

THE WEIGHT

By: Ricochet



No Disclaimer: I was nowhere near the tommygun when that thing happened! Also, the characters of "Combat!" belong to the characters at Selmur. I receive no recompense, just the pleasure of knowing the Fanfic squad. Thank you Jester and DII for your honest input, and special thanks to my Native American spiritual guide, Running Nuts—mi amiga. I honor and salute the men and women of the Armed Forces, especially my brother Ben, and pray for their safe return.

Saunders woke up hung over again. Cheek pressed to the sheets, he lay with his eyes closed a moment longer. He didn't know where he was, so he remained still, his muscles gathering tension. The noise that had awakened him repeated itself; a furtive rustle in the bushes outside the window. 'Nazis!' his instincts hissed in alert.

Then a kid laughed and a dog barked and the world came rushing back to the present.

It was 1949. He was thirty-two years old, a fireman, and a father. No longer a husband. Alone. The same question he'd asked himself a million times before echoed in his mind. Why must he always fight the worst battles alone?

Bloodshot eyes pried open, staring as if stunned at the empty closet. A breeze from an open window jangled bare hangers together like tuneless bells. The house was suffocating in silence. Saunders couldn't even remember the sounds his family made. In his mind, the phantom roar of bullets and bombardments had long ago overwhelmed their voices.

He lit a cigarette with an unsteady hand. Every morning it took him longer to escape the illusions of war. A vital portion of his being still roamed those devastated lands. At one time, he'd prowled the rubble in search of enemies. Now he returned there in his dreams, seeking meaning. He often awoke exhausted, his pillow damp with sweat or tears or both. Today was no exception.

He rolled out of bed stiffly, grimacing at the headache and stale taste in his mouth. Dragging both hands through his hair, he wandered to the bathroom and drank thirstily from the tap. Every evening he poured too much gin down his throat, yet he couldn't sleep without it. Days were bad enough, but he dreaded the night. Memories arrived without warning, crushing him in their path.

He shaved without looking himself in the eye, then showered and dressed in his uniform. He was comfortable in these clothes; faded denim and heavy leather boots, familiar sergeant's insignia on his sleeve. A uniform suited him. It felt as though he had always worn one.

Of course that wasn't true. At one time he'd been a civilian, a kid. He'd been primarily concerned about his reputation and his hair, but that all changed. He'd changed. Brutal reality demolished his boyish American fantasies. Every second of what he'd seen in campaigns across the globe was branded on his brain, never to fade.

His wife once told him his gaze seemed ancient. He could never express to her the reasons why. There were no words sufficient to describe the atrocities he'd witnessed; no incantation powerful enough to make him forget.

Month after month he'd stalked the scorched earth, until one day he found he couldn't smile anymore. Violence and loss had defined his life for so long, it felt wrong to wake up without them. Tranquility made him impatient; silence made him suspicious.

No wonder she'd left him. She'd found marriage to a burned-out, bitter cynic intolerable. He was addicted to action and anger, carnage and chaos, and who could handle that? No one sane, that was sure.

Now Saunders spent his days breathing the smoke of burning buildings, rescuing cats from trees and making the rounds of grade schools on Career Day. Occasionally, he saved a few lives. He appreciated the homemade meals and cookies the grateful survivors invariably sent to the station, but nothing could fill the emptiness at his core.

Leaving his house without bothering to lock it, Saunders began the long walk to the job, habitually settling into the wary saunter of patrol. He walked everywhere, his muscles accustomed to the exertion, his turbulent mind craving the distraction. In the haven of his own thoughts, he was accompanied by the squad. His men silently guarded his back, kept strangers away. And everyone was a stranger, now.

The sergeant moved down crowded sidewalks untouched. Passing pedestrians

averted their eyes, unsettled by his hawkish gaze. Surrounded by people, Saunders felt isolated from humanity; alien and anonymous. If he spoke, would they even understand his words?

Halting abruptly in a dark alcove, Sarge lit a cigarette and cursed the sting in his eyes. He didn't know what was happening to him. The war had left him numb inside, heartsick and unable to trust. As much as he craved human contact, he cringed at the thought of reaching out. It took too much effort, and he was so tired.

Moving on, Sarge berated himself for his weakness. He'd never leaned on anybody and he wouldn't start now, but he didn't know how much longer he could bear himself up alone. His world was collapsing inward, retreating from light and warmth and love, and no one knew it because he couldn't find the words to tell them.

He was sad beyond measure. He saw no reason to continue. He wished he were dead. And those feelings never went away.

The slender, dignified man in the trench coat entered the busy café and approached the counter. "Espresso, sil vous plait," he murmured to the counter girl, reaching into his pocket.

When she returned with the hot beverage, he handed her a heavy gold coin. Holding her palm open in front of her eyes, she stared at the coin in bewilderment. How in the world should she make change for this?

