aaannh, you're all crazy, if you ask me," said Kirby.

Grady Long shook his head. "Kirby, when're you gonna surprise us all by turning into a nice guy?" He reached over and playfully slapped the glowering Kirby on his helmet. "Lighten up, pal."

Two other soldiers came up suddenly, each carrying the extra ammo. "Hey, what'd we miss?" one asked, looking around the still-smiling squad. He was as dark as Caje, but rounder in the shoulders, with an unshaven face, bushy black eyebrows and a wide-lipped smile. His companion was a thin older man, his face serious and unsmiling. He began immediately passing out the ammunition and grenades he was carrying.

Littlejohn introduced them to Billy. "That's Garzoni and Ames."

Garzoni was the darker one. He looked over at Kirby expectantly. "So, did the Sarge notice?"

Kirby just scowled.

Garzoni laughed cheerfully. "That's ten you owe me, and that's U.S. dollars, buddy. Pay up."

"Kirby," Grady said patiently. "When're you going to learn you can't get anything past Saunders?"

"Aw, shut up, Grady."

Grady rolled his eyes and glanced back at the CP tent. "Wonder what's taking Saunders so long?"

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Lieutenant Hanley stood beside Saunders as they bent over a wrinkled map spread across his field desk. "The only real obstacle standing in the way of the advance the brass is planning is this river." Hanley pointed a long, clean forefinger at the map. "It's too deep and too wide to ford easily, and too fast for a pontoon bridge. Our best bet

is to use one of the three existing bridges. The one to the south is too small—it's basically just a footbridge. And the one to the north is really too far out of our way. But this one here in the center could be ideal." He tapped a small marking crossing a couple of spidery lines on the map.

Saunders nodded. "So you want us to check it out."

"See if it's wide enough for trucks. And sound enough for a whole convoy to cross. S2 says the area's clear—you shouldn't run into any trouble." Hanley straightened up and looked across the tent. "Brockmeyer! Get a radio for Sergeant Saunders."

The stocky blond corporal nodded. "Yes, sir." He turned around and started rummaging through the pile of equipment stored in the corner of the tent.

Hanley turned back to Saunders. "The bridge is on the north side of an abandoned quarry. The reports say the banks are steep and the river runs fast and deep there, so it's not going to be easy to get a good look at. Better bring some rope."

"Yes, sir," Saunders said.

"You're supposed to be getting a couple of replacements before you head out." Hanley ripped open a fresh cigarette pack and shook one out for himself, then offered the pack to Saunders.

"Thanks." Saunders took a cigarette and pulled his lighter from his pocket.

"Yeah, Nelson and Renz. They're outside."

As they both lit up, Brockmeyer approached carrying a portable backpack-style radio.

"Give that to Braddock, will you?" Saunders said.

"Sure, Sarge," Brockmeyer said and headed out.

Saunders stuck his cigarette in one corner of his mouth. "I'll check in when we get there."

"Oh, and Saunders?" Hanley added as Saunders followed Brockmeyer for the tent exit.

"Yes, sir?" Saunders paused and turned around.

"Leave Doc here—you shouldn't need him on a scouting party like this, and I'd like to send him with third squad when they go check out some enemy positions to the south."

"I'll tell him." Saunders nodded and left.

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Outside, Brockmeyer was trying to hand the radio to Braddock.

"Why me?" Braddock complained, not taking it.

"Because the Sarge said so. Here."

Braddock grimaced and grabbed the radio by its straps.

Grady smiled and shook his head at him. "And here you thought you'd get out of carrying it."

"That'll be the day," Kirby smirked.

Braddock stared at the radio, then looked up and raised his eyebrows hopefully.

"Hey, Brockmeyer, I'll trade you. How'd you like to go on a nice long patrol?"

Brockmeyer grinned at him. "Sorry, Braddock, the lieutenant needs me."

Braddock's hopeful expression didn't change. "I can help the lieutenant. I was helping him before you were."

"Maybe when you earn your own stripes."

"You didn't earn those stripes, you—"

Before Braddock could finish, Saunders ducked out of the tent and interrupted,

"All right, that's enough. Now, listen up. Doc—inside. Lieutenant's sending you with third squad."

Kirby grinned. "Now that's more like it. Where we going?"

"We're checking out the usability of a bridge due east of here. Littlejohn—go requisition two coils of rope."

"Okay, Sarge," Littlejohn said, getting to his feet.

"The rest of you relax. We leave in fifteen."

Ames came over and handed Saunders the extra ammo and a couple of grenades he had been holding for him. As Saunders attached the grenades to his jacket, Grady sauntered over and leaned close. "Braddock carried the radio last time. Don't you think it's someone else's turn?"

Braddock heard him and looked over hopefully.

Saunders glanced at Grady, then followed the BAR man's gaze. He had to hide a smile at Grady's obvious proposal. Why not? he thought. "Braddock," he called.

"Yeah?"

"Give the radio to Kirby."

Kirby whirled around.

Braddock grinned cheerfully. "Hey, thanks, Grady."

"Yeah, thanks, Grady," Kirby echoed, but with an entirely different tone of voice.

Grady grinned at them both. "No problem. Just keeping things fair around here."

"Braddock," Saunders said, almost as an afterthought.

"Yeah?"

"You can carry Grady's extra ammo."

Braddock's smile vanished, and he glanced wistfully after the radio Kirby had just taken from him. "Thanks a lot, Grady," he groaned.

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After marching along a dusty, tree-lined road for over an hour, Saunders called a halt. "All right, let's take five."

The soldiers sprawled in the grass and weeds on either side of the road, seeking out the shade of the few trees growing between them and the deserted fields beyond. Braddock plopped down beside Billy and Littlejohn. Littlejohn had two coils of rope, carried crosswise over his body, like the bandoleers of a Mexican bandito.

"Man, am I tired of carrying this ammo," Braddock grouched. "I think it's getting heavier somehow. Hey, Grady," he called across the road, "sure you don't want to fire off a few rounds? Maybe even a couple mags?"

Grady just laughed and shook his head, then sat down in the grass next to Saunders.

Braddock smiled sarcastically. "Yeah, thanks, Grady! You're a pal!" To Billy and Littlejohn, he added, "You'd think after he got me into this predicament, the least he'd do is help lighten my load a little."

Kirby walked past them toward a tree a little farther back from the road. "Well then, why don't you keep your mouth shut next time?" he snapped. He slipped out of the radio's harness and rolled his shoulders, rubbing at the muscles.

Caje came back toward them from his forward position where he had been scouting the road ahead. "Kirby, why don't you follow your own advice once in awhile?" He crossed the road to where Saunders and Grady sat. "All clear ahead, Sarge."

"Good. Go ahead and take five too," Saunders told him.

Caje re-crossed the road and sat down cross-legged in the warm grass near Kirby. "Got a smoke?" he asked.



"Yeah, yeah." Kirby fumbled in his coat pockets. "Here, last one." He tossed over the crumpled pack.

"Down to your last one already?" Cajé asked as he caught the pack deftly.

"Last one in that pack." Kirby winked.

Across the road, Grady said something the other soldiers didn't catch. Saunders began to chuckle, then let loose with a full-out laugh.

Braddock shook his head. "You know, no matter how long this war lasts, I'm never getting used to that."

"Used to what?" Littlejohn asked between swigs of water from his canteen.

"The Sarge being such good buddies with Grady Long, that's what," Braddock answered.

"Yeah? Why's that?" asked Billy from where he lay stretched full-length in the grass. The shade felt good after all that marching. Maybe he should've joined the Navy instead, and had boats to take him everywhere.

Braddock explained, "I spent week after week with Saunders in England before the invasion. Not once did I hear him laugh like that."

"Aaannh." Kirby rolled his eyes. "You're just sore 'cause the Sarge never laughs at your jokes like he does Grady's."

"Shut up, Kirby," Braddock said, his tone still amiable. "You didn't know him before like I did. I'm telling you, he's a different guy with Grady around. Hey, Cajé, am I right?"

Cajé shrugged. "Probably."

"I'm right."

Billy asked, "So what was the sergeant like before? Really mean or something?"

"No, he wasn't mean. He was just, I don't know, a little cold." Braddock shifted around so that he lay on his side, one arm propping up his head. "He'd talk to you easy enough, but you always felt like he was keeping his distance. Maybe the lieutenant got through to him now and then, but not like Grady does."

Kirby flicked away the end of his cigarette. "What're you now, a philosopher?"

"Drop dead, Kirby," said Braddock. "Do us all a favor."



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To Billy Nelson, it seemed like several more hours of marching passed before Cajé dropped back from his lead position to announce, "Not much farther. Just over this hill you can see the river."

"Wait here," Saunders said and went forward with Cajé.

They bellied up to the top of the rise, and Saunders looked down into the valley beyond. The ground swept gently downhill until it neared the river, then the bank dropped a steep thirty feet into the water. The river itself was twenty-five or thirty feet across, fast-moving and deep. The narrowing gorge banks funneled the river downstream toward the bridge, where the water frothed against the arches of the quarry bridge and made visible wakes around the stone base. On the opposite side of the river, a rocky cliff rose fifty or sixty feet up from the height of the bridge. The road crossed the bridge and switchbacked all the way up the cliff to the top, where a promontory overlook jutted out.

Saunders let his gaze sweep downriver, past the bridge and the cliff face, to the

giant scooped-out hill of the abandoned quarry itself—the broad flat area by the river, the carved-out steps of the stone walls, a couple of wooden outbuildings just visible in the lee of some boulders—all of it unapproachable from this side of the river without swimming or crossing the bridge.

He returned his scrutiny to the bridge in question. It was an old stone masonry structure, almost as broad across as it was long; two trucks could pass side-by-side on it without trouble. He lifted his field-glasses to his eyes and began a slow scan. It was old, all right, and in pretty poor repair. The two spans were fissured and missing stones, and the main support in the center of the river looked like it had been battered by one too many storms. The river swirled around rubble that had been knocked loose. The bridge roadway appeared to have at least two gaping holes on the far side that, despite the bridge's width, looked big enough to prevent even a jeep from crossing. Those could be patched easily enough, as long as the arches were structurally sound and able to bear weight. They would need to take a closer look.

And that posed a problem, he thought, just as Hanley had predicted from the reports. The bridge was wide enough that no one could see the underside clearly from the shore, and the steepness of the banks would prevent anyone from being able to get beneath it without the aid of ropes or by flat-out swimming. And that stiff current would make any water reconnaissance difficult.

Saunders studied the area again with the binoculars, making sure nothing moved out there. The road split just before the bridge. One half spilled onto the bridge roadway; the other continued south along the riverbank. He ordered, "Caje, scout up along the road on this side of the river. See where it goes."

"Right," Caje said and took off.

Saunders signaled to the rest of squad, and they followed the road over the rise and down to where it forked at the bridge. The thick trees and underbrush that had lined the road suddenly petered out in the rocky soil, and the bridge and surrounding riverbanks were completely in the open. He didn't like that exposure, but there was nothing to do about it.

"Grady," Saunders said, gesturing to the vegetation to the right of the road. "Cover us from here. Kirby, leave the radio with him. Grady—call Hanley and let him know we arrived."

Kirby hurriedly handed his rifle to Garzoni and shrugged out of the radio's shoulder straps. Braddock dropped Grady's extra ammo down beside the BAR man.

Saunders went on, "Ames, Garzoni—check out the condition of that cliff road. It's got to be able to handle armor." He pointed up at the top of the cliff on the opposite bank. "That overlook should give you a good view in all directions. One of you take up position there, the other—see what else is up there. Here, you might need these." He handed his binoculars to Ames.

Ames slipped the binocular strap over his head, and the two men headed off, trotting onto the bridge.

"The rest of you—let's check out this bridge."

There remained a certain majesty to the old stone structure that defied the harsh passage of time. Its lines were basic and functional and, yet, the crumbling balustrade displayed more ornate curves than the simple bridge warranted, as did the squat columned decorations rising from the abutments at each end of the bridge.

Ames and Garzoni crossed carefully, veering wide on the far end to avoid the collapses in the roadway. On the other side of the bridge, beneath the cliff walls, was a circular flat area, large enough to give vehicles a place to pull off or turn around before ascending the switchback road. A stone hut still stood off to one side, and Ames checked it out and signaled all clear to Saunders before he and Garzoni started up the



road.

Littlejohn and Billy headed immediately toward the center of the bridge.

Saunders walked to the right side of the bridge, but the bank was as steep there as it was on the left. He slipped on the sandy ground before he caught himself against the abutment and pulled himself back up on the road. Any attempt to get down to the base of the bridge that way would result in an unpleasant bath, with no way to get out of the water until the banks leveled out further downriver into the quarry.

Braddock was standing nearby, eyeing the bridge as if it might collapse at any moment. "You know, Sarge, I've built houses out of cards that looked more stable than this."

"It's stone, Braddock, it's not going to fall apart."

"You never know."

Saunders shook his head and walked past him onto the bridge.

Braddock followed, saying, "I don't know anything about bridges. What good am I going to do?"

"You don't need to know anything about bridges."

"I don't?" Braddock asked, raising both eyebrows in doubt.

Saunders stopped walking and turned back toward the heavy private, his face a mask of innocence. "You know how to tie a knot, don't you?"

Braddock perked up. "Sure, I can tie a pretty decent knot."

"Good. Then get out there and help Littlejohn with the ropes."

Braddock's smile fell.

"Go on," Saunders ordered, sharply. He turned and called, "Kirby, you and Nelson are going over the side. We need to know what condition those two spans are in underneath. Williams, Renz! Give Littlejohn and Braddock a hand."

Kirby grimaced, but made his way out to the middle of the bridge. He moved to the right-hand side and peered over the railing. Fifteen, twenty feet down, the water rushed out from under the bridge in mesmerizing patterns.

"Hey, dummy," Braddock called. "Wrong side, unless you like swimming upstream."

"I know that," Kirby snapped. "I'm just taking a look." He turned and unslung his rifle as he crossed to the left side of the bridge where Littlejohn was pulling the two coils of rope off over his head.

Saunders glanced up to check on Ames and Garzoni's progress. They were toiling up the long switchbacks, already halfway up. He looked back at Grady's position, but the BAR man had faded into the underbrush already. Off in the distance, Caje was a tiny figure weaving among the trees along the south river road.

Kirby looked doubtfully over the side again as Littlejohn and Braddock secured the ropes to the stone railings about twelve feet apart, one on either side of the center support. Littlejohn asked Braddock, "You know how to tie a double bowline?"

"A what?" Braddock asked, his hands working with the rope.

"That's it." Kirby shoved Billy toward Braddock and took his place by Littlejohn.

"Hey!" Billy said. He moved back in front of Littlejohn. Kirby made a face and crossed his arms as he watched Braddock work.

Braddock held up his neatly-knotted rope. Littlejohn smiled.

"You guys trying to be funny?" Kirby muttered. He tugged suspiciously with both hands at the looped and knotted rope Braddock handed him, as if expecting the knots to unravel. "How do I know you tied this right?"

"Kirby, I am full of talents you couldn't even begin to guess at."

"Like always cutting in first on the chow line, weaseling out of patrols...."

"Don't you know it's not polite to brag about yourself?" Braddock said.

"Hurry up out there," Saunders called.  
"Yeah, hurry up out there," Braddock said to Kirby, mimicking Saunders' tone of voice. "You think we got all day?"