"It's yours, cherie," the gentleman said quietly. "If you will show me the back way out of this place."

Moments later, the dignified man nimbly hopped a dilapidated fence. Lithe as a cat, he dashed down the littered alleyways of the city, dodging strewn obstacles, piles of rotting refuse and a trio of lethal hunters. Not since the Gestapo had he known such relentless pursuers.

Only after putting several city blocks between himself and the busy café did he stop and look over his shoulder. Reaching into his pocket, he felt the thin notebook nestled safely in the hidden lining of the coat.

So many names, some of them right here in D.C. Cajé hated every one of them; hated their treason and subterfuge, hated their lies and betrayal.

Of these, betrayal was the worst. Instead of gratitude to the United States for using her might to help rid the world of tyranny, some sought to steal her secrets, leave her vulnerable to invasion and defeat. Cajé hated the disloyal cowards who plotted against his country. He'd killed one of them today with no remorse.

Now he had the names of the rest.

He turned with a grim look of satisfaction on his face, then froze in his tracks. His wide brown eyes, usually so warm and mild, now seemed as hard and cold as petrified wood.

Standing in the entrance of the alley, three men stared darkly at Cajé. They didn't need to say a word; their drawn guns eloquently conveyed their intentions.

The assailant in the center started toward Cajé, his hand held out expectantly. "Give me the notebook."

The former scout felt his fingers curl in his pocket, seeking the reassuring weight of his pistol. It wasn't there. He'd lost it during the fight on the bridge. It had fallen out of his coat when he and his target plunged over the side. Cajé had managed to grab a cable before he hit the water; his opponent wasn't as fortunate.

The only weapon Cajé had left was also sewn into the lining, and his fingers clutched its hilt and felt for the release button. The click sounded incredibly loud to his

ears, but the men didn't seem to hear it.

The first thug halted before Cajé, his hand still out. He had a triumphant sneer on his face and an arrogant tilt to his chin. "Hand it over, frog."

That was all the impetus it took. Cajé whirled, quicksilver reflexes too fast for the eye to follow. There was a flash of light, and then the scout straightened, wiping the bloody blade on the dead man's coat as he crumpled at his feet.

Normally a moment of shock ensued after such a gory spectacle, allowing Cajé time to escape. But the other men were combat veterans, too, albeit from a different front. Ignoring their fallen comrade, they opened fire, the muffled crack of the silencers blending with the sounds of traffic.

No one noticed the drama in the dark alley. No one saw the two men approach the distinguished gentleman and roughly tear open his coat. If anyone witnessed the biggest man kick the fallen victim in the head, no one came forward with information.

When the police finally discovered Cajé, he was alone in the alley, apparently the victim of a vicious robbery and nothing more. At least, that's what the newspapers reported in a three-line paragraph buried on the back pages. Within a day the story—and Cajé—were all but forgotten by the public, just as planned.

Hanley rested his head in his hands and suppressed a moan. He'd thought paperwork in the Army was ridiculous, but this was insane! Why did he ever think being his own boss was a good idea? He didn't even have time to spend the money he earned!

"Gil?"

Hanley looked up. Mary stood in the doorway, her face flushed with effort. To say the slight blond woman was heavy with child would be a gross understatement. Gil almost knocked over a lamp rushing to her side. "What are you doing here? Is anything wrong? You shouldn't be on your feet!"

Mary grinned at him, both cheeks dimpling. "At ease, soldier. I have permission to move about freely."

Hanley stared at her. Although she was lousy at it, she frequently slipped into Army dialect to tease her intense husband. Feeling somewhat foolish, he relaxed.

"Is it too early for lunch?" Mary asked hopefully, azure eyes wide. In the last months of her pregnancy, she'd been eating like a horse. Gil grinned at her proudly.

Thirty minutes later, she said "Oh!" and dug in her purse for an envelope. "This telegram came for you." She handed it to Gil as her cheeseburger, onion rings, extra pickles, chocolate malted, and Key Lime pie arrived.

Watching her with a smile, Hanley crossed his long legs and tore open the envelope. He idly scanned the letter. Then he lost all color in his face.

He turned to Mary with a stricken gaze. She couldn't have known what was in the telegram; couldn't have known the shock it would bring. "Honey...." he said, the rich timbre of his voice faltering.

With uncanny intuition, Mary read the expression in her husband's eyes. "Oh, Gil," she asked softly. "Who is it?"

Hanley only needed to mention his name and she knew the depth of his dismay. Gil gripped her hand in both of his. That familiar feeling of urgency, of despair and fear that he'd felt so often in French fields, suddenly returned fully. Here, in this lovely restaurant in midtown Manhattan, Hanley could hear the shrieks of men dying in pitched battle.

He looked at Mary, speechless with indecision. His face betrayed his conflict.

He couldn't leave his wife now, but someone else needed him at this moment, and he couldn't turn away.