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Saunders slowly crossed the bridge. The first half of the roadway appeared in good shape; only the last bit had not fared so well. He dropped on one knee beside one of the ragged collapses in the roadway, bending forward cautiously to see if he could determine how undermined it was. The river rushed by below and, through the hole, he could see Billy being lowered down on the east side of the center support. He thought most of the damage looked worse than it really was, and he stood again, glancing behind him, to check on the men's progress.

Williams, while not as tall as Littlejohn, still made most of the squad members feel short. He and Braddock had Kirby's rope; Littlejohn and Renz had Billy's. Both teams were carefully paying out their lines, lowering their charges over the side.

Braddock glanced over at Littlejohn. "Betcha ours hits the water first."

"That's no bet," Littlejohn said.

Saunders shook his head and walked around the second hole to reach the far side of the bridge. The cliff top promontory jutted out above him. The eastern bank offered nearly vertical drops into the river, and he didn't bother getting too close to the edge. Even though he had seen Ames check out the stone hut built there, he checked it out himself and found only an empty stone-walled room.

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"Stop!" Kirby shouted, but he went waist-deep into the river before the rope jerked taut. The current sucked him immediately beneath the bridge, where he hung awkwardly, with not enough play to maneuver. Kirby cursed Braddock under his breath. But the water wasn't that cold, and it actually felt rather good. Except he would be hiking back in wet boots. As if he didn't have enough blisters already.

He grabbed the rope and over-handed himself back upriver until he could be heard over the loud noise of the rushing water. "Give me some more slack!"

They did, but this time he was ready, and he grabbed hold of the jumbled debris knocked out of the center support. He drew himself up until he was standing on top of the rubble. The rushing water broke knee-deep around his legs. He started inspecting the wall.

"Hey!"

He heard Billy's voice echoing and saw the kid peeking at him from the other side through a deep crack in the thick stone. "I can scrape the mortar out with my knife," Billy said. "Is that bad?"

"Aaannh," Kirby said. "Who knows." He slapped the stone with his palm and looked downstream, eyeing the wall.

"What's this writing?" Billy asked, calling through the crack again.

"What writing?"

"Looks German. Like little notations on the wall. It's in chalk or something." Billy added, "It rubs off."

"Aaannh," Kirby said again. "Probably nothing." The kid was seeing things, he thought. It was probably just mineral deposits leeching out of the stones from the constant moisture. He had some of that on his side too, white squiggly lines and rings he could rub off. He studied the right-hand abutment wall where another section had

crumbled loose. It was too dark beneath the wide bridge to see it properly from his position and, with a grimace, he decided he had better get wetter and check it out up close. Saunders would kill him if he didn't do this inspection right.

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"Give me some more slack!"

Braddock heard Kirby's shout and nodded to Williams. They let some more rope out. Braddock wiped his brow one-handed. "Why don't we get Grady's job? Stretch out in some bushes and count the clouds." He sighed longingly, then made a face at Williams. "This is more work than digging a foxhole."

Williams chuckled. "Don't let Saunders hear you, or I'm sure he'll find something else for you to do. You know what he always says."

"Yeah, I know. I need the exercise." Braddock grimaced. "If I get any more exercise, I might lose my manly figure. The only exercise I want is—"

Gunfire cut through the morning air—sharp, menacing, and far too close. On the bridge, the men's gazes snapped upward, up the cliff face in the direction the noise had come.

Down by the stone hut, Saunders craned his head back to look skyward, realizing in a heartbeat that if something had gone wrong, if there were Germans up there, the squad were sitting ducks down here. Distance and cover were their only option and the bridge had neither. He started back across the bridge, shouting to Littlejohn and Braddock, "Get 'em back up, now!"

He looked downriver and located Caje; alerted by the gunfire, he was already jogging back from his downstream recon. Good.

More gunfire came from up above—this time, the clear whiplash crack of rifles. Littlejohn and Renz, Braddock and Williams were heaving on the ropes. Then Kirby was up, and Braddock grabbed his arm to help pull him over the railing. Williams joined the other two men in hauling Billy the last feet up onto the bridge. Kirby quickly freed his legs from the looped rope and grabbed up his rifle.

"Get those ropes off there!" Saunders said, as he ran up.

Braddock tugged frantically at the knots around the railing.

One of the squad ran up to the rim of the cliff overlook. Saunders thought it was Ames. The man waved and shouted, "Krauts!"

Then Garzoni appeared a second later, sprinting immediately down the switchback road. Ames turned to follow but the sharp staccato of a German machine pistol opened up. Ames stumbled and fell soundlessly off the overlook, rolling down the last thirty feet of slanted bank to hit the water with a splash. The current sucked his body downriver.

Saunders yelled, "Get off the bridge! Get back, get back!"

Renz and Williams took off immediately. Braddock finally got his rope untied and simply flung the end out over the railing, into the river, before snatching up his rifle from where it leaned against the bridge railing. Saunders watched Littlejohn gathering the last of the rope he had been using and slip the coil back around his body. Billy tugged at the tall man's arm urgently.

Then up on the overlook, the first couple of Germans looked down over the cliff rim, their dark helmets silhouetted against the sky.

Almost instantly, Grady opened up from his position, and one of the Germans collapsed, dropping his rifle. It rebounded off the side of the cliff a few times before splashing into the river. The other Kraut yanked back out of sight. spurts of dust and rock kicked up where Grady's bullets raked the top of the cliff.

Then more Germans appeared: peeking and retreating, then apparently lying down, barely visible to the men below. The muzzles of their rifles eased out over the cliff edge, and they opened up on the Americans.

The squad returned fire, but the Germans made almost impossible targets. Grady was clearly trying to cover Garzoni's pell-mell run down the switchbacks, and Saunders tensed, watching the figure sprinting downhill. There was no way Garzoni could make it; he had too far to go, with no cover. That overlook Saunders had thought would make such a good observation spot for Ames was now working for the Germans, exposing not only the whole bridge, but the entire switchback road to their gun sights. The Germans would shoot Garzoni down, and there was nothing Saunders or any of the other squad members could do about it. Grimly, Saunders fired at the cliff top again, hoping he would get lucky, hoping he could buy Garzoni a miracle.

Then the snout of not one but two heavy machine guns appeared over the edge on their tripods. One targeted the bridge; the other aimed for Grady's position. Grady's BAR fell silent as he took cover. Saunders dove for the left-hand abutment, nearly sliding down the steep slope into the river. Renz and Williams took cover behind the other. Kirby and Braddock kept going, zigzagging, heading for the underbrush and trees on the other side of the road near Grady. Littlejohn and Billy—still on the bridge—dropped to the ground and rolled up against the bridge railing, pressing themselves flat against the stone.

The German machine guns fired mercilessly, pinning them all down, bullets whining in murderous ricochets off the stone bridge.

When Saunders fired upward, trying to hit the guns, Renz and Williams followed suit, their rifle shots cracking out across the quarry. What they needed was a bazooka, or a grenade launcher, something that would let them hit the top of the cliff out of their own visual sight. And they had nothing like that. Their bullets passed harmlessly over the prone Germans' heads or peppered the edge of the cliff face. They might as well have been firing peashooters at the Krauts for all the good they were doing.

Then one German machine gun fell silent—Caje, realizing the danger, had cut away from the river, going for higher ground and a better angle from where he had been able to hit either the gun itself or the operator. Saunders couldn't tell which. The stammer of the other machine gun stopped as well and, in the momentary lull, Saunders shouted at Littlejohn and Nelson to get off the bridge. He ran himself, crouched, sprinting toward the trees, followed by Renz and Williams. Grady opened up again as soon as the German machine guns stopped, Kirby and Braddock joining in.

Rifle fire started again from the cliff top, and Littlejohn and Nelson dove behind the right-hand abutment that Williams and Renz had just vacated, unable to get farther.

"Get out of there!" Saunders shouted at them.

"What about Garzoni?" Littlejohn shouted back.

Garzoni was a dead man. Saunders knew it, but his gaze traveled across the bridge, up the road. The private had passed the last switchback and was racing down the final section, twisting, darting left and right to make himself a harder target. Somehow, he had made it that far without being hit, and Saunders held his breath as Garzoni flung himself the last feet and drew up behind the small stone hut on the other side of the bridge. It was the last spot of good cover until he could join them here, in the vegetation. Sixty feet of exposure: forty feet on a deathtrap bridge, twenty across the open road. The words echoed bitterly in his brain: Garzoni was a dead man.

Then in between the spurts of small arms fire, with no warning, an explosion behind them showered them with dirt and debris.

"Mortars!"

Everyone flung themselves for better cover.

"Sarge, we gotta get outta here," Braddock called, urgently.

The first shells were all long, blowing great smoking craters in the ground thirty feet behind them, splintering trees. It wouldn't take the Germans much time to adjust the range, though the fact they were aiming long indicated they didn't want to risk damaging the bridge. They must want it intact too, Saunders thought. And that meant this lousy dilapidated bridge had just attained an importance its old stones hadn't had since this was an active quarry. S2's intel hadn't mentioned anything about a German push, and certainly not here.

"Sarge?"

It was Garzoni, shouting from the other side of the bridge.

"There's a whole platoon up there, Sarge!" Garzoni shouted. He yelled something else, but a burst of machine gun fire drowned him out.

A whole platoon... Saunders swore.

Another mortar blast hit behind them, closer this time.

And at the same time, a covered truck rumbled down from the top of the road, its heavy tires kicking up dust. There was movement on the far side of the vehicle, just visible through the dust—soldiers, using the truck as cover, were coming down where they could get a better shot at the Americans.

Garzoni was peeking around the corner of the hut, staring upward. He turned abruptly, shouldered his rifle, and pulled two grenades off his jacket. He held them up, gestured urgently up the road while looking across the distance at Saunders as if for confirmation.

"Geez," Kirby said. "He gonna try for that truck from his position?"

For a second, Saunders thought that's exactly what Garzoni was going to do, but then the man was shouting again, and Saunders made out the word "road" and understood. Garzoni meant to try to damage the switchback road, blow a couple of craters in it that just might undercut the cliff edge enough to prevent the Germans from bringing their trucks down.

"Do it!" Saunders yelled, hoping Garzoni could hear him.

He thought he saw Garzoni nod, but the German heavy machine gun opened up again, and Saunders ducked flat, covering his head. The Krauts were trying to pin them down, keep them from retreating or trying to hit the truck while it downshifted and kept on coming.

Grady's rate of fire had slowed, and Saunders knew he was running low on ammo, despite the extra they had brought. The BAR man would be conserving his last mags to cover the squad's retreat. In fact, they were all running low on ammo. They hadn't come equipped for a protracted firefight. S2 had reported the area clear. Sure, it was clear all right, Saunders thought, angrily. Clear as a mud puddle.

They had to get out of there. Saunders quickly checked on the positions of the squad. Caje held the high ground off to their right, where he was sniping at the soldiers hiding behind the truck. Garzoni was still on the wrong side of the bridge. Littlejohn and Nelson crouched side by side behind the right-hand bridge abutment twenty feet away. Grady was off to his left, joined now by Renz and Williams, and Kirby and Braddock lay next to Saunders.

Saunders checked on Garzoni again, just in time to see the man step back and heave one, then the other of his grenades high up. It was a risky throw—if they didn't clear the edge of the road, they would bounce off the cliff and come right back down on top of him—but his throw was carefully aimed; almost too carefully, because when the grenades had exploded—one, two—and the geysers of dirt and rock settled back down, Saunders could see that most of the damage was close against the inner side of the road, not the outer. One good explosion against the outer edge would have undercut

the road, leaving the Germans no way to fill it in again. Still, the craters looked wide and deep enough that there was no way their truck could get down without some repair work.

The twin explosions had startled the Germans, and their remaining machine gun on the cliff had fallen silent. In the abrupt quiet, the voices of the German soldiers carried clearly across the gorge.

Garzoni immediately turned and sprinted across the bridge.

"Give him cover!" Saunders shouted. It was useless, he knew it in his gut, but they had to try anyway.

The Americans began firing. Saunders targeted the truck, as the soldiers it hid had a better field of vision than any up on top of the cliff. But it didn't make any difference. The Germans opened fire, and Garzoni caught it just as he ran out onto the bridge. His sheer momentum carried him staggering another ten feet before he pitched forward to skid and half-roll onto his back.

Saunders closed his eyes for a second, the fury churning in his gut—two men dead on a routine recon patrol. This shouldn't have happened.

He opened his eyes again and tersely ordered Kirby and Braddock to join Grady, adding, "Braddock! Get Hanley on the radio." Braddock nodded, and both men scuttled off toward Grady under cover of the vegetation and tree line. Saunders rolled over and shouted back at the bridge, "Nelson, Littlejohn! Fall back! Fall back!"

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Brockmeyer entered Lieutenant Hanley's large tent, a cup of coffee in each hand. "Lieutenant, I've got your—" He stopped speaking when he saw that Hanley had fallen asleep at his desk. Head pillowed on his arms, the lieutenant sprawled across the little portable table, snatching a few precious minutes of rest. If there was one thing the Army taught you, it was to sleep whenever you could, wherever you could.

Brockmeyer set one cup of coffee down on the radio table, then sipped from the other. The coffee had cooled already, which should have been nice on a hot June afternoon, but it irritated him. If there was one thing he hated, it was lukewarm coffee.

The radio crackled beside him, and he turned quickly to it, grateful for the distraction. It was Braddock's voice asking for King Two, and the urgency in his tone worried Brockmeyer. "Hang on White Rook. Over," he said, then turned and called quickly, "Lieutenant—Saunders is calling in."

Hanley lifted his head, yawned, and rubbed his eyes. "Who?" he asked.

"Saunders."

"Right." Hanley stood and crossed to Brockmeyer, took the proffered phone. "White Rook, this is King Two. Over."

He jerked the phone away from his ear as the ripping noise of gunfire came over the radio loud enough that Brockmeyer could hear it too. "Say again, White Rook. Over," Hanley said grimly.

Brockmeyer couldn't make out what Saunders was saying between the obvious sounds of a firefight, but just watching Hanley's face was enough to tell him something had gone terribly wrong with the bridge recon.

Hanley said, "Hold on, White Rook. Over." He turned to Brockmeyer and snapped, "Get me Captain Jampel, immediately."





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Saunders flung his arm over his head as two more mortar blasts came, one after another, pelting them with debris. He wiped blood off his cheek where a flying rock had gashed it. What was taking Hanley so long? he thought furiously.

And while they lay there returning fire sporadically, he could hear the steady rumble of the German truck coming down the road. It braked suddenly, and Saunders looked up to see it had finally reached the section damaged by Garzoni's grenades. The soldiers who had been hiding behind it broke from cover, running past the grenade craters, down the dirt road, stopping occasionally to fire across the river at the squad. They were almost superfluous, Saunders thought, as long as that heavy machine gun on the overlook had the ammo to keep the Americans pinned down, and the mortars continued to zero in on their position.

He switched on the radio again and said, "King Two, this is White Rook. I need your orders. We can't stay here much longer. Over."

"What's keeping them?" Braddock muttered.

Another mortar blast knocked them all flat, and Saunders lost his grip on both the radio and his Thompson. Ears ringing, dazed, he watched a great gout of earth and obliterated tree bits blow upward, almost in slow motion. His hand slapped the ground around him, searching for his Thompson.

They couldn't afford to stay there a minute longer. He coughed and spat blood, found he'd had bitten his lip. He shouted, "Retreat! We're getting out of here. Let's go." He shoved at Braddock and got to his knees, the Thompson back in his hands.

A scream came from off to his left, and he turned to see Renz buckling forward, clutching at his stomach.

Williams and Braddock were closest. They got Renz up between them, hauled him off. Kirby followed, shooting at the soldiers on the switchbacks as he went. Saunders looked around and swore again. Littlejohn and Billy were still pinned down at the bridge. They had managed to cross to the left-hand abutment, which afforded them more protection, but they hadn't been able to cross the road to reach the others.

Saunders started to move their direction, but Grady grabbed his arm. The BAR man said, "I'll cover them. You go."

The sudden concussion from one of the mortar shells struck nearby, and they dropped flat again, covering their heads protectively.

"Kirby's down," Grady said, urgently.

Saunders rolled to get a look.

Kirby was sprawled in the road, trying to push himself to his knees. He shook his head, looking dazed and only half-conscious, but uninjured. But when the dust and smoke cleared, he would make an easy target as soon as one of the Germans spotted him.

Almost irritated, Grady shoved at Saunders and said, "Go!"

Saunders went.

Grady used up his next-to-last mag, but Littlejohn and Billy were still pinned down at the edge of the bridge. He grimaced, then made a decision, reloaded, picked up the BAR, and headed back their way to get as close as he could.

At the bridge, Billy said desperately, "Littlejohn, I'm out of ammo!" He ducked down again as a spray of machine gun fire kicked chips of stone off the abutment.

Littlejohn said nothing. He was nearly out himself. A glance over his shoulder showed the trees looking no closer; that open bare ground seemed to stretch forever, even if it was only twenty feet. They would have to try for it anyway. It was either that or stay there and die, or get captured. Then he saw Grady coming back, darting tree to

tree, bush to bush to get closer. Suddenly, Cajé pushed through the bushes from the other direction and joined the BAR man. Littlejohn smiled grimly. This would be the only chance he and Billy would get. If Grady and Cajé couldn't give them enough cover, no one could.

"Get ready to run," Littlejohn said to Billy. "Next time a mortar hits, use the dust and smoke for cover."

"What about you?"

"I'll be right behind you."

An explosion rained dirt and pebbles on them.

"Now!" Littlejohn shouted. Billy took off, Cajé and Grady opened fire, then a second mortar shell hit, the concussion sweeping them all off their feet. Billy lost his rifle. Grady scuttled out and checked on Billy as the kid started to sit up. He shoved Billy toward cover, shouting, "Get moving, kid!" then hurried to Littlejohn. Bullets whined around them, and Grady dropped flat, but he was too close to the edge of the embankment and he started to slide. Littlejohn dove forward and caught hold of Grady's left arm, but the top of the embankment crumpled under his feet as he scrabbled furiously against the inexorable pull of Grady's weight.

It was the Krauts across the way firing as they came down the last switchback. Billy unhooked his two grenades. He had a good throwing arm and it wasn't more than ninety feet or so across the river gorge up onto that last switchback before the bridge, like throwing from third base to home plate. He could do that easily, without even trying hard. He was out of ammo, out of other options. And he needed to buy Littlejohn time to get Grady back up before they slid any further toward the river or the Germans picked them off.

Cajé kept up steady fire from his position, dropping German soldiers across the way.

Billy pulled the pin from the first grenade and threw it hard, watched it arc over the gorge. It exploded as it hit the cliff wall above the road, kicking a great gout of rock and dirt out of the wall and taking out three of the soldiers standing beneath. Their gunfire ceased, and Billy shouted to Littlejohn, "Come on!"

Littlejohn hauled at Grady.

Billy armed the second grenade, had just drawn his arm back to send it after the first, when agonizing pain ripped through his left bicep. He cried out and, without thinking, grabbed at the wound with his right hand, dropping the armed grenade in the process. It rolled a few feet toward Grady and Littlejohn. Littlejohn, facing the river and still trying to pull Grady away from the edge, didn't see it, but Grady did. His free hand shot forward and closed around it. He turned and heaved it away from them, but the frantic action overbalanced him and he started to slide again, despite Littlejohn's grip on him. "Kid!" Grady started to shout, to get Billy moving, unfrozen, then he yelled in pain as a Kraut bullet hit his right shoulder.

A second later, the grenade blew on the near side of the river, almost directly below them. A geyser of white water shot thirty feet into the air. The concussion was close enough to send Littlejohn and Grady both tumbling down the steep bank into the river. They hit with a terrific splash and were swept immediately downstream toward the bridge. Billy saw Littlejohn grab Grady's jacket collar with one hand and a jutting piece of broken masonry with the other. The current broke around them, but Littlejohn fought it, hauling Grady closer to him so he could get a better grip on the wounded BAR man.

Billy stared, frozen, in pain, knowing it was his fault; then Cajé was grabbing him, shouting at him, yanking him firmly away, until suddenly they were under cover and Billy had no memory of getting there.

"Come on!" Cajé snarled, frustrated with him. "Let's go!"

Billy felt Cajé's iron grip dragging him away through the trees and bushes. The German gunfire stopped behind them, and a strange desolate silence fell over everything. There was just the sound of their crashing through the bushes. The constant gunfire, the explosions all seemed to belong to another reality, and Billy let Cajé pull him along, too numb to object.

Then they were out of the vegetation, on the road again, moving freely.

Up ahead, the rest of the squad had stopped just off the road and were gathered around someone who was lying on their back: Renz—moaning and crying. Billy could hear the voices buzzing around the wounded man, talking over each other. He heard the anger, the frustration, the urgency—but the words themselves didn't penetrate his mind. He felt Cajé sit him down nearby and start removing his jacket. Billy cried out, startled, as the sharp pain in his arm cut through his thoughts. He had almost forgotten about getting shot. How did one do that? How was it possible to put something that painful out of your head? Cajé got the jacket off him, and Billy stared at the blood-soaked shirt sleeve in astonishment. *That's my blood...* It didn't panic him like he had thought it would. But there were Littlejohn and Grady Long in his mind, tumbling down into the river where no one could help them. They were there because of him. Because he had dropped the grenade. He hadn't even been shot in that arm; he had no excuse. Why couldn't he have hung onto the grenade long enough to throw it away? Why had he just dropped it like that, without thinking? He had failed them, and that knowledge hurt worse than any bullet wound ever would.

Abruptly, Billy realized Renz had fallen silent, the squad's voices had trailed away, and there was just the midday sun, the whisper of wind through the trees, and the trilling call of some bird nearby.

Cajé ripped open a sulfa packet and shook the contents into Billy's wound.

Saunders straightened suddenly, pushing himself away from Renz's body. His gaze swept over the gathered men, taking a rapid headcount. His face was scraped on one side, just superficial cuts from flying dirt and rocks, the bleeding already stopped. "Where's Grady?" he asked sharply, looking around.

The question hit Billy like a straight right to the jaw, and the panic he thought he had managed to escape rose through him, froze him there with his heart pounding. His mouth opened, but no words came out.

It was Cajé who answered Saunders, with a slow headshake.

Saunders' jaw worked a moment, clenching and unclenching, before he said, "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Cajé said. "There was an explosion—mortar or a grenade or something—right near them. Grady and Littlejohn went in the river."

"Alive?" Saunders' voice was even sharper.

"I don't know, Sarge," Cajé said, wearily. "I couldn't see from where I was. Maybe, but I doubt it."

Kirby said, bitterly, "What does it matter? Even if they did survive the blast, they're dead men. That place'll be crawling with Krauts. They wouldn't stand a chance." He broke off under the glare Saunders turned on him, looked away.

Cajé unwrapped a bandage, stretched it out, and began tying it around Billy's arm.

Into the uncomfortable hush, Saunders said, "Give me the radio."

Billy stared at him, wide-eyed and more than a little scared at the way the sergeant bit out the deceptively simple command. Billy would rather have heard Saunders start yelling, but this quiet fury, barely held back and clearly looking for an outlet, was something else. Billy had a feeling whoever Saunders meant to call on the radio was going to be in for it. But wouldn't that be their lieutenant? Saunders wouldn't

yell at him, would he?

Braddock cleared his throat. "We don't have the radio."

Saunders turned on him, and Braddock shrugged. Billy wondered how he could be so nonchalant under that wrathful gaze. Maybe Braddock was just a good actor. "It's still sitting back by Grady's position," Braddock explained. "Renz got hit and none of us had time to grab it."

For a long moment, Saunders didn't move, then his shoulders slumped ever so slightly and, when he spoke again, the dangerous anger seemed to have receded a little. "All right, on your feet. Let's get out of here." He turned toward Cajé and Billy. "Nelson?"

"He's okay, Sarge," Cajé said. "Wound's clean. Bullet passed right through."

Saunders nodded, almost absently.

Everyone else climbed to their feet, picked up their weapons and packs.

Saunders said, "Williams, take the point."

The squad took off in a ragged single-file line. Billy started after Cajé, but stopped, his eyes straying back to Saunders, who was taking up the rear. Saunders hadn't moved yet, was staring back in the direction of the bridge. Billy couldn't see his face, and he thought that was a good thing. Cold, distant, Braddock had said, describing him. Tough, Littlejohn had said. But neither man had mentioned this side of their squad leader. It scared him. How was he supposed to tell this man that it was his fault Grady had been wounded? Saunders was liable to kill *him*. But he had to tell him. If he didn't, then nobody would help Littlejohn, and Littlejohn and Grady were still alive, he was sure of that. He had seen Littlejohn pulling Grady to safety beneath the bridge. But if he didn't say anything to Saunders, they wouldn't be for long.

"Sarge," he began.

Saunders turned then, and Billy felt those blue eyes boring into his. "Move out, Nelson."

Billy swallowed, and said again, "Sarge, I—"

"I said move out!" Saunders lashed out, angrily.

Billy jumped and quickly turned, stumbling after Cajé, clutching his wounded arm tightly to his side. He wasn't sure which would overwhelm him first, the physical pain, or the guilt inside him. And every step he took away from the bridge only increased his misery.

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The water dragged mercilessly at Littlejohn, trying to pry loose his grip on the wet stone. He shifted position again, treading water slowly, trying to swing Grady's weight in closer to the center stone wall where he would be more protected from the fast current. Ironically, it was the decrepit state of the bridge that had saved them. He had been able to grab onto the jumbled pile of collapsed masonry, and that was the only thing that had prevented him and Grady from being swept downstream and out into the open.

The gunfire had stopped. He fervently hoped Billy had made it to cover safely. Cajé had been back there... Cajé would have gotten him away if he had been able to. Littlejohn had been so busy trying to keep Grady from falling that he hadn't been able to see where the kid had gone. Then that explosion had gone off right below them, and there was nothing to do but grab on to Grady and pray.

The wounded BAR man was gasping, sputtering as water slapped him in the face whenever Littlejohn's grip sagged. Littlejohn had maneuvered them just downriver from the largest collapse, where the rubble diverted the worst of the current away from them. There was enough fallen stone that Littlejohn thought he could at least get Grady

partly out of the water. If he didn't, he thought bleakly, his grip wasn't going to hold much longer, and they both were going to get swept downriver.

At least the same steep riverbanks that had kept them from inspecting the bridge easily would keep the Germans from it too. And they were fortunate, Littlejohn thought, that the near side of the bridge was intact. If the river had carried them beneath the eastern arch, they would have been exposed to the Germans by those two great holes overhead.

*A whole platoon....*

Garzoni's shouted words echoed in his brain. Why'd the Krauts have to show up now, and in such force? The squad hadn't stood a chance.

*Wait a minute*, Littlejohn thought and, for the first time, felt a surge of hope. The Germans wouldn't have sent a whole platoon just to recon the bridge. No, he realized. They would have done that already, yesterday, maybe. Hours before the squad got there. Two teams sent to recon the same objective, and the Krauts had beaten them to it. They were back in force today because they had already checked out the bridge and found it would bear the weight of their trucks; they wouldn't need to inspect it again. And that meant as long as he and Grady stayed beneath, they would be safe from observation, at least for a while. Then, when it got dark, maybe....

"Littlejohn..." Grady gasped. "I'm hit... right shoulder."

"I know," Littlejohn said. "I'm going to try to get you more out of the water so I can take a look." Grady's BAR and his own rifle were long gone, but the coil of rope was still around his body, dragging at him and hampering his arm movements. He wondered if he couldn't use it somehow to help secure Grady. He would need both hands free if he was going to try to bandage the man. All their med supplies were soaking wet, though.

Had anyone in the squad seen what had happened to them? Billy and Cajé had been the only two close enough, but who knew which way they had actually been looking when that explosion had gone off, or if they were even still alive now. If Saunders knew Grady was alive, he would be back; Saunders wouldn't leave him behind.

But then Littlejohn shook his head to himself. No, it didn't matter what Saunders knew or wanted: the bridge was now in the hands of the Germans, a full platoon of Germans that had clobbered them with their cliff-top advantage. And now they held both banks. The Americans wouldn't be able to get close enough to see the bridge again, let alone attempt a rescue. No, he and Grady were on their own.

"Littlejohn...." Grady said.

Littlejohn thrust aside his fears and gave his full attention to Grady.

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Mixed feelings overwhelmed Billy as they returned to the tent encampment. Relief that for the moment, at least, the walking was over and he could rest; despair that he was here, and not back at the bridge.

"You okay, kid?" Braddock asked, gesturing at Billy's arm as he came up alongside the younger man.

"Oh this? Cajé says it's just a scratch."

Braddock raised an eyebrow, then shook his head. "You're braver than me, kid. You and Littlejohn. I remember when he—" Braddock broke off at the look on Billy's face. "Something wrong?"

"Braddock?"

"Yeah?"

But Billy couldn't find the words, and he shook his head. "Nothing."

He knew Braddock was still watching him, puzzled.

Saunders marched them straight to Hanley's CP, and Billy keenly felt Littlejohn's absence as the familiar tent hove into view. It was only early afternoon now, and just this morning... joking, laughing, reunited. How did things change so quickly? War seemed to compact events that should have taken days and years into mere hours. Billy glanced around at the remnants of the recon patrol. Just Saunders, Braddock, Kirby, Williams, himself, and Cajé remained. Little more than half the patrol.

"Cajé," Saunders said, at the tent entrance. "Get a medic over here."

"Right." Cajé took off at a fast jog.

Saunders watched him go, then shoved aside the tent flap and gestured the squad inside.

Billy went in tentatively. Even though it was shaded inside, it seemed hotter than being outside in the afternoon sun, the air too warm and still. Lieutenant Hanley stood when they entered. "I've been trying to contact you on the radio for over an hour." He looked over the five men who entered, then asked tightly, "Where's the rest of the squad?"

Saunders said nothing, his lips pursed together as he grimly met the lieutenant's gaze. Hanley looked away first. Quietly, he said, "Give me the report on the bridge's usability."

Curtly, Saunders answered, "Roadway needs repairs before you can get a vehicle across it, but otherwise looked sound. Kirby?"

Kirby crossed his arms uncomfortably and said, "The stone support arches have quite a bit of damage, but I don't think it'll affect its load-bearing capacity. It looked sound from what I could see. Get the surface bed filled in, and it should hold armor."

"You sure?" Hanley asked.

"Yes, sir," Kirby said. "That stone was three feet thick."

Cajé came in suddenly, accompanied by a different medic than the small, dark-haired man Billy had met earlier. This one had pale blond hair and a rich tan, and looked as if he'd be more at home carrying hay bales than a medic's kit.