Mary took the choice from him. One of the traits he valued most in her was the strength behind her pale beauty; he couldn't imagine going through life without her by his side.

She folded her napkin and stood awkwardly. "We'd better hurry if you're going to the airport, Gil." He began to argue, but she shook her head resolutely. "If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have you," she said as explanation, her eyes bright.

A small reading lamp was the only light in the room, but Hanley easily recognized the Cajun. His forehead was wrapped in thick bandages, as were his ribs and left shoulder. Blood and intravenous fluids dripped into his depleted body from numerous tubes, and an oxygen mask partially obscured his handsome features. He was in a coma, yet furrows of pain cut into his cheeks. The hair showing through the bandages was nearly all white. Life had been hard on the scout.

Hanley walked across the darkened room and stood at the foot of the bed. At his knees, a chart hung from a hook. 'LeMay, Paul,' read the caption. With numb fingers, Hanley lifted the cover and struggled to read the incomprehensible scribble.

"Skull fracture, Lieutenant. That's what all that Latin gobbledy-goop says," a weary voice spoke from the shadows. "That'n a couple a bullet holes."

Startled, Hanley squinted into the dark corner at a figure beginning to rise. "Doc?"

As the man stepped into the light, Hanley saw that it was indeed the gentle medic from the 361st Infantry. Despite his bleak thoughts, Gil smiled broadly and clasped Doc's hand, slapping him on the shoulder.

Neither man said anything as the years fell away and memories embraced them. This was their first reunion since VE Day, and it was awkward. Not all their memories were bad, but all had the war as a backdrop.

When he left the front lines for the final time, Gil never looked back, and he never regretted it. He could see that knowledge in Doc's face, as well as the disappointment the man couldn't disguise.

"Been a long time, Lieutenant," Doc said softly, careful not to disturb the sleeping patient. "You look good. Put on a few pounds."

Gil grinned bashfully. "Well, I expect to snap back into shape once the baby's born." He watched as Doc's expression changed to one of delight.

"A baby? No kiddin'?" he whispered, brightening. "Well, that's great, sir, congratulations!"

Doc's smile was fleeting, but genuine. Then, as though guilty for feeling pleasure while his friend lay nearby in pain, his doleful gaze shifted to Caje. "Can't wait 'til he hears the news."

Subdued by sorrow and uncertainty, both men fell silent. Hanley finally spoke. "What happened to him, Doc? Do you know?"

Doc shrugged. "We met up a few times over the years, and while he didn't exactly say, I gather he works for the government. Sort of a... a courier or something for a diplomatic liaison." Reminded of something, he dug in his pocket and held up an ebony-handled switchblade. "They found this in his hand, though. Guess he tried to ward off his attackers."

"He carries a knife?" Gil frowned, staring at the razor-sharp weapon, then at the bandages encircling the Cajun's head. "Seems like a dangerous job, Doc. What else

did he tell you?"

Doc shook his head. "I dunno, sir. Like what?"

"Did he mention any enemies, any people who wanted to see him dead? He's been shot, Doc. Who'd want to kill a courier on a diplomatic mission? It doesn't make sense."

The former medic glanced at the tall man beside him. An odd expression crossed his face. Where had Hanley been these last four years? The Communists had been on everyone's mind, not to mention the front page of every newspaper in America. Far from being stunned into submission by the horrendous bombs dropped on Japan, Soviet Russia was rousing like a mighty, ferocious bear in the frigid East.

"This is still a troubled world, Lieutenant. Our war is over, but others will follow, sure as the tide. You know that."

Gil seemed startled that men were still fools enough to fight. Although peripherally aware of growing hostilities, he'd apparently underestimated the scope of the threat. Or maybe he'd just lost interest in the affairs of tyrants.

After the war ended, Gil shunned anything that dealt with conflict or cruelty. The majority of his time was devoted to his family and business. He rarely focused on anything else, and even then he was very selective. He hardly read the newspaper anymore. He only listened to classical music on the radio. He and Mary attended theater or art galleries devoted to timeless works and, on the rare occasion they mixed socially, it was at cocktail parties with elite crowds too polite or uninformed to discuss politics.

Without realizing it, Hanley had gradually tuned out the world beyond his small sphere. Safe in his comfortable cocoon, he allowed no other intrusions. "I... I suppose I had other things on my mind, Doc."

"It's all right, Lieutenant," Doc said, his voice flat with disillusionment. "It's not your fight, you don't need to concern yourself with it. Our war was hell enough, and I can't blame a man for..." He paused, then stuffed his hands in his pockets morosely. "For wantin' to avoid anyone or anything that reminds him of it."

Hanley turned his head stiffly and looked at the medic. "Is that what you think I'm doing: hiding?"

Trying and failing to conceal the truth in his eyes, Doc answered honestly. "Yes, sir, I do."