Saunders turned and gestured the medic toward Billy, then turned back to Hanley. "What does it matter? The Germans hold that bridge now, Lieutenant, and they hold it in force."

Hanley tensed, knowing Saunders wasn't saying half the things he wanted to. Not yet anyway. Hanley ignored the tension for the moment and asked, "How long do you estimate it will take them to get it repaired for their own use?"

The medic was trying to steer Billy toward a chair, but Billy swallowed and stepped forward instead, remembering something he had seen under the bridge. Something that might be important. "Sir?" he interrupted, tentatively.

Hanley's gaze settled on him. "What is it, Private...?"

"Nelson, sir," the young man said, then added, "When I was under the bridge with Kirby, I saw some chalk writing on the middle support. Looked like German." He screwed his eyes shut, trying to recall the letters he had seen. He tried to sound out the word: "Abstewer or absuszen or something like that."

From his corner, Brockmeyer said, "*Abstützen*?"

Billy turned to look at the blond corporal, then asked sheepishly, "Uh, how do you spell that?"

While Brockmeyer grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil, Hanley looked over at Saunders and said, "You know what this means if it is German?"

Saunders said darkly, "That the Krauts already scouted that bridge before we got there."

Behind them, they heard Billy say, "Yeah, that's about what it looked like."



Hanley asked Brockmeyer, "What's it mean?"

"Basically, to shore up."

Hanley nodded. That was that. The Germans had been planning to use the bridge all along. He looked back at Saunders. "Do you have a report on the exact German strength at the bridge?"

Saunders glanced meaningfully at the rest of the squad, then back at Hanley.

Hanley exhaled sharply, then said, "There's a chow line set up over on the east side of camp. Grab yourself some hot food. Dismissed."

The men filed out the tent entrance.

"You too, Brockmeyer," Saunders added, not moving, not looking up.

Brockmeyer looked from Saunders to Hanley. Hanley nodded at the exit, and Brockmeyer quickly left, but not before Hanley saw the mute sympathy on his face. Anger flared in Hanley because he, too, could guess what Saunders wanted privacy to say. And he didn't have time to deal with the irate sergeant right now. Whether his grievances were valid or not simply didn't matter. Hanley couldn't change what had happened at the bridge. He had bigger worries, if they were guessing right and the incursion at the bridge signaled a German advance.

And then, slowly, he realized the one thing he'd been unconsciously avoiding, the one important fact he hadn't truly let sink in yet: Grady Long was one of the men who had not returned. Silently, he cursed fate for saddling him with that particular BAR man, cursed himself for assigning him to Saunders' squad and not one of the others. He closed his eyes, rubbing at his forehead a moment, as he steeled himself. Then he opened his eyes and said, "All right, Saunders. Let's have it."

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Billy Nelson paced outside Hanley's CP tent. The blond medic had bandaged up his arm and assured him it wasn't a serious wound. Not enough to get him sent back home. Not even enough to keep him off the front lines for a day or two. But it wasn't his arm that bothered him. No, it was guilt that kept him restless, kept him walking back and forth in the avenue near Hanley's tent. If only he hadn't dropped that second grenade—what had he been thinking anyway? He had panicked when he had gotten hit, that's what he had done. Panicked, and then what? Dropped it, like some stupid green recruit. And now Littlejohn and Grady Long were stuck back at the bridge, wounded, maybe even dead by now. Littlejohn was his best buddy in the whole war, and he had as good as killed him.

And worse than that... Saunders hadn't answered Hanley when the lieutenant had asked about the rest of the squad. His face had been set and grim, with anger hiding grief. And that meant only one thing: Saunders thought Grady and Littlejohn were dead.

Billy had to tell him what he had seen.

Williams and Brockmeyer spoke quietly together nearby, glancing every now and then at the tent. Then Williams shook his head and came toward Billy. "Come on, Nelson. What are you waiting for? Hot chow."

"I'm not hungry," Billy told the big red-head, and that was the truth.

"Billy, this is the Army. You don't get a second chance. Now, come on, before Braddock eats it all."

Billy hesitated, looking back at the tent.

Williams followed his look, then shook his head knowingly. He caught Billy's good arm firmly and pulled him away. "Billy, whatever you want to say to them can wait. Trust me. Neither's going to be in a receptive mood for some time to come. So come on

and let's grab some food, okay?"

Reluctantly, Billy let himself be tugged away.

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"Where're we getting our intelligence—the Marx brothers?" Saunders said, his voice almost a snarl. "That quarry was swarming with Krauts! I lost five men and got one wounded. On a so-called scouting mission." He glared at Lieutenant Hanley.

"So S2 made a mistake—they're only human." Hanley shot back. He stood, arms folded, near the field desk that held his rumpled maps.

"Well, maybe this war would be over a lot sooner if you didn't send squads out on faulty intelligence," Saunders responded, angrily.

"That's enough, Sergeant!" Hanley snapped. As if he was supposed to have known the intelligence was bad? What was he, an all-seeing oracle or something?

"Is it?" Saunders took off his helmet and held it down at his side, his Thompson in his other hand. "Tell that to Grady Long and Littlejohn. Tell that to Ames and Garzoni and Renz."

"I would if I could," Hanley said.

"And if someone hadn't sent Doc with third squad," Saunders growled, "Renz might still be alive."

Hanley raised an eyebrow. "All right, Saunders, I realize you're upset about losing five men, especially Grady. But you've lost men before."

"Yeah, well, Grady's different."

"You're not the first man to lose a friend in this war," Hanley said, roughly.

Saunders nodded, his expression suddenly cold, remote. "You're right, Lieutenant. And I won't be the last."

Hanley held his temper in with difficulty. Sometimes it seemed Saunders thought he was the only person Hanley had to deal with. Sometimes Hanley wished that was true—he had spent all morning on the radio with his superiors, reporting in on the unexpected resistance the squad had met at the quarry, the estimated size and strength of the platoon that now had control of the bridge.

"Look, Saunders, we don't have time for this. Your running into those Krauts was a lucky break—"

"What?"

Hanley cut him off, coldly, harshly, refusing to let Saunders turn the conversation back to his losses. "We've been unable to determine where the Germans were going to make their advance. I don't think they expected you any more than you expected them, and Captain Jampel and the brass feel the Germans have tipped their hand by showing their force at that quarry bridge. It's a good spot, which is why we wanted it. If they can repair and hold that bridge open, they have a straight line of attack against our right flank."

Hanley paused a moment, but Saunders waited in stony silence.

"Captain Jampel's radioed me half a dozen times already, asking if I've found a suitable river crossing. Your orders are to take a patrol out this afternoon and scout that other bridge up north." Hanley watched Saunders tense in reaction, slowly shaking his head, his mouth locked down in a grim line. Almost unconsciously, Hanley raised his own voice as he went on, as if that could prevent the outburst he knew was coming. "It's out of our way, but it's our only choice. If it's good, we can swing down from there and cut off the Krauts from behind. We can't do that without the river crossing. We've got to know if it's usable by 2100 tonight, earlier if possible. Your orders are to leave within the hour."

Hanley watched Saunders walk a few steps away, stand there with his back to Hanley. Hanley knew what he was asking him to do wasn't fair, but that was just too bad. This was war and they all had unpleasant orders to follow. This ruckus was all because of Grady Long, Hanley thought angrily. Because of one man. Why, he wondered, why did this sergeant who had taught him not to get too close to people have to break his own rule? If Long had lived, Saunders still would have raised the same objections—he had a right to, the intelligence *had* been lousy—but he would have done it impersonally. He wouldn't have acted as if S2's failure was some sort of personal betrayal.

Softly, dangerously, Saunders said, "I went out with eleven men this morning. I came back with six, one of those wounded." He turned back around slowly, keeping his motions tightly controlled. "Are we suddenly the only squad in this platoon?"

"Take Brockmeyer with you."

"That's not the point, Lieutenant. We just got clobbered out there." He used his helmet to gesture at Hanley as he declared his dissatisfaction with the orders he had just been handed. "Send someone else out for once!"

Hanley closed his eyes for a minute, consciously forcing his fists to unclench. Letting Saunders rile him wasn't going to help anyone. When he reopened his eyes, he said calmly, "You might as well be my only squad. I had to send the rest of them down south to reinforce Item Company this morning while you were gone." He tried to keep his voice quiet, reasonable, but that stubborn closed-off look of Saunders' never failed to aggravate him. Harshly, he said, "Your men have time to grab some hot chow, but I want you on the road again within the hour."

Saunders shoved his helmet back on his head and left without another word.

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Grady was still losing blood. Littlejohn had gotten him partly out of the water at least, enough that he had been able to rest his own exhausted muscles for a moment. His fingers fumbled with the bandages again, nearly dropping them in the river before he was able to rearrange and press them more firmly against Grady's shoulder.

Grady moaned, and Littlejohn shushed him, looking up at the thick stone arching above them. He was pretty sure the noise of the river would cover most of their sounds, but he couldn't be sure. It had been quiet overhead the past hour, though he was sure there were German soldiers patrolling up there. No rumble of trucks yet, and Littlejohn smiled grimly. Garzoni's grenades had bought them some time, at least. The Krauts would have to repair the switchback road before the trucks could get down to the bridge.

He wished he could see what was going on, but he knew he didn't dare risk leaving cover. Besides, he was tired enough that if he lost his precarious hold on the debris now, he wasn't sure he had the strength left to prevent himself from being swept downriver. If that happened, he and Grady were both dead men. And he needed to save his strength. As soon as it was dark enough, he would have to try floating them out of there somehow.

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Billy debated the issue with himself as he stood in line to get whatever Army-issued slop they felt like plopping on his mess kit that day. Could he tell Saunders the truth, that Grady Long and Littlejohn weren't really dead? That it was all his fault they were stuck under that bridge? And his fault Grady had gotten wounded? The more time that passed since their return to camp, the harder the idea of speaking up seemed. He

felt like even if he did tell Saunders now, the sergeant would kill him for waiting so long. He'd demand to know why Billy hadn't just spoken up right away, even though Billy had tried.... Billy didn't know how to reconcile his desperate need to tell what he knew with his equally desperate fear of both the sergeant's reaction and the admission of his own failure.

He must have been more preoccupied than he thought, because as he walked away from the line, with what was supposed to be beef stew steaming on his plate, he nearly ran straight into Braddock.

"Hey, watch out, kid!" Braddock said, mock-angrily. "I don't wanna wear your stew—this is my last pair of clean fatigues!"

Billy looked the muddy Braddock up and down and probably would have laughed if he hadn't been so worried.

"What's wrong?" Braddock asked, losing his loud, blustering tone in an instant. "You look like you just got word your dog died or something." He stuffed a piece of bread in his mouth and chewed. "Wanna talk about it?" he asked, still chewing.

Billy shook his head. "No, thanks."

Braddock swallowed. "You sure? Might help." He gestured to a vacant patch of grass under a spreading elm tree near where the rest of First Squad was eating. "At least sit down over there with us, so I don't have to worry about you spilling your lunch on me."

"Okay." Billy followed the pudgy soldier to the appointed spot and sat down cross-legged beside him.

Caje, sitting nearby, asked Billy, "How's the arm?"

"Not too bad. The medic said it's, um...." Billy tried to remember the word. "It's superfissious."

"Superficial?" Braddock supplied. He seemed to possess the rare talent of talking intelligibly even when he had his mouth full of food.

"Yeah," Billy said.

Nearby, Kirby rolled his eyes. "Well, lucky you." He shoved his spoon into his stew unenthusiastically.

"Hey, lay off the kid," Braddock said, giving Kirby a threatening glare.

"You gonna make me?" Kirby growled back.

"Everybody settle down," Caje broke in. "Don't waste your energy on each other. You'll need it soon enough."

"What, you got info on what we're doing next or something?" Kirby asked. "The lieutenant been confiding in you?"

Before Caje could retort, Brockmeyer appeared behind Billy. "All right, listen up," he said. "Saunders says you've been ordered out again—"

"Aw, not again!" Kirby threw his spoon down in his stew and glared up at the brawny corporal.

"Yeah, we just got back! Don't the lieutenant know we need our beauty sleep?" added Braddock.

"I told you not to waste all your energy arguing," Caje reminded them.

Billy listened to the complaints, but felt a surge of hope. They *were* going back out again! He listened eagerly as Brockmeyer, hands held up to forestall any more comments, said, "Look, I didn't make the orders, I'm just relaying them, so cut it out. Finish your chow, get your gear, and meet at the north end of camp at 1500."

"Hey, how come the Sarge didn't come tell us this himself?" Kirby asked.

Brockmeyer shook his head. "If you don't know, I'm not the one to tell you." He walked away, over to get in line for his own chow.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kirby wondered aloud, and Billy, too, found

himself looking from man to man.

It was Cajé who finally answered. "Grady Long."

Everyone got really quiet and started shoveling food into their mouths a little faster. But Cajé's answer gave Billy strength. It was the confirmation he was looking for. The Sarge was going back after Grady Long and Littlejohn. It had to be why they were going out again so soon. Saunders must have figured out that Littlejohn and Long were still alive and persuaded the lieutenant to send the squad back on a rescue mission.

Finally, Braddock asked, "Wonder where we're going this time?"



When no one else spoke, Billy ventured, "Back to that bridge, don't you think?"

"The bridge? Are you kidding? It's covered in Krauts!" Kirby protested. He shook his head emphatically. "I ain't going back there!"

"But Grady Long and Littlejohn..." Billy said, trying to keep the anticipation out of his voice. "Don't you think we'll be going back to rescue them?"

Kirby looked over in disbelief at him. "Kid, you were there. They probably both got it from that grenade or whatever."

"You didn't see their bodies anywhere, did you?" Cajé countered, and Billy looked at him in surprise, not expecting support from any of the other squad members. Had Cajé seen what he had, seen Littlejohn pull Grady to safety beneath the bridge?

"I didn't look back," Kirby said. He shoveled some stew into his mouth and glared at Cajé. "All I know is we're out a BAR man, and I don't like it."

"Yeah," Cajé nodded. "We're out another BAR man."

Billy thought Cajé looked bitter and wistful, all at once. "Another BAR man?" he echoed.

"Grady was our third," Braddock explained, his loud voice suddenly quiet, matching Cajé's sad expression somehow. "First we had Theo." Braddock looked over at Cajé. "He and Cajé were buddies until he got it at Omaha. Then we had some guy named, uh—hey, Cajé, what was that second guy's name?"

"Fergus," Cajé said.

"Oh yeah. He was a real winner," Braddock said. "Shot one of our own guys by accident, and got himself killed on a mission right after. And then we got Grady."

"And then we lost Grady," Kirby added.

"Maybe not," Billy blurted. "Like Cajé said, maybe he and Littlejohn are still alive."

"Don't kid yourself, boy," Kirby said, standing up. His expression was bleak. "They're dead. Forget 'em."

Billy opened his mouth, wanting to explain that Kirby was wrong, that he knew they were still alive, but the words died in his throat. He was afraid of the way Kirby was glaring around at everyone. The last thing he wanted was to have Kirby pounce on him; the man might look scrawny, but he would probably never quit whaling on you once he started. He reminded Billy somehow of a bull terrier, the single-minded kind that wouldn't open their jaws until they were sure their prey was dead. Billy didn't want to be prey, that he was sure of. Slowly, he closed his mouth again.

Kirby shook his head, then walked off.

Billy stared after him, his brow furrowed.

"Don't mind him," Williams said, with a wry smile. "He's a sorehead."

"You think we're going back to the bridge?" Billy persisted. "I mean, Grady Long and Littlejohn... they might be okay. We have to go back to find out, don't we?"

Caje shrugged. "Who knows, Billy. This is the army." He stood up too and followed Kirby off down the avenue between the rows of tents.

"Well, why don't we just ask? Hey, Brockmeyer," Williams called as the corporal returned with a full mess kit. "Where are we going?"

"Some bridge up north," Brockmeyer replied, sitting down in the space Kirby and Caje had vacated.

"You mean east?" Billy asked. "The one we were at this morning?"

"No, north. Different bridge," Brockmeyer said around a mouthful of stew.

Billy stopped breathing. He thought his heart might have stopped beating too, because it startled him by starting up, loud and strong, when he began to breathe again. Brockmeyer must have heard wrong, gotten the directions mixed up or something.

But then the truth hit him. They weren't going back for Grady Long and Littlejohn. They weren't going back because nobody knew they were alive except him, and he didn't have the guts to tell anyone. He'd been expecting a miracle answer, but he should have known better than that.

"Not another bridge," Braddock complained. "I've had it with these bridges. Why can't we go liberate a nice winery for once?"

Billy was barely aware of Braddock and Williams bantering, Brockmeyer eating wordlessly. They were going north. Far away from Littlejohn, the bridge, Grady Long, everything that mattered. If only Saunders knew that the two soldiers were still alive and hiding under that bridge. He'd never abandon them, Billy felt sure of it. If only Saunders knew.

Billy looked around, but Saunders hadn't shown up for chow. Billy swallowed. He just had to tell him the truth.

Suddenly, Billy noticed Braddock staring at him. "What?" Billy asked, trying to act nonchalant. He took another bite of stew and realized it had already gotten cold and slimy.

"You okay, kid?" Braddock asked.

"You mean my arm? Yeah, sure." Billy almost managed a carefree smile.

"That's not what I meant."

Before Braddock could say more, Brockmeyer stood up. "I'd better go draw ammo for the patrol," he said.

"I'll help," Williams offered, his lanky frame towering over Billy and Braddock when he stood.

As soon as Brockmeyer and Williams were out of earshot, Braddock asked, "What's on your mind, Billy-boy?"

"What do you mean?" Billy asked, trying to sound innocent.

"Don't give me that—I didn't come in with the last load of bayonets, you know. Something's eating at you. Spill."

Billy squirmed, not wanting to confess even to the jovial, friendly Braddock.

"Well, back at the bridge, did you see what happened?"

"Which part? I saw a whole lot of Krauts coming at us with a whole lotta hurt on their minds. Saw Ames and Garzoni get it. Saw Renz catch it."

"What about when I got shot, did you see that?"

Braddock shook his head. "Williams and I were high-tailing it out with Renz."

"And what happened to Littlejohn and Grady Long?"

"Nope." He swallowed and looked at Billy, his face turning sympathetic. "Oh, kid. Littlejohn was your buddy—did you see him get it?"

"That's the thing—Littlejohn didn't get it! I saw him and Grady through the dust



and smoke and everything. They hit the water, but he grabbed Grady and got him under the bridge. I think Grady was hit. And...." Billy paused unhappily. "And it's all my fault."

"Wait—Littlejohn and Grady are alive?" Braddock asked.

"Yeah."

"You're sure?"

"Sure as shootin'."

"Does the Sarge know this?"

Billy shook his head, so miserable he couldn't stand it anymore. "No. I tried to tell him when we were back there, right after Renz died, but, well, you know how he's been ever since the bridge. I've been too scared to try telling him again."

"He needs to know! If he knows they're alive, nothing'll keep him from taking us back to rescue 'em. Why haven't you told him, kid?"

"Because I'm the one that wounded Grady." The admission tore a hole in Billy's gut, and his gaze dropped to the dirt. Everyone would hate him, the whole squad. They might even kick him out. Make him transfer to a different unit, where he'd have to start all over again. He could tell how much everyone, not just Sergeant Saunders, had liked Grady Long. And once they knew this was all Billy's fault....

Braddock raised his eyebrows. "I don't follow." He didn't sound angry, just confused.

"I'd pulled out a grenade. Before I could throw it, I got shot, and I dropped it. It rolled down toward Littlejohn and Grady and went off."

Braddock shrugged. "You got shot. Coulda happened to anyone."

"You think so?" Billy looked up, not daring to hope.

"Sure." Braddock patted Billy's good shoulder. "Listen, you need to find the Sarge and tell him. If nothing else, it'll make you feel better."

"Yeah?"

"You feel better just after telling me, don't'cha?"

Billy nodded. "I guess I do." He handed Braddock his half-empty plate of stew. "Here, hang on to this for me, will ya?" He stood up. "I'll be right back." He ran after Brockmeyer and Williams, who were just disappearing around the corner of a tent. "Corporal! Corporal Brockmeyer!" Billy shouted. "Could you tell me where to find Sergeant Saunders?"

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Saunders was so full of rage he could barely see.

The anger burned inside him, warm and intoxicating. He knew the feel of it all too well—how many years had he worked on learning to quell that flame of fury? To dump cold, wet sanity and logic on it until the flames sputtered and fizzled and died? Well, he didn't want to douse this anger. He wanted it burning fierce and strong inside him. As long as it did, he could ignore the empty ache left by a guy named Grady Long who had become such a good friend so quickly, the bonds of their friendship forged swiftly in the furnace of war.

He knew if he hadn't left when he did, he wouldn't have been able to stop himself from doing something stupid. Like smashing every stick of furniture over Lieutenant Hanley's stubborn head.

Thinking of Hanley sent the flames dancing higher. They had been friends too, back before Hanley had traded his sergeant's stripes for bars on his collar. Saunders hadn't thought much had changed between them when Hanley got promoted. They could still let their guards down around each other, relax a little inside in a way they couldn't around the other soldiers above and below them in the Army pecking order.

And Saunders had thought they still understood each other. Well, it seemed he had been wrong. All that must have changed sometime, he just hadn't noticed until now. Hanley had turned into simply another cold, calculating officer, more concerned about his maps and his orders than about the lives of the people he commanded.

Saunders kicked a loose rock down the grassy avenue and let out a string of curses that would have made his Uncle Pete proud and his mother so mad she would have slapped him with her wet dishtowel. He was about to kick another stone when someone called his name.

"Sarge? Sergeant Saunders?"

It was that kid, the new one in his squad. Littlejohn's buddy. What was his name again? Saunders couldn't remember—he had known it an hour ago, but not now. So he just turned and snapped, "What?"

The kid blanched visibly, and Saunders let out a deep breath. The kid had just lost his friend too, he reminded himself. Saunders dragged his anger inside and tried to temper his voice into something more resembling normal. *Just make it quick, kid*, he thought. "What is it?" he asked again.

The kid swallowed, then said, "Braddock said to come talk to you."

Saunders started to lose his patience again. He didn't have time for this. What, did Braddock think he was now, the squad chaplain?

"It's about what happened at the bridge, to Littlejohn and Long."

Saunders froze, then raised his eyes to meet the kid's. Nelson, that was his name. "What about what happened at the bridge?"

Nelson hesitated, then blurted, "Littlejohn and Long—they're still alive."

For a second the words didn't register, then Saunders took two steps forward and grabbed Nelson hard by both shoulders. "Are you sure? I mean are you really sure? Did you see them?"

The kid's head bobbed up and down.

"Alive?"

"Yes, alive," Nelson managed to squeak.

"How come you didn't tell me this before?" Saunders demanded.

The color drained from the kid's face again. "Well, I, uh—" he stammered.

"Never mind. Come on." Saunders grabbed Nelson by the arm and started hauling him toward Hanley's CP.

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Someone barged into Hanley's tent, making him lose his place in the important communiqué he had just received. When he saw that it was Saunders again, this time with that new man in tow—Pvt. Nelson—Hanley let his impatience show clearly. "Now what, Sergeant?" he snapped.

"Go on," Saunders said to Nelson. "Tell him."

Hanley leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "Tell me what?"

Billy Nelson saluted, looking as though he would rather be attacked by rabid porcupines than retell his story to an officer.

Hanley's expression relaxed a little. "At ease, soldier," he said, returning the salute. Poor kid.

"Thank you, sir." It seemed his voice hadn't even finished changing; it cracked and broke under the pressure of being forced to talk to an officer.

"What is it you're supposed to tell me?" Hanley asked, looking directly at Nelson and ignoring Saunders.

"Well, sir, it's about what happened at the bridge," Nelson began.

"Yes, we all know about the bridge," Hanley said, tiredly. The glance he shot toward Saunders said, *You had better not be wasting more of my time.*

"No, sir, you don't. That is, I saw something no one else could. Because I was closer, you see. To the edge, I mean, sir. I saw them fall in the river, but I also saw them get safely onto the rubble under the bridge."

"Who?"

"Littlejohn and Grady Long, sir."

Hanley took a deep breath. "Are you saying you think they're still alive?"

"Yes, sir. I know they are. Long was hurt, but Littlejohn got him to safety under the bridge. I saw it."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir," Nelson said, then blurted, "But you see, sir, don't you? That we have to go back and help them?"

"Thank you, Private, that will be all."

"We'll be going back, right, sir?"

"Dismissed, Private!" Hanley snapped. Nelson hurried for the exit, his shoulders sagging with relief. The kid looked like he had suddenly been released from a terrible burden, a burden that was now settling on Hanley's shoulders instead.

"Well?" Saunders demanded as soon as Nelson had gone.

"Well what?" Hanley asked, although he knew the answer.

"Doesn't this change anything?"

"No." It was just one tiny little word, why was it so hard to spit out?

Saunders' voice was abrupt, angry, like his gesture toward the tent flap where Nelson had exited. "Didn't you hear what he said, Lieutenant? Littlejohn and Grady are alive. Send us back there to get them."

"Not too long ago you said your men were too tired to go anywhere." Hanley didn't mean it to sound sarcastic, he meant it to be a matter-of-fact statement; as Saunders clenched his jaw, he knew he hadn't tried hard enough.

Brusquely, Saunders said, "They've rested."

Hanley stood up, unconsciously falling back on his height advantage to stand against the sergeant's rage. "I can't send you back to an occupied bridge just because you think two of your men might not be dead."

"You sent us in fast enough after Black Rook."

"That dye plant wasn't swarming with Germans!"

"But it might have been for all we knew. That didn't stop you then."

"This situation is totally different, Saunders." Hanley shook his head. "I'm not sending your squad back there just because one kid thinks he saw something." Why did Saunders always have to do this, always think he knew better than anyone else? What made him so special, anyway? Why couldn't he just follow orders like the rest of the platoon's sergeants? "You said it yourself: you've lost too many men at that bridge already."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" Saunders tossed his head back a little, somehow managing to look down his nose at the taller officer.

"Just that we can't afford any more casualties." Hanley sighed. Sometimes he wished he had never been promoted. A lot of times, lately.

"We could get two of my men back if—" Saunders began.

Hanley cut him off. "You have your orders, Sergeant."

Saunders persisted, "Split the squad. I'll take Kirby. Send Brockmeyer with the others to recon the bridge—"



Hanley didn't let him finish. "Secure the bridge to the north and determine if we can use it to get around the Germans." He waved the communiqué at Saunders. "The brass are sending Fox Company in here to lead the attack, and they need that bridge." He paused a moment, not wanting to say the rest, but knowing he had to. "We're sending in an artillery barrage against the quarry bridge at dawn."

Saunders stared at him. "Are you insane?" he said, furiously. "Send in artillery right on top of

two of my own men, *your* own men? That's a death sentence!"

"That's enough!" Hanley had already cut Saunders more than enough slack, and it was time to remind the sergeant just who was the officer here. "If Littlejohn and Long are alive, maybe they can escape in the confusion. Do you read me?"

Saunders just glared at him.

"Do you read me?" Hanley demanded again.

"Oh, I read you all right," Saunders said. "I read you loud and clear, sir." He emphasized the last word, practically sneering when he said it.

Hanley closed his eyes and silently cursed Grady Long for not joining the Navy instead.

Saunders started to turn to go, but paused and asked acidly, "Do we warrant a medic this time?"

"Doc's not back yet. Take that medic who worked on Nelson earlier. Daly."

"Yes, sir," Saunders said, then he turned on his heel and stomped out.



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As the afternoon waned, so did Littlejohn's spirits. The longer they stayed under that bridge, the closer they came to being discovered. The Germans had worked all day on repairing the holes Garzoni had blown in the switchback road. He had been able to hear them even over the river's noise.

As for Garzoni, the Krauts had dumped his body into the river soon after they had reached the bridge. Littlejohn had watched it float downstream, knowing it could have been him or Grady instead.

At least he had finally managed to secure Grady Long to some of the rubble that sheltered them. He had looped the rope around Grady's torso, anchoring him to the biggest chunk of broken stone so that even when Grady lost consciousness, he wouldn't slip back into the river. And that had let Littlejohn move around a little. He hadn't gone farther than a few feet either direction, just enough to stretch his legs. He wasn't about to jeopardize their position just to satisfy curiosity. With a full platoon, the Germans had the manpower to have sentries everywhere. It would be just his luck to have one peering over the bridge railing right when Littlejohn risked a peek.

The long stretches of time when Grady Long was unconscious left Littlejohn with little to do except stare at his surroundings. The underside of the bridge was now as familiar as the east forty back home. The sunlight never touched these old stones, and they were damp and slick, the lowest stones layered with dull green moss above the

waterline. As the sun sank for the horizon, the air along the surface of the river grew chilly. His extremities were already numb, his reflexes slowed, his muscles aching from fighting the current, fighting to keep his grip on the rubble near Grady. How long could he hang on once night's cold hit? How long could Grady? Although he didn't complain much, Littlejohn knew Grady was losing strength.

Littlejohn gazed downstream. Maybe under the cover of darkness they would be able to float away. The problem would be keeping Grady's head above water. Maybe if Grady was conscious, or if some friendly branch floated by to help him buoy Grady up and hide them from any sentry's curious gaze. Maybe....

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The squad walked through the warm summer woods in uneasy silence. The sun was nearly set, the woods full of lengthy shadows and the pall of coming twilight. Saunders had informed them of both the fact that Long and Littlejohn were possibly still alive and the additional fact that they were being sent north to scout and secure a different bridge. They didn't need to be told how he felt about it. Even Kirby kept his mouth shut for once, not making even one snide comment about the mental capabilities of officers.

Superficial or not, Billy's wounded arm hurt. A lot. The blond medic who had joined them, Daly, had given him more aspirin to take, but it didn't seem like the medication was doing any good. The pain made it hard to concentrate on figuring out why they weren't going back to rescue Littlejohn and Grady Long. He had done the right thing, like Braddock said, told the truth to Saunders and even Lieutenant Hanley. And still they headed north, just as if Billy hadn't said one word to anyone.

That wasn't quite true, Billy realized. Not everything was the same. Sergeant Saunders certainly wasn't. He had stopped looking kind of defeated and hollow. Unfortunately, he had filled the empty space with anger, probably at the lieutenant for not letting them go back for Grady and Littlejohn. But Billy had a feeling that anger could very easily be directed at the first person that displeased the sergeant, that stepped out of line just a little, or did something stupid. Like dropping a grenade.