Gil faced him. "Doc... you know me. I've never run from responsibility in my life. And I'm not running from it, now." He hated the sound of pleading that crept into his tone, but he continued. "I—I just have a lot of work..."

"Lieutenant Hanley," Doc interrupted gently. "My job in the war was to help the sick and wounded, and I had a lot of help from the Good Lord above. I thanked Him on my knees when the squad left for home, because all of us had survived. Least I thought so at the time."

Despair crossed Doc's kind face and he shook his head. "Only now, when I look at my friends, I realize I've never seen such deep wounds in my life, and there's nothing I can do about it."

Hanley swallowed tightly. "Doc..." he began.

"You don't have to explain anything, Lieutenant, I was there with you," Doc said in the same soft tone. "You earned the right to live in peace. But, sir, don't forget the squad in your haste to forget the war. Some of them need you as much as they ever did on the battlefield. At least there, they knew you were coverin' their backs."

Doc pulled his jacket on as he rode the empty elevator to the lobby of the hospital. His expression was grim, his gaze troubled as he struggled to make sense of a disturbing situation. What had happened to these men, these heroes?

Financially, Hanley was very successful, yet Doc hadn't heard from him in several years. No one had. While that hurt deeply, the medic rationalized the rejection by telling himself the lieutenant needed time to be alone; it wasn't personal. Yet that was the problem. Banishing the squad to exile wasn't personal to Hanley, and it should have been.

Kirby was divorced again, second time in four years. He often wrote long, rambling letters to Doc; pages that started out crisp and hilarious, but unraveled into sloppy, barely legible litanies of regrets as the former BAR man got drunker.

Littlejohn's wife told Doc that her husband often disappeared for days without notice, leaving the farm duties to her while he wandered the flat, desolate prairie alone. Upon his return, he wouldn't speak of it to anyone, even to his wife. She didn't know how much more she could take.

And Cajé. Oddly enough, he was the one Doc saw most after the war, and he apparently had the most to hide. Upon reflection, Doc realized that whenever they met for lunches or cocktails, a great deal of talking occurred, but no real information was exchanged. The Cajun was still very much a mystery. What little Doc knew of his history, he'd surmised from idle small talk.

Doc knew Cajé had tried civilian life and found it lacking. He knew vague details about a woman who'd broken his heart, and he suspected there had been the dashed promise of a child. Doc would probably never know the rest. Whatever Cajé was doing, he wouldn't stop. Or couldn't stop.

Sitting at the scout's sick bed earlier that evening, staring at the suffering man, Doc had felt pity flood his heart. War was a job for the young or the foolish...or for those who knew no other way.

Crossing the hospital lobby, Doc stepped outside and looked around. It was deep night, and the streets were dark and deserted. No taxis or buses in sight. Flipping his collar up, Doc began to trudge wearily to his hotel, hoping he'd find it. He'd paid for a room he hadn't even seen yet. He'd been at the hospital for the better part of a week, ever since a nurse called long-distance, saying Cajé's records listed Doc as "family."

Flying to Maryland at once, Doc had sat with Cajé for days, first watching for any signs of recovery, then later listening as the scout feverishly called out his friends' names, summoning a spectral sergeant and a medic who was already at his side.

Standing constant vigil, Doc prayed and sent telegrams and quietly made arrangements on the phone. He ended each conversation with, "and bring a dark suit... just in case." At times, Doc felt like a general directing troop movements for a sad invasion, but he couldn't go on like this. He was worn out and worried sick, yet the man he needed most could not be found.

Doc had called Saunders a dozen times in the last three days and telegraphed him twice, but no answer. Finally he'd resorted to contacting Sarge's job. Doc couldn't keep the stiffness from his voice as he relayed the message that a mutual friend was dying. He intentionally failed to mention the friend's name; part of him wanted Sarge to worry as he had the last week. Immediately upon hanging up, Doc regretted his petty actions. Yet there was still no response from the sergeant.

Now, walking alone down the dark streets, the uncertainty and strain of the last few days caught up to Doc. Exhausted, he felt tears well up in his eyes, and he didn't try to stop them. Hell, he was lucky he could still cry, and he wept unashamedly for his friends.

He had just walked blindly past a phone booth when the receiver rang. Nerves

jolting at the noise, Doc hesitated, not sure what to do. Dragging a sleeve across his damp face, he stepped forward to answer, but the moment his hand touched the booth, the phone stopped ringing. Doc stared at his reflection in the smudged glass doors, slowly growing angrier at the impotence he saw there.

With a firm look of determination on his face, he yanked open the doors of the booth and snatched up the receiver. Digging into his pocket, he fed a handful of coins to the phone, then began to dial. Listening to the endless, unanswered ring on the other end of the line, he started to get mad. He'd try one more time to reach Saunders, one more time... one more time!

And then one more time after that.

Doc jammed the same coins in the slot over and over, only to have them return after each unsuccessful connection. Finally he slapped the phone down in his frustration. Scooping up the change, he put his hand on the bi-fold doors, then paused. He stared at the coins for a moment, then reached for the receiver again. Under the weak, flickering lamp of the phone booth, he dialed the operator and requested a number he never thought he'd be calling.

The receiver rang several times, and Doc looked at his watch. This was the granddaddy of all long shots.

There was a click and a pause, then a voice said cautiously, "Hello?"

Just as Doc opened his mouth to speak, the doors to the phone booth slammed open with a crash. Rough hands reached in and grabbed him by the lapels and yanked him out, muffling his surprised shouts.

"Hello? Who is this?" the voice on the other line demanded.

Smothering in the grip of a woolen sleeve pressed over his mouth and nose, Doc could only stare with ridiculously wide eyes as a big man in a dark overcoat lifted the wildly swinging receiver. He held it to his ear for a moment, then put a finger to his lips.

"Shhh-hh..." he told the frightened medic. Smiling, the stranger hung the phone up with exquisite care, then turned to his huge companion and his captive. "Come," he told Doc, gesturing toward a waiting black sedan. "We must talk."

Floating weightless in a gray, featureless fog, Cajé felt paralyzed by fatigue. He didn't have the energy to open his eyes, much less turn his head. He heard people talking, but he was too tired to even interpret their words. Unresponsive, he let the hushed sound of their syllables wash over him like waves.

"...Can't wait 'til he hears the news..."

"...Is that what you think I'm doing, hiding?..."

"...I have no idea where he is..."

"...tomorrow, Lieutenant, bright and early..."

Fading in and out, the scout had no concept of time. Whenever reality intruded upon his trance, he was unsure whether a minute had passed, or a month. At one point he felt a cool hand on his forehead, and a woman spoke quietly. A deep voice responded. The voice tugged at Cajé's memory, but before he could identify it, he fell back into the soft gray tunnel of oblivion.

The next time the Cajun came to, the room was deserted and dark and he was being smothered by his own pillow.

Awakened to impending death, Cajé's mind cleared for the briefest of moments. The scout clawed at the cushion covering his face, trying to ward off the attack. It was no good. He was too weak. He felt the pressure mount as the assailant leaned into the task. A kaleidoscope of colors exploded behind Cajé's eyelids as he slowly suffocated.

The last thing he heard was a chime as an elevator door opened. And then, with a final, stiff spasm of resistance, the scout's tortured body deeply relaxed.

Precariously balanced on the brink of death, Cajé didn't hear the footsteps approach down glossy halls or feel the cushion quickly replaced beneath his head. He didn't see his assailant rush across the room and ease out the open window, or witness him pause and glance back in, as though to acknowledge unfinished business.

None of this was apparent to Cajé, who lay as though in peaceful repose on the narrow hospital bed. When the dark figure of a man appeared in the doorway, the defenseless scout was oblivious to danger.

The man soundlessly crossed the room and bent over Cajé. A calloused hand descended lightly, patting the scout's tousled hair with tender affection. "I'm here," the man whispered. "I'm right here, Cajé. I got your back...."

Hanley stifled a yawn and stared blearily at the percolator. Tempted to start a fire on the nurse's desk and get the job done fast, Gil impatiently splashed some weak brew into a cup, dumped in sugar, and left cursing under his breath. One thing never seemed to change: cruddy coffee followed him everywhere he went.

The corridors were deserted at this hour. Even the nurses had disappeared. Hanley's gaze darted restlessly as he walked. Four years in civilian life hadn't dulled his instincts. He still felt jumpy passing dark, open doorways without a loaded carbine nestled in his hands. Listening to the hum of the slumbering hospital, the former soldier strained to hear a discordant note.

Then a patient's muffled groan brought Hanley back to the present. With a scornful noise, he shook his head. Stupid, you're an architect, now. War's over. Besides, he reasoned, he could just throw a cup of hot water on any lurking Krauts he saw.

Entering Cajé's room, Hanley frowned, mildly perplexed. The window had been shut when he left; now it was open. Perhaps a nurse had finally appeared to check her patient and decided he needed fresh air. Turning his head, Hanley listened to Cajé's breathing; it seemed irregular and rough, almost a struggle.

Crossing the dark room, Gil closed the window and latched it tightly. Air was one thing, he thought with a touch of annoyance; pneumonia was another. Even as he stood there, Cajé's breathing improved steadily, and Hanley nodded in satisfaction.

With a quick, dry rasp, a match flared to life behind him. Badly startled, Hanley jerked around, scalding his hand with hot coffee. "What the hell—!" he barked.

Slouching against the wall, a man bent his head to light his cigarette, and Hanley caught a glimpse of thick blond hair. "Who... Saunders?" He could hardly believe it. He found a place to set his cup and searched for the light switch. "Is that you, Sarge?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," the low voice responded. "You wanna keep the lights off? You got a hurt man over here."