The farther they marched, the more depressed Billy got. He had thought for sure Saunders would convince the lieutenant to let them return. He'd counted on it. But what was the point of telling the truth when it hadn't made any difference after all? Littlejohn was as good as dead now—the Germans were sure to find him, if he didn't drown first. That river had been awful fast when Billy had dangled in it only a few hours earlier. Had it really been just that morning that Littlejohn had lowered him over the side, like a really big piece of bait attached to a fishing line?

It wasn't fair. He and Littlejohn were finally in the same outfit again, only to have the Army separate them once more.

Caje trotted back. "Bridge is just up ahead. Looks quiet. If there are any Krauts there, they're dug in good."

"If there are any Krauts there...?" Braddock echoed incredulously. "Buddy, with our luck today, there's at least another whole platoon of Germans waiting. I think they got special road maps marked: *'here's where K Company Second Platoon First Squad's gonna be today.'* They know more about where we are than we do."

"All right, knock it off. Spread out," Saunders said. "Brockmeyer, take the left—"

Machine gun fire stabbed out of the shadows ahead, and Billy saw Caje go down in front of him. Saunders was shouting, "Hit it!" but the squad had already scattered. At least it was much more wooded here than at the quarry—plenty of cover for them, but also for the Germans. Billy landed behind a fat, solid tree trunk, sucked in his breath as

the fall jarred his bad arm.

Gunfire came from all around him, deafening him, as the squad returned fire.

Saunders was issuing quick orders, "Braddock, Brockmeyer—work around to the left, see if you can flank them and use your grenades. Kirby—you're on me. We'll try to draw their fire for you. Williams, you and Nelson keep those Krauts busy from here."

"Right," Brockmeyer said and tapped Braddock on the arm. The two took off at a crouching run. Saunders and Kirby slunk off to the right.

Billy peeked around the tree he was using for shelter to figure out where he would have to aim, then pulled back quickly as a burst of bullets ripped up the bark. The Germans had dug in just south of the bridge, behind a tree trunk fallen across the riverbank. Williams fired a couple of shots, and when the machine gun shifted toward him, Billy popped out and opened fire on the nest. Three shots—duck back—two more—duck—fire again while Williams reloaded, reload himself while Williams shot. Then Billy heard the Sarge's Thompson and Kirby's rifle open up from off to the right and the machine gun swung away from them, trying to locate and stop the new threat.

A grenade went off barely thirty seconds later, and the German gun fell silent. There was no more gunfire, from either side. Billy glanced at Williams, who grinned at him. Billy felt the same brief moment of exhilaration—any victory after the quarry bridge felt good. Even so, they stayed under cover until they heard Braddock and Brockmeyer's voices calling to Saunders.

Williams turned and hollered, "Daly, get up here! Cajé is hit!" He scrambled toward where Cajé lay in the road as the young medic hurried up. Billy followed Williams, rifle still ready.

Saunders sent Kirby, Braddock, Billy, and Williams to make sure the other side of the bridge was clear, then came over to where Brockmeyer crouched near Cajé, watching as Daly tied a bandage around Cajé's wounded leg. "How is he, Doc?" Saunders asked.

"I've seen worse." Daly grinned, white teeth flashing in contrast to his tanned face.

Cajé forced a shrug. "It's not too bad."

"It's clean," Daly added. "Went right through and missed the bone. I've stopped the bleeding, but the bullet cut up the muscle pretty bad. He needs to see a surgeon."

"Okay. Cajé, think you can make it back with Doc's help?"

"Think so."

"Good. Head out as soon as you can."

"Right."

Saunders stood and walked over to inspect the wooden bridge. It was newly built, of heavy rough boards that showed little sign of wear. It looked broad and strong enough to suit the Army's needs. Hanley should be happy about that, he thought. So should he, with the mission accomplished and no casualties this time, but his gaze moved instead to the river. The river banks were gentle here, thick reeds growing close in to shore, the current moving swift and sure out in the middle. Trees drooped and overhung the water nearby. The sunset glow gave it all a deceptively pastoral tint. He almost expected to see some boys fishing with their wood poles. But instead there was a crater and the four dead Germans in their destroyed machine gun nest.

And downriver... downriver....

He jerked his mind back to the needs at hand. "Brockmeyer," he ordered, "get me Hanley on the radio."

"Right," the corporal acknowledged. He walked over to where Kirby had ditched the radio and pulled out the antenna. "White Rook to King Two, over. This is White Rook, do you read me, King Two? Over."



"This is King Two, come in, White Rook. Over," Hanley responded almost immediately.

Brockmeyer lowered the phone and called, "Sergeant? I got him."

Saunders came over and took the phone from Brockmeyer. "This is White Rook. Dorothy and Toto have reached the Emerald City," he said, so accustomed to the ludicrous code words the Army kept handing him that he didn't even smirk. "Repeat, Dorothy and Toto have reached the Emerald City. Over."

"Did they meet any munchkins? Over." Hanley asked.

"A few, but they've been taken care of. Over."

"What kind of condition is the Emerald City in? Over."

"It's useable. Over."

"Good work, White Rook. Dorothy and Toto can stay in the Emerald City until the wizard arrives. Over."

"Copy that. White Rook out." Saunders switched off the radio, angrily, and pushed himself to his feet. He didn't want to talk to Hanley, didn't want to hear that calm reasonable voice, even over the radio. He didn't want to think about the fact that nothing had obligated Hanley to hear him out earlier. Another officer might have thrown him in the stockade for getting out of line like that, even demoted him, but not Hanley. Hanley let him have his say, then stubbornly trusted that logic and orders would convince Saunders of where his priorities should lie. But logic and orders and priorities didn't change the fact that Grady Long had been abandoned and left for dead. Logic and orders wouldn't bring him home again.

The sun dropped suddenly behind the horizon and the last of the gold sunlight filtering between the trees vanished. Saunders walked toward the river again, staring downstream, where the dark waters roiled and churned. That current was swift, maybe too swift, but did it matter? He checked his watch, then made his decision.

Footsteps thudded across the wooden bridge, and Saunders turned and watched the rest of the men returning. He strode back to where Daly was helping Cajé to his feet. He did a quick headcount—everyone was there.

"All clear over there, Sarge," Williams said.

"Brockmeyer, I'm putting you in charge of this bridge," Saunders said. "Have the men dig in and hold this bridge until the morning. Fox company will be arriving sometime around midnight."

"Why?" Brockmeyer asked. "Where will you be?"

"Kirby and I are going for a swim."

"Aw, Sarge," Kirby protested. "Why me?"

"Because I said so."

For a moment, Billy didn't believe he'd heard right. He looked around the circle of faces, grim and unsmiling in the twilight.

"What makes you think that even if they're still alive, they haven't floated clear of that bridge already on their own?" Brockmeyer asked, his soft voice calm and rational. "Littlejohn's not stupid. If he could get them out, he would. You could get there and find nothing."

"That's a chance we'll have to take."

"I hate to bring this up," Braddock said, "but you know how the Army's likely to view this little excursion."

The term AWOL popped into Billy's head. He frowned. Littlejohn had said this sergeant was a by-the-book guy. Did he really intend to break practically every rule in that book to rescue Grady Long and Littlejohn? And if he was willing to do that for a friend, shouldn't Billy too?

Before he had time to think it over, Billy blurted, "Let me go too, Sarge."

Everyone stared at him. Billy tried not to squirm under their scrutiny. He had probably just done the stupidest thing ever, volunteering to go AWOL. But doggone it, this was Littlejohn's life they were talking about. Billy had a feeling Littlejohn would do the same for him if their roles were reversed.

Saunders eyed Nelson, his eyebrows puckering as he assessed the young injured soldier and his request.

"Don't take him," Kirby said. "Why ruin our chances of getting out alive by taking along some green kid?" He looked over at Billy. "Forget it, boy."

"I'm not green!" Billy declared, clenching his fists. "I might be younger than the rest of you and, sure, I've made a few mistakes now and then. But I'm not green. I hit the beaches at Normandy with Littlejohn. You don't call him green, do you?"

Kirby said, "No, I've got better things to call Littlejohn."

"Enough," Saunders broke in.

"Please?" Billy asked desperately, certain the sergeant would forbid him to go.

Saunders fixed Billy with a steady gaze. "Can you swim?" he asked.

"Sure."

"I mean really swim. That current is fast; the river's deep. Can you take care of yourself and maybe keep one of the others afloat too?"

Billy nodded. "I was almost a lifeguard last summer. Only the guy who runs the town pool has three nephews...." He smiled nervously, realizing that the sergeant could probably care less about small-town politics at the moment.

"Okay. You can come."

Kirby exploded. "What? Are you kidding? I was in that water under the bridge, Sarge. It was moving fast and there were precious few handholds. You want to tell me how Junior here with a wounded arm is gonna handle that? He'll just get all three of us killed!"

"You're not coming along, so you can quit worrying about it," Saunders told him. "It'll just be Nelson and me. Brockmeyer needs every man I can leave here."

"This is crazy." Kirby threw his hands up in the air in exasperation. "I give up! Take the boy, fine. Got anything you want the lieutenant to say in his letters to your mothers?"

Saunders turned his back on Kirby and addressed Brockmeyer. "You hold this bridge no matter what until Fox Company gets here."

"What about you?" Brockmeyer asked.

"After we reach the quarry bridge, we'll float downriver, then try to make it back to the CP. With any luck, we'll be out of the river before that barrage hits at dawn."

Brockmeyer pursed his lips. "I think Kirby's right," he said. "This is crazy."

"I didn't ask what you thought. You have your orders."

Brockmeyer shook his head. For a moment, he looked like he wanted to add something else, then he just said simply, "Good luck."

"Yeah, thanks."

Everyone looked so solemn that Billy began to think he had made a very big mistake. None of the others really expected them to make it out of that river alive.

Braddock clapped Billy on the shoulder. "You're a good egg, Nelson. Here's hoping we see you in a day or so."

"Yeah, in the stockade," Kirby scoffed.

Billy was glad he didn't say something like 'morgue' instead.

Caje, his arm over Daly's shoulders, hobbled over to the group. "You sure you want to do this?" he asked Saunders.

Saunders didn't answer him, just said, "You just get back to the CP in one piece; don't waste time worrying about us. Doc—give me some morphine and any extra

bandages you have. Cajé, I'll need your knife."

The young medic dug out some supplies and passed them over. Saunders pocketed them and accepted Cajé's sheathed knife. Then he shouldered his Thompson. "Let's go, Nelson." He headed toward the riverbank, leaving Billy no choice but to follow.

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Shortly after Saunders and Billy had floated out of sight, clinging to a couple tree branches, the radio buzzed to life beside Brockmeyer where he lay in some weeds near the wooden bridge. Hanley's voice came over the airwaves again. "White Rook, this is King Two. Come in, White Rook. Over."

Brockmeyer picked up the receiver. "King Two, this is White Rook. Over." He kept his voice low, just in case there were any Krauts sneaking up on them in the dusk.

"This doesn't sound like White Rook. Over."

"This is White Rook's second-in-command. Over."

"Well, where's White Rook? Over." There was no mistaking the irritation in Hanley's voice.

Brockmeyer lied, "He's out scouting the area. Over." He heard a snort come from the other side of the bridge, where Kirby had dug in.

Hanley said, "Scouting? For what? Over."

Kirby hissed, "Just tell him the truth! He'll find out anyway."

Brockmeyer ignored Kirby and thought fast. "He thought there might be more munchkins nearby. Over."

There was a pause while Brockmeyer held his breath, hoping the lieutenant would buy it. Then Hanley asked, "I need to know if the Emerald City can handle Tin Men or Scarecrows. Over."

Tin Men and Scarecrows—those would be tanks and half-tracks. Well, that he could answer at least. Brockmeyer squinted at the bridge beside him in what remained of the twilight. "It seems sound, and it's wide enough for Scarecrows. Not sure about Tin Men. Over."

"Good enough. Tell White Rook to report in when he returns. Over."

"Roger that. Over."

"King Two out."

Brockmeyer lowered the receiver and frowned. He would probably be in trouble too, now, covering for Saunders. Great. He'd been getting quite fond of those corporal's stripes too.

Kirby started up again. "Why didn't you just tell him? Now you probably made him all suspicious. I bet he doesn't believe for a minute the Sarge is just out looking for Krauts. I bet he knows exactly what's going on."

"Shut up, Kirby. You want the whole German army to know where we are?"

Brockmeyer snapped. The last thing he needed was the mouthy private giving voice to his own worries.

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Billy Nelson was grateful for the two large dead tree branches Saunders had dragged into the river. That let them save their energy for when they reached the bridge and also gave them something to prop their weapons on and give them a chance to stay dry.

The river was colder than Billy had expected. When he had been dangling in it near the bridge that afternoon, it had seemed pleasantly cool on his hot feet and legs.



He'd even considered splashing some on his face and head to help combat the June heat. But now, he had begun shivering almost immediately, and he hoped his whole body wouldn't go numb before they traveled the long distance downriver to Littlejohn and Long.

The waning moon peeked out from behind a cloud now and then, but for the most part they floated in the increasing darkness. He could just make out the black shape that was Saunders drifting slightly ahead of him. After a while, Billy

lost all sense of time, and it seemed to him as if he had been clinging to a tree branch in the middle of the river forever.

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As the night deepened, Littlejohn forced himself to stay alert. He positioned himself so he could watch upstream for any debris floating his direction. He had to be ready to grab anything that came his way, anything that might bear Grady's weight, or even just camouflage them enough to hazard an escape.

Time was running out. The water had not seemed that cold when they had first gone in, but immersion in it all this time had left him wracked with shivers.

"Littlejohn," Grady murmured.

"I'm here," Littlejohn said.

"It's dark now," the BAR man said, his voice husky with pain, "Get out of here, Littlejohn."

"We both go, or we don't go at all," Littlejohn said.

Grady shook his head. "Don't be stupid. If you go now, you have a chance."

"Quiet," Littlejohn hissed suddenly. He had seen a shape in the water, bobbing toward them. He raised himself out of the water for a better look.

It was some sort of snapped-off log, coming fast toward them. But it was angling the wrong way.... Littlejohn watched in dismay as the current swept it out of sight down the eastern side of the center arch. He'd had a fifty-fifty chance of it coming down their side, and he had lost. His shoulders slumped, and he spun around in the water to watch the log come out the other side of the bridge. Just a few seconds and it appeared again, a low, dark shape riding the waves.

Two rifle shots banged out of nowhere, and Littlejohn jumped, startled, looking for the source. Another shot, then another, and he saw the white spray kicked up by a bullet striking the water. Then he understood, and he glared up at the stone above him, as if he could see straight through it to the one or two guards bored enough with their sentry duty to try a little target practice off the bridge.

*That could have been us,* he thought bleakly.

He heard a voice yelling angrily, distantly, and hoped the guards were getting dressed down by their officer for shooting. But he had no way of knowing. Maybe they were getting yelled at for their bad aim, or the lousy coffee they had made. It could have been anything, anything at all, and it was definitely no guarantee that the next object to pass out from beneath the bridge wouldn't be shot full of holes.

*Now what?* he asked himself. What was worse, waiting to be discovered or getting shot attempting to escape? At least the latter offered them some hope.

But they would have to wait until it was much darker. They had to hold on a bit longer.