Gil's hand dropped away from the switch. Saunders' voice had an odd quality to it, something Hanley couldn't quite place. Coldness rimed the tough tone, or perhaps it was his imagination. Nevertheless, this reunion might also be tainted by the past.

Hanley decided to ignore the attitude. He approached the shadowy figure.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "I didn't think I'd see you for awhile."

"Yeah?" Saunders said quietly, shifting his stance.

Hanley nodded once. "Yeah."

He noticed that Sarge drew away as he moved closer, clearly reluctant to participate in this conversation. The sergeant turned his shoulder to Hanley, keeping

him in his sight but not speaking. He just listened, as always; listened and weighed his options. Eyeing the door.

Gil's brow crimped in confusion. It was three o'clock in the morning. Saunders didn't keep weird visiting hours; he'd known Hanley was here but had waited for him to leave. He'd mistakenly thought Gil had gone home when he only went for coffee.

Now the sergeant felt trapped. Hanley had seen that tense posture many times before, an eternity ago. And he knew Saunders was a very dangerous man when trapped. "You live on the East Coast now?" the lieutenant asked in a casual tone.

Sarge shook his head.

"Where do you live?" Hanley inquired patiently.

"Chicago."

"Yeah? They serve great steaks in Chicago."

Saunders didn't respond and Gil sighed. God, this was tough. He'd never met a man who played his cards so close to the vest, and the trait seemed to have gotten more pronounced.

"You married? Got kids?"

Hitching his shoulders edgily, Sarge paced farther away. When his voice did come, it surprised Gil with its unusual undercurrent of defeat. "Divorced. One boy, his name is Jason."

Gil didn't so much hear the words as see the effort it took Sarge to speak them. "That's a good name. For your son, I mean."

Saunders gave a listless shrug. "She chose it."

"How old is he?" Gil asked, trying to steer the conversation to what must certainly be a happier topic for the sergeant.

"Two."

That was it. A nearly inaudible, one-word response. No bragging, no stories, no photo in the wallet. Somehow, Hanley knew he'd discovered by accident the focus of his friend's pain.

Saunders paused before the window and gazed out. Silhouetted against the city lights, Gil got his first look at the sergeant. His wayward blond hair was the same, but the lean face beneath had relinquished nearly all its fierce vitality. For a man still in the ripeness of youth, Saunders seemed spent, world-weary. The dull luster of defeat was evident in his eyes.

Staring at him, Hanley searched for inspiration, something to help untie his tongue. What could he say to the sergeant? You've changed so much, I barely recognize you?

"So... what are you doing these days, Sarge?" he asked slowly, disturbed by the sight before him and trying not to show it.

Bathed in bluish moonlight, Saunders seemed ghostly, unreal. His pale eyes appeared colorless, and he stared at Hanley without blinking. "Same thing I've done all my life, Lieutenant," he murmured. "Surviving...."

Saunders saw the emotions cross Hanley's face in a tide. Just to have someone look at him, really see him, proved almost more than he could bear. He said something just to say something. It didn't matter; just something to get that piercing green gaze off him.

Then he felt an invisible shield surround him, impenetrable to stray fears. It was instinct now. The war had taught him to cover his pain like a pearl, smooth the sharp edges and bury it deep. Perhaps he'd learned too well.

For years, he'd watched helplessly as people he met began to avoid him, thinking him cold. He'd earned a reputation as being demanding and distant. Maybe he deserved it, he didn't really know.

Now here was a face from his past, staring at him with a mixture of regret and alarm. For his part, Saunders didn't know what Hanley saw. He'd avoided taking a hard look at himself for years. Part of him was afraid of what he'd see.

"When was the last time you slept, Saunders?" Hanley asked bluntly. "When was your last decent meal? I've seen you come back from two weeks in the field in better shape than this."

"I'm fine—"

"Like hell you are! I knew I shouldn't have let you out of my sight. Why didn't you call me? Does your family know where you are? Maybe I should contact your mother."

Despite himself, Saunders was amused. Neither man could help it; when they were together, they were like brothers, squabbling yet caring deeply for each other.

"No," he said quietly. "Don't tell Mom. I promise to behave."

Hanley fell silent, then looked away. He seemed shaken, as though he'd suddenly realized up was down and right was left. If Doc was correct—if even Saunders had buckled trying to readjust to civilian life—what must have happened to the others?

"This is my fault," he said somberly. "I should have called you, kept in touch. I should've known you wouldn't ask for help, but I never dreamed you'd be the one who'd need it." He glanced at Saunders in dismay. "I guess I thought you'd conquer the world in your usual, capable way, Sarge."

He left unsaid the obvious conclusion: that instead, the world had conquered the sergeant.

Saunders absorbed the truth without flinching. He was well-acquainted with cruelty, it was kindness he couldn't accept. His wife had burst into tears one night after counting his scars, and those were only the visible ones. When she ran from the room, he didn't follow, rejecting her compassion and, ultimately, their marriage. He didn't even know why. It took a lot for others to injure the sergeant, yet he seemed to hurt himself almost effortlessly.

After the divorce, his life became an aimless path of difficult days and unbearable nights. It was disturbing to realize his best years were behind him, especially at an age where most men were only just hitting their stride. Somehow he knew he'd never again be as awake, as vigorously alive, as he was on the killing fields of France.

Yet returning home—the illusion that had sustained him throughout the war—was shocking. Two weeks after arriving on U.S. soil, he found himself lying awake at night, camped on the hard floor of his old bedroom, listening for the sounds of battle. Missing it, actually. Dozing restlessly in the unaccustomed quiet, he was often jolted awake by the echoes of mayhem in his mind.

Fearing himself jaded or even sick, Saunders threw his efforts into being as normal as possible. He married the first girl he even remotely liked, bought a house in the suburbs, went to law school on his G.I. bill... and developed an unslaked thirst for gin.

His first mistake was the girl. After two years of marriage and a son, he didn't even know what color her eyes were. That she hated him when she left was no surprise. He'd reserved his worst contempt for her, blaming her for his unhappiness and frustration; blaming her for staying and blaming her for leaving. There were no fights, no arguments; he simply froze her out. She didn't even bother saying goodbye.

His second mistake was law school. Legal arguments bored him. The best argument he knew was a fully loaded Thompson submachine gun. There were never any disagreements with anyone after that.

His third mistake was seeking out the very thing that poisoned him. Impatient and unfulfilled by the boring legal studies, he became a firefighter because the smoke and destruction and terror appealed to him. That was something he hid from everyone, including himself. Action was a dangerous addiction, but every wailing siren and every flaming explosion brought him closer to the life he left behind. Unwittingly, he had replaced the vanquished German aggressor with his other mortal enemy: fire.

The nightmares grew in force. At first he tried to ignore them, throwing himself into his job with such conspicuous courage he rose to the rank of sergeant in record time. It helped that he was a decorated combat veteran. Soon he was leading a squad again.

Yet the dreams continued to haunt him, some so vivid he'd awaken in the middle of the night bellowing orders and breaking furniture. He not only terrified the neighbors, he scared himself.

Exhausted, he often sought oblivion in a sea of Seagram's. He didn't sleep so much as pass out. It was the only way he could stop the visions, silence the voices. But still, somehow, they always found him.

A hand touched Saunders' sleeve, and he blinked up into the somber face of his former lieutenant. Hanley stared at him in profound worry, not speaking. Saunders didn't know how long he'd been standing there, his gaze focused inward. A loner, he frequently sought refuge in his own thoughts, unnoticed by everyone else. Only this time someone noticed and took exception.

Hanley felt a knot of fear settle in his belly as he stared at his friend. What had happened to the Saunders he once knew? That man was tempered and tough, prepared to fight to the death for what he believed in.

Now, looking at the silent, unsmiling stranger before him, Hanley wondered what overwhelming calamity had made Sarge stop believing in himself.

"Come with me, Saunders," Hanley said, sparing a quick glance at Cajé. "I want to talk to you."

Gripping Saunders' arm, he escorted him to an empty visitor's lounge across the hall. Once the door had safely shut behind them, Hanley turned to the sergeant with a concerned frown.

"I don't know what's wrong, Saunders," he said quietly. "But I'm worried about you. I think you need to talk to somebody." His words touched a raw nerve in the brooding man.

"I'm not crazy!" Saunders' strong voice rang out in the stark room, echoing loudly down the linoleum halls.

"I didn't say you were," Hanley shot back, reminded anew of the sheer impact of Sarge's temper. "I only meant you need to get some help before you explode. Look at you; you're hurt so bad you can hardly stand, but you won't let anyone near you!"

"Oh, for— You sound like her!" Unnerved by the lieutenant's insight, Saunders prowled around the room, turning his back on Gil. "Go home, why don't you? Leave me alone!"

"No," Hanley said firmly. "I won't make the same mistake twice." The disgraceful memory of the day he'd abandoned Saunders for dead would never fade from his mind. Without realizing he did it, he held out a hand, desperate to reach his friend now. "Sarge...you don't have to be in the field to call for help."

Saunders stopped pacing at the far window. A humorless laugh escaped his throat, and he shook his head.

If he were in the field, he wouldn't need help. If he were in the field, he'd be too busy fighting and killing to feel the despair undoing his mind. He'd be too busy to think of those he'd loved and lost. And there were so many; their faces overwhelmed his

dreams, their voices echoed in his empty house.

"This isn't the Army, Hanley," he said in a dull tone. "You're not responsible for my life, anymore."