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Lieutenant Hanley stepped out of his tent and discovered that twilight had come and gone while he wasn't looking. He had been so wrapped up in paperwork, he hadn't noticed the time. Now, he frowned, checked his watch, and frowned again. Sergeant Saunders should have radioed in an hour ago, let him know if there were any more Krauts around the bridge. His earlier absence, the fact that he hadn't called in yet himself... surely Saunders wouldn't have disobeyed a direct order, wouldn't have tried going back to the quarry bridge after Long and Littlejohn instead. Would he?

Hanley's frown deepened. He had to admit it was a possibility. He ducked back into his tent and crossed to his radio, adjusted a couple knobs, and picked up the receiver. "King Two to White Rook. This is King Two to White Rook. Over."

When he got no response, he tried again. "King Two to White Rook. Come in, White Rook. Over."

"Uh, this is White Rook," came a voice that belonged to neither Saunders nor Brockmeyer.

"Who is this?" Hanley demanded. "Over."

"This is Toto. Over."

That must be Kirby, the wise guy Saunders was always butting heads with. "Well, Toto, where's White Rook now? Over." Hanley asked.

"Uh, he's following the yellow brick road."

Hanley rolled his eyes. If he ever got his hands on the wisenheimer that thought up their code words.... "Why is he following the yellow brick road? Over."

"He's hunting munchkins. Over."

Again? Hanley thought. "Will there be a problem when the wizard arrives? Over."

"Negative. Over."

"Where's his second-in-command? Over."

"Uh, he's watering the poppies, if you know what I mean."

Hanley sighed. "Fine. Listen, Toto, when White Rook gets back, have him report in immediately. Do you read me? Over."

"Loud and clear, sir. Over."

"Good. King Two out." Hanley glared at the radio. He had a feeling all was not well in the land of Oz.

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At the wooden bridge, Kirby sighed and crawled back to his position on the other side. Why did Brockmeyer have to leave the radio just when Hanley decided to call? And why had he, Kirby, decided to keep covering for Saunders? He should've just spilled the whole story while he had the chance. Then again, Braddock and Williams weren't that far away, and they'd probably have heard and ratted him out when Brockmeyer got back from his little personal trip into the woods.

"Aaannh," he muttered.

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Grady Long was unconscious again. His wound had gradually stopped bleeding, after Littlejohn had pressed all their bandages and part of his own shirt against it for what had felt like hours. Littlejohn wasn't sure if that was a good sign or a bad

one—Grady's skin felt cold and clammy.

Kraut sentries paced the bridge, exchanging noisy pleasantries when they met in its middle, right above the center support arch that sheltered the two Americans. They also tossed a remarkable number of cigarette butts into the river, which Littlejohn watched arc toward the water like dying fireflies.

Littlejohn didn't dare try to get some sleep. He knew if he did, he would probably relax his tenuous hold on the rubble and go floating down the river, away from Grady. So he did multiplication tables in his head, imagined building a tractor piece by tiny piece, tried anything to keep himself awake. Once in a while he would start to nod off, but ducking his head under the river would revive him for a few minutes.

Finally his mind grew as numb as his fingers and toes, and Littlejohn simply stared upriver, watching leaves and bits of junk float toward, then past him.

And just when he had decided that sleep was worth the risk, two larger shapes came floating down the boisterous river, two substantial tree branches headed straight for him. Maybe he could grab them without the Germans noticing, tie Grady to them, and they could ride the river to safety.

As the tree branches came closer, clouds covered the moon again, blotting out even its dim light. Littlejohn could barely see the branches, and he worried he might not be able to reach one of them, or that they would float past on the opposite side of the central arch, like the other log had.

But then one of the branches, the one a little ahead of the other, began to behave very strangely. It changed direction as it neared the bridge, heading straight for the side that harbored Littlejohn and Long. When the second branch did the same, Littlejohn began to worry. What if the Krauts had spotted them after all and were now playing some kind of strange, sick joke on him? What if they were floating down under the bridge to capture or kill him and Grady? Maybe they didn't want to shoot down here because they would risk damaging the stonework even more. Or maybe he was actually out of his mind, and the tree branch bearing down on him was just an illusion.

And then a twig poked Littlejohn in the arm. Wet leaves flapped in his face and he tried to fend off the invading tree limb. Something touched his arm, something firm, yet soft. Like a hand. And then Littlejohn heard a voice whisper, "Quiet, Littlejohn, it's me."

Littlejohn blinked. He must be dreaming. "Sarge?" he whispered back.

Saunders swam around from the other side of the tree branch. He got a handhold on the loose rubble piled up against the stone support and pulled his Thompson from its perch on the tree branch. "Let go of the branch," he whispered. "The sentries probably saw it float under here, and they might wonder why it isn't floating out the other side."

Littlejohn loosened his grip on the wood. The branch floated away downstream, bobbing merrily along in the rushing water. Immediately, the other large tree limb floated up beside Littlejohn. But it continued past, and from behind it appeared Billy Nelson. "Hello, Littlejohn," he said, grinning like a five-year-old on Christmas morning.

Saunders moved around Littlejohn to where Grady Long was moored to the rubble. He slipped on the slick rocks and Littlejohn grabbed his arm, kept him from falling further, but the effort of hanging on to the sergeant was almost too much for him. He knew he had been in the water too long, been fighting the current too long. He had no reserves left.

Saunders got himself braced again. "How bad is it?" Saunders asked Littlejohn, fingering the mound of blood-soaked bandages on Grady's shoulder.

They all jumped at the sudden sound of rifle fire.

"The sentries," Littlejohn said. "They've been shooting at anything floating down



the river. Until their sergeant yells at them, that is."

Saunders stared downriver, his jaw clenched tight a long moment, before he turned back to look at Grady and asked again, "How bad?"

"Bad enough. I got the bleeding stopped, but he won't stay conscious. The sooner we get him to a doctor...." Littlejohn realized his words were useless, that Saunders already knew what needed to be done. Softly, Littlejohn said, "You shouldn't have come. You're just going to get yourselves killed too."

Saunders said nothing, just kept watching Grady.

"Sarge, if you were planning on the four of us just floating out of here, it won't work. Don't you think I'd have gotten Grady out of here the minute it got dark enough?"

"Only two of us are floating out of here."

Billy looked at Littlejohn, then back to Saunders, not liking the sound of that at all. "What do you mean, Sarge?"

"With that fast current, you two ought to be able to hold your breath and stay underwater far enough to be out of the sentries' immediate sight before you surface."

"We're not leaving you behind—" Littlejohn started to say.

"It's not up for debate, Littlejohn," Saunders interrupted. "Besides, I need you to do something for me."

Billy and Littlejohn exchanged a worried look.

"When you get ashore, circle around upriver again. Cut some more branches loose and send them downriver at regular intervals. I'll use those to float out of here with Grady."

Littlejohn shook his head. "Sarge, it won't work. Those guards—"

"Don't worry. I won't move out until they're distracted."

"Distracted?"

"This bridge is going to be targeted by artillery at dawn. I'll get Grady out of here then."

"That's crazy!" Littlejohn objected. "You'll be blown sky high with the bridge."

"No, we won't. We know what's coming. Just send down some good covering branches, and keep sending them."

Littlejohn heard the obstinate patience in Saunders' voice. He pursed his lips but made no more objections. It would do no good; Saunders had made up his mind. Finally, he warned, "It could take a few hours for us to work our way around the quarry upriver."

"I know."

"The river's gonna get awfully cold on you. And fighting the current's gonna wear you out."

"Just get me those branches," Saunders said. "Then the current can carry us out of here, just like it will you."

Littlejohn nodded, then looked at Billy. "You ready?"

Billy's eyes widened. After coming all this way, was he really going to have to leave Saunders and Grady behind, just like that? They *all* should leave, now, while there was still darkness. But they couldn't take Grady underwater, not while he was unconscious. He finally nodded.

"Here." Saunders held out his Thompson toward Littlejohn. "There's bound to be Kraut patrols on our side of the river already."

Littlejohn shook his head. "Won't you need it?"

"I'll have that artillery. And my sidearm. Take it."

Littlejohn reluctantly accepted the submachine gun. He looked at Billy, who had slung his rifle over his back, the strap over one shoulder and under the opposite arm. Littlejohn did the same with the Thompson.

Billy started taking in deep breaths, trying to prepare himself. Littlejohn told him, "Hang on to me. We'll stay under as long as we can, then surface just long enough to grab a breath and go down again, okay? Let the current do the work."

Billy nodded. He thought he should say something to Saunders, thanks for listening, thanks for bringing him, good-luck, something... but no words came to him. Then Littlejohn was counting to three. Billy sucked in a giant breath and ducked his head under the water when Littlejohn did.

Saunders watched the river swallow them up, and then there was nothing but the incessant sound of it, battering against the rocks and the bridge itself. He watched downriver, but if they surfaced again within his view, the darkness hid them. No shots rang out from above, no voices shouted, and he exhaled in relief.

Suddenly, Grady moaned and rolled his head.

Saunders quickly put his hand over Grady's mouth, though he doubted the sound would carry over the noise of the river. "Shh," he said, softly. "You're still in Kraut territory."

"Saunders, that you?"

"Yeah."

Grady made another noise, and it took Saunders a long moment to figure out Grady was laughing. "You stupid, stubborn fool, Saunders. Only you would come back. Where's Littlejohn? Big lug saved my life."

"I sent him out of here to save it again."

Grady was silent awhile, and Saunders thought he had fallen unconscious, when the BAR man asked, "Hanley know you're here?"

Saunders didn't even bother answering that one.

Grady laughed silently again, body shaking until he moaned and stifled a cry of pain as he tried to shift against the rocks. Saunders pulled out the morphine ampoule and syringe Doc had given him. Wedging himself in closer to the wall, he readied the shot.

"I won't be any good to you if you give me that," Grady murmured.

"You're no good to me right now anyway. You need the shot."

"Not saying I don't." He watched Saunders a moment, then asked, "So when do we skedaddle?"

"Dawn."

"Good."

Saunders glanced at him in surprise. "Good?"

"That gives you plenty of time."

"Time?"

"To decide what you're going to tell Hanley."

Saunders said nothing.

Grady said suddenly, "Too bad our situations aren't reversed."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Grady said, smiling. "I'm a much better storyteller than you. You got no sense of timing."

"And you're talking too much. Save your strength."

Grady laughed again. "Yeah, that's right, shut me up just 'cause I'm right. You like dishing the truth, but you sure can't take it yourself, you know that?"

Saunders looked away a moment, then said softly, "The truth is neither of us stands much chance of getting out of here. Our artillery's gonna hit this bridge at dawn."

"Oh, swell, you tell me that now? Couldn't let it sneak up on me, all sudden-like?" He groaned, reaching for his shoulder, and Saunders leaned forward anxiously.

"Grady?"

"How about that morphine now?" Grady gasped out. "Some medic you are... not dispensing the goods."

Saunders quickly administered the shot.

Grady let out a slow sigh. "Saunders?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're here," Grady said, his voice trailing off. "But you're still a stupid, stubborn...."

Saunders checked his pulse and breathing, made sure both were still steady. He pulled the extra bandages Daly had given him out of his pocket—they were mostly dry—and set about replacing some of the blood-saturated bandages on Grady's shoulder.

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Hanley stomped back to his tent after a tongue-blistering post-midnight meal of what they'd told him was franks-and-beans, but seemed more like something they would have fed his dog Buster when he was a boy. He knew he should have just been grateful the cooks had been willing to scrounge up something hot for him at that late hour, but he was too troubled by that afternoon's altercation with Sergeant Saunders to be thankful for scalded slop.

He ducked back into his tent, startling the private who was filling in for Brockmeyer, minding Hanley's radio and running errands for the busy lieutenant. "Gah!" exclaimed Pvt. Lewis, his pale blue eyes wide. He had been lounging in the chair behind Hanley's desk, and when the lieutenant appeared, he hopped up and away from the chair so quickly, he backed into the table that held the bulky radio. The table swayed, and Lewis flung his arms around the radio to keep it from falling to the floor, hugging it like a giant teddy bear.

Hanley glared at his temporary aide. "Any word from White Rook yet?" he growled.

"No, sir!" Lewis managed to steady the radio again and stepped back, snapping to a smart salute.

Hanley turned on his heel and left the tent. He needed to walk some more, that's what he needed. He needed to be outside in the cool night air, not cooped up in that musty tent. That would clear his head, let him figure out what to do about the Saunders situation. He headed for the edge of the canvas village, looking for room where he could pace without having to constantly stop and exchange salutes with other soldiers.

As he reached the last row of tents, Hanley heard voices coming from the sentry line. On the off chance that it might be one of his squads returning from reinforcing Item company to the south, he walked toward the commotion. Two men moved his way, one supporting the other. Some walking wounded, no doubt.

They were part of his platoon, all right, but not from the squad he'd expected. The two GI's coming toward him turned out to be Cajé and the young medic, Daly.

"Hiya, Lieutenant," Daly said, saluting with his left hand since his right was around Cajé's waist, holding the wounded soldier upright.

Cajé didn't bother saluting, just nodded.

Hanley returned the salute and asked, "What happened?"

Daly smiled. "Seems some Germans decided to use Cajé for target practice."

"All right, cut out the cute stuff," Hanley said, glowering. "Why hasn't Saunders called in?"

Cajé and Daly exchanged a look. "Would it be okay if I sat down?" Cajé asked, indicating the bandage around his leg.

"Fine." Hanley led them to a stack of crates piled near the supply tents.

Daly eased Cajé down onto one of the crates, and Cajé grimaced as he straightened his wounded leg in front of him.

"Now, tell me what happened," Hanley demanded, crossing his arms across his chest.

"Didn't Brockmeyer tell you?" Cajé asked.

"I'm tired of getting the run-around from you people!" Hanley exploded. "First Brockmeyer, then Kirby, now you! What is going on? Where is Sergeant Saunders?"

Cajé looked away, back the direction he and Daly had come from. "He and Nelson went back to the quarry bridge," he said, then looked quickly at the lieutenant's face, as if wanting to see the officer's reaction, but apprehensive about it too.

Hanley closed his eyes. All that time Saunders had spent arguing with him, and for what? He'd planned to disobey orders all along, to do what he wanted regardless. "I see," he said, reopening his eyes. He forced his voice to soften, reminding himself that it wasn't Cajé's fault Saunders had decided to go AWOL.

That's what it amounted to, of course. He had expressly told Saunders not to return to that lousy quarry, not to throw effort after foolishness, and what had the sergeant done? Defied orders, defied Hanley, defied the entire American Army. For what?

For Grady Long, that's what. For one man. Well, two, since that young replacement Nelson had said Littlejohn was still alive as well. But it really all boiled down to Grady Long, to Saunders' friendship with that silly, wise-cracking BAR man.

"Okay," Hanley said. "Thank you, Cajé. Better go get that leg taken care of. And if you're lucky, there might be some hot chow left."

"Right." Cajé struggled to stand up with a little assistance from Daly, who'd been standing off to the side, knowing he wasn't really involved in First Squad's business and wisely staying out of the mess.

After Cajé and Daly left, Hanley took a seat on the up-ended crate himself, suddenly too tired to continue his walk. He rested his elbows on his knees, rubbed both hands over his face, and groaned aloud. He knew why Saunders had spent all that time arguing with him. Saunders hadn't wanted to go AWOL, of course. He wasn't the type to disobey orders. He had wanted to change Hanley's mind, get official orders to go back to that quarry bridge.