Offended, Hanley answered stiffly: "That's bullshit and you know it." They owed each other a debt they could never repay; how could Saunders question or belittle that?

Because he was lost and alone, and he didn't know how either thing had happened to him. Hanley could see it plainly. Sarge would never seek pity or the consolation of others. Yet his burdens were killing him, and he had no one to share the weight. If not for Mary, Hanley wondered if he'd be strong enough to endure the aftermath of front line combat in solitude. Somehow, he doubted it.

Frightened for his friend and angry at his own helplessness, Hanley spoke in the flinty tone of command, praying that the soldier in Saunders would respond. "All right, let's get it out in the open: you're suffering and you won't get help. That sounds like a death wish to me, Saunders. Are you trying to die?"

"Oh, for God's sake—"

"Are you?" Gil roared. Few men could out-shout Sarge. Considering the occasion, Hanley took no pride in the accomplishment.

"What does it matter?" Saunders muttered, his voice rough with resentment. "You don't owe me, Hanley. You didn't owe me coming into the war, and you don't owe me on the way out. So let's keep it that way, huh?"

The bitter words landed like a blow, staggering Hanley. It took him a moment to find his voice. "How can you say that, Sarge?"

"Because it's true!" Saunders snapped. "Because it's what you wanna hear!" He jabbed a finger in the direction of Caje's room. "You got a man in there with no real good reason to live, except he's used to it. It's like a bad habit he can't break, but there's no purpose to his life except to kill. That's what he does, Lieutenant; he kills people for a living. He's got a real knack for it, too; courtesy of the Army! Now what're you gonna do—tell him to go see a shrink and charge it to Uncle Sam?"

Hanley opened his mouth, stunned. "I—I didn't know, Saunders...."

Turning away, Sarge glared out the window, his voice harsh. "You don't know anything, Hanley, and you don't want to."

That airless sensation had returned to Gil's chest, anxiety squeezing his ribs. It was coming back, all of it. The more he spoke with his former sergeant, the more he absorbed the man's agony and alienation, and the more his own guilt grew. Why had he survived when other, more deserving men had not?

Beyond Sarge's shoulder, Hanley watched a distant flight depart from the airport; a single glittering star ascending to the sky. Suddenly Gil thought of Mary, and his miserable heart constricted with longing. He would give anything to be home with her now, surrounded by serenity and security. Away from the poisonous, pointed barbs that Saunders threw.

Almost as though Sarge read his mind, Hanley heard him remark cynically, "You always were lucky in love, Lieutenant. What's your secret, huh? How do you keep 'em from running away: silk nylons and perfume? Chocolate bars and three-day passes?"

Hanley's eyes narrowed. "Watch it, Sergeant," he said coldly.

Saunders glanced at him over his shoulder, a trace of a smirk on his lips. For a brief moment, Gil saw the specter of a ruthless young street punk in his posture. He seemed to be inviting Hanley's wrath.

Suddenly the differences between them were displayed in stark contrast; Hanley was Ivy League, Saunders was City College. Gil played a devastating game of billiards; Chip was a pool shark. The lieutenant was a tall, refined officer from a wealthy, well-bred family; Sarge was a scrappy Scottish noncom from a broken home in the Bronx.

Their single commonality was the war. Their friendship, Hanley once thought, was the only good thing to come out of the conflict. Now he was not so sure.

Reaching an unpleasant impasse with the willful sergeant, Gil breathed out hard and headed for the door. Saunders got there first. "Where you goin', Lieutenant?" he asked in a deadly soft tone. "Too hot for you in here?"

Gil's hands balled into fists. That was the second time in as many hours that he'd been called a coward. "Let me out of here or I'll bust you in the mouth," he grated.

"Yeah?" Sarge cocked his head, taunting the furious officer. "And risk your good conduct medal—?"

Hanley's first punch was to Saunders' stomach, his second to his jaw. He had little time to savor his victory. Launching himself off the floor like a wildcat, Sarge tackled Hanley around the waist. Both men crashed heavily to the ground, bruising themselves on sturdy, sharp-edged furniture. Incredibly, no one came to investigate the racket; nor could they have done anything about it.

Getting his elbows under him, Gil tried to rise, but Saunders quickly straddled his chest. With one fist tangled in the lieutenant's collar, Sarge hauled back and punched as hard as he could, flaying open Hanley's left cheek. The knuckles of his right hand also fractured, but that was secondary to the satisfaction he derived.

Squinting through ruined vision, Hanley twisted mightily, shoving Saunders to the floor. The sergeant was quick, scrambling to his feet, but Gil had the advantage of greater reach. Lashing out, he kicked Sarge's legs out from under him, then watched in horror as Sarge stumbled and fell, his head slamming against the hard wooden arm of a chair. Almost as soon as it began, the fight was over.

"Oh, God," Hanley breathed. Pushing