But Hanley couldn't have changed his orders, even if he had wanted to. Defeating the Germans in this sector, taking that bridge to the north and keeping them from penetrating the American lines, was much more important than two men who might or might not still be alive and hiding under some occupied bridge. Wasn't it?

In the big picture, it was. Obviously. But to Saunders, sacrificing Grady Long and Littlejohn was too high a price to pay. So he'd wanted Hanley to somehow magically be able to do both. Take the all-important northern bridge *and* rescue Long and Littlejohn. With one squad left in his whole outfit. Didn't Saunders know Hanley would have done so if he'd had the resources? If there hadn't been a whole platoon of Germans swarming in that quarry?

Hanley lit up a cigarette, sucked the smoke deep inside, then exhaled slowly. He couldn't send men into a death trap like that quarry had become, lose more men trying to rescue a couple soldiers who were probably already dead anyway. But in the end, it didn't matter what Hanley could or couldn't do, did it? Because Saunders had just gone ahead and decided to mount a rescue with only one green kid to help him, and now Hanley had to face the fact that he would lose them too.

Because that's what it all really amounted to, he admitted reluctantly: he hadn't wanted to lose Saunders. That's why he had been so adamant in his refusal to send First Squad back to the quarry. He was afraid it would be *his* friend lost in that river,

stuck under that bridge, wounded. Dead.

In the end, it all boiled down to friendship, the fear of losing someone you'd let yourself start caring about somewhere in this morass of killing and death and loss. Saunders was unwilling to lose Grady Long. And Hanley was unwilling to lose Saunders. Well, thanks to Saunders' insistence on doing what Hanley had ordered him not to, they might just both end up short a friend.

He took another long drag on the cigarette.

*You're not the first man to lose a friend in this war.* He'd said those words just hours ago to Saunders, trying to persuade the sergeant to accept what Hanley couldn't accept himself.

He could have let Saunders take Kirby and sneak back to that quarry, orders from Captain Jampel or no orders. Brockmeyer could have led the rest of the squad to the bridge up north and held it. He'd sent Saunders on stranger, stupider missions before. But he hadn't wanted to, and that's all there was to it. He simply hadn't wanted to. His friendship for Saunders had somehow blinded him to the fact that Saunders would do anything to protect Grady Long. Just like Hanley would do anything to protect Saunders, even if it was just from the sergeant's own foolishness.

Maybe he hadn't been blinded. Maybe somewhere inside, he'd known that Saunders would put his own life on the line for Grady Long, the way he'd done so many times before for Hanley. Maybe he'd been a little jealous of Saunders' friendship, unwilling to share it with anyone else.

Or maybe he'd been tired and irritable for so long, he'd forgotten how to be anything else. Hanley took one last pull on his cigarette, stubbed it out on the ground, and stood up. There was absolutely nothing he could do about any of it now. He could neither send Saunders aid nor call off the artillery barrage. All he could do was wait and pray. And hope. It was out of his hands.

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The night wore on toward dawn, and tiredness and aching muscles began to undermine Saunders' strength. He shivered constantly against the river's chill, now understanding all too well Littlejohn's warning about it. And he couldn't rest, couldn't even release the grip he had on the damp stones for a minute without the insidious current trying to pull him away. And as every hour passed, he lost energy and strength he knew he was going to need badly to get Grady safely away from the bridge.

The BAR man was unconscious, feverish, and Saunders worried. The wound itself wasn't bad. If they could have gotten him back to the aid station immediately, it probably wouldn't have kept him out more than a week or two. But the exposure, the length of time spent in the river—those were what was bad. And he could do nothing but wait and watch for the branches Littlejohn and Nelson would send downstream.

Slowly, night's darkness gave way to pale grey sky, and the stone walls curving over Saunders' head took shape. The night had dragged endlessly, yet now that daylight approached, it seemed like it had passed too quickly. Over the river's noise came the rumble of trucks, downshifting and growing louder. An edgy alertness replaced his exhaustion, as adrenalin kicked in.

The Germans must have gotten the switchback road repaired enough to risk passage, and they were coming down. And Nelson had seen those chalk notations under here somewhere, what had Brockmeyer translated the words to? *To shore up...* The Krauts would start preparing to repair the bridge. Saunders wondered if he hadn't postponed their departure for just a little too long. He should have risked the bullets of the bored guards. Maybe if he had stuck close to the bank, they wouldn't have been

spotted. But it was too late now. It was light enough that he and Grady would be noticed instantly.

He turned his gaze north once more, upriver, still waiting and watching. Plenty of vegetation had floated by... all of it natural and unsuited for his purposes. Over four hours had passed since Littlejohn and Nelson had made their escape. That should have been enough time to circle around. Unless something had happened. Unless Nelson and Littlejohn hadn't made it.

Fiercely, he shoved those thoughts aside. It didn't matter. When the barrage started, he would take Grady and go regardless.

Then his eyes picked out a dark shape drifting down the river. Easing himself away from the stone support, he readied himself. The branch bobbed close, and he grabbed hold of it, grinning as he saw the marks where it had been hacked from a tree. Littlejohn and Nelson had made it after all. He quickly checked his watch again, and his grin faded. There were still ten minutes left... If he kept this first branch and the sentries were still keeping a close eye above, if it didn't float through and they noticed... but if it was the only branch coming and he let it go?

If... if... if....

He gritted his teeth and forced his fingers to open and let the branch go. It whipped immediately out of his hands, spinning as it passed out from beneath the bridge. Ten minutes was too long; he couldn't afford to raise suspicions now, not this close to dawn. There'd be more branches coming. There had to be. Littlejohn and Nelson wouldn't let him down.

The minutes dragged by.

The bridge trembled as one of the German trucks pulled out on it, and Saunders looked up. A fine dust sifted down. Boot steps trod the roadbed above and crisp authoritative voices began calling orders. They were getting ready to get down to work, he thought grimly, and checked his watch again. Another couple minutes and the artillery barrage would hit. And for once, he hoped their first shots weren't accurate.

He scanned the river upstream, desperately hunting for any sign of more branches. But the water, silvery in the dawn, held no hint of more help. Too late, he thought. He should have held onto the first one. But there was no time for recriminations, and he looked away from the cursed river. Unsheathing Caje's knife, he severed the swollen rope that bound Grady to the rubble. As soon as the rope broke, Grady's body slid slowly down into the water. Saunders maneuvered Grady Long around until the unconscious soldier floated on his back, then hooked an arm across Grady's chest and under his arm, ready to shove off and float down the river while still holding the wounded man's head above water.

Something smacked him from behind, and he turned, startled. It was a small tree limb, broken off at one end, leafy smaller branches forming a thick barrier. Swiftly, he let go of Grady with one hand and snatched at the branch before it could get away. For a moment, he clung to it, fighting the current for possession, then he had it steady and he maneuvered it in front of himself and Grady.

The shells started falling a moment later.

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Billy Nelson still felt cold inside. Despite completely dry clothes, three cups of hot coffee, and the increasing heat of a mid-June afternoon, he still felt the river's chill inside him. He sat on the ground outside the tent he and Littlejohn had been assigned, trying to absorb as much warm sunlight as he could. He glanced over at Littlejohn, who sprawled on the grass to his right, and realized that no matter how cold he still felt,



Littlejohn must be colder still. How many hours had he spent in that numbing water? Too many, that's for sure.

They had sent seven large branches floating down the river, hoping at least one of them would reach the bridge before the artillery opened up. It had taken them longer than they had anticipated to circle back upstream, then find branches big enough to support part of Grady's weight, yet small enough they could hack through them with their bayonets. Littlejohn gave up on that eventually and just ripped likely-looking limbs down with his bare hands. Then they'd begun the long trek to camp.

Despite the fact that Littlejohn had to be six times as tired as Billy was, it was Littlejohn who had led them back, walking as steadily as if he weren't exhausted and falling asleep on his feet. The artillery had shaken the ground under them as they made their weary way back toward camp. Every time Billy faltered, he thought of the Sarge back there with Grady, and he pushed himself onward again, until they reached the camp and headed to Lieutenant Hanley's tent to report in.

Billy had been too tired, his arm too sore and throbbing, to worry any longer about the consequences of going AWOL with Saunders. The lieutenant had looked as tired as Littlejohn, Billy thought, with his five o'clock shadow and dark circles spreading beneath his eyes. Hanley had taken Littlejohn's report silently, then sent them to eat and rest. The term AWOL had never been mentioned. They found out from Hanley's temporary aide, Pvt. Lewis, that the rest of the squad was still at the northern bridge. And that there'd been no word from Saunders, no word from Fox Company, who had gone in after the barrage to take back the quarry bridge, no word at all from anybody to let them know if the sergeant and Grady Long had made it out from under that bridge in time. Nothing.

And now they'd spent hours back at camp. Dry. Fed. Fretting so badly sleep was out of the question.

Well, Billy couldn't sit there, silent and worried, for an instant longer. Littlejohn had barely spoken since reporting in to Hanley. It wasn't as if he was shutting Billy out, exactly. It was more like he was holding his breath, waiting. Well, Billy was waiting too, and the longer the silence between them stretched, the antsier he got. "Hey, Littlejohn?" Billy said softly. "You asleep?"

"Yes," Littlejohn answered, not opening his eyes.

"Can I ask you something anyway?"

"Shoot."

"Shouldn't the Sarge and Grady Long be back by now?"

"Maybe."

"Well, do you think they made it out before that barrage hit?"

"They might have."

"Maybe we shouldn't have left them," Billy continued. "Maybe we should all have waited. How could the Sarge get Long and himself both outta there?" It was a relief to voice the things gnawing at his conscience. He had a feeling Littlejohn was troubled by them too, despite the infuriatingly calm tone he was using.

"He'd manage."

"What if none of our branches got to him in time?"

"Then he'd figure something else out."

"Well, aren't you even worried about them?" Billy asked, exasperated. Talking with Littlejohn usually helped ease his mind, but it didn't seem to be working this time.

Littlejohn opened one eye. "Sure I am. I'm just not being so noisy about it." He re-closed his eye. A moment later, he opened them both and sat up. "You hear that?" he asked.

"Hear what?" Billy looked around them, at the noisy camp full of jabbering

soldiers.

"Sounds like a jeep."

"Probably somebody to pick up the captain that's visiting the lieutenant."

"This jeep sounds like it's got a belt loose. His didn't." Littlejohn stood up, suddenly towering over Billy. He picked up Saunders' Thompson from its spot in the grass next to where he'd been lying.

Billy scrambled to his feet too, careful not to use his wounded arm. "So it's a jeep, so what?"

"It's coming from the south." Littlejohn began walking toward the edge of camp.

South. The river flowed south. Billy scurried to catch up with Littlejohn and fell in beside him. "You think—?" he asked, a little out of breath.

"I don't know." They rounded the last of the tents and watched as a jeep bucked and jounced over the muddy field, heading straight toward them. There was a stretcher on the jeep, and beside the stretcher was a very blond, very muddy sergeant. *Their* sergeant.

"Medic!" Saunders hollered as the jeep slowed.

Their approach had been noted by more people than just Billy and Littlejohn. No sooner had the jeep jolted to a halt than Doc Daly ran up, followed by two other medics. Billy and Littlejohn pushed their way through the crowd up to the side of the jeep and Billy swallowed. Grady's unconscious face was too pale beneath the dirt and fever's sweat.

"Looks like he's lost a lot of blood," Daly said, examining Grady's wound. "We'll get some plasma into him right away." He looked up at Saunders, Littlejohn, and Nelson, who all hovered above Grady Long's still body. "His pulse is weak; it'll be a while before they can operate and take out the bullet."

"Will he make it?" Billy asked, when no one else did.

Daly's young face was grave as he answered, "I don't know." He and the other two medics lifted Grady's stretcher off the back of the jeep and carried the wounded man away before anyone could ask any more unanswerable questions.

Saunders watched them leave in silence, then climbed wearily out of the jeep. "Thanks," he murmured to the Fox Company driver, and the man nodded and drove off.

Billy watched the sergeant anxiously, for the first time wondering what would happen now. He had spent all his time wondering *if* they would make it back in one piece, not what would happen afterwards.

The jubilation he thought he would feel if Saunders and Grady Long made it back safely did not materialize, and he did not know why. This should have been a happy moment, a moment for celebration, but it wasn't. It wasn't sad, either, Billy reflected, merely matter-of-fact.

He watched Saunders, and he saw a different person than the squad leader he'd finally been able to tell the truth to yesterday. The fierce rage was long gone, the anger washed out of Saunders during those lonely hours in the river, and the sheer exhaustion etched in the lines of his face and the heavily furrowed brow as he stared after Grady, left him looking vulnerable and human. Billy watched him and thought he wouldn't be afraid to tell this man something in the future. It was a strangely satisfactory thought, and he let his gaze follow Saunders' after Grady and the medics.

Grady would make it, he thought strongly and believed it.

Into the silence, Littlejohn said, "Caje is fine. He's probably over near the mess tent, waiting for lunch." He waited until Saunders turned to look at him, then held out the Thompson, his tone almost reverent as he said, "Thanks for the loan."

Saunders accepted the weapon with a nod.

Littlejohn avoided Saunders' gaze as he added, "I think the lieutenant's been

wondering where you are."

Saunders nodded again. "I figured."

Littlejohn said, "Glad you made it, Sarge."

"Thanks." Saunders began walking toward the aid tent, with Littlejohn and Billy trailing behind him, but when they neared Hanley's CP tent, Saunders paused. Billy thought he looked like he was trying to make up his mind about whether to go turn himself in for going AWOL, or follow Grady to the aid station and face the consequences later.

The door flap to Hanley's CP opened suddenly, making Saunders' decision for him. Lieutenant Hanley stepped out, closely followed by an older, dark-haired man with captain's bars on his collar. "Saunders!" Hanley called out and started walking toward the muddy sergeant.

Saunders, Littlejohn, and Billy all saluted. The captain walking beside Hanley returned their salutes. "At ease, men," he told them, then turned to Hanley. "Well?" he asked. "This is the one you sent to take those bridges?"

Hanley nodded. "Yes, sir." He looked at Saunders and raised one eyebrow. "Tell me, Saunders," he said, "did you encounter any resistance on the way back from the river?"

Billy thought Saunders looked as surprised as if Hanley had just asked him if he would rather have a pony or a new bicycle for his birthday.

Hanley reiterated, "Do the Germans have any patrols on our side of the river?"

Saunders recovered his composure quickly and answered, "No. The artillery barrage appears to have driven them back, sir. There were none between the river and where we ran into Fox Company's lines."

Hanley nodded. "Thank you. Oh, and I'm glad to see you made it back. All of you."

The captain added, "Thank you, Sergeant." He turned to Hanley and said, "We'll be heading north now, to that other bridge you've secured. Strike your camp and be ready to move out by 1400." He exchanged salutes with Lieutenant Hanley and walked toward his waiting jeep.

Hanley looked at Saunders, both eyebrows raised, as if he was very curious to hear what Saunders had to say for himself.

Saunders looked him directly in the eye and said, "I'm not going to apologize."

Hanley nodded. "I'm not asking you to."

Exchanging a quick glance with each other, Billy and Littlejohn backed away from Saunders and Hanley, moving out of earshot as hastily and unobtrusively as they could.

Littlejohn looked down at Billy and shrugged. "Welcome to the squad, Billy," he said.

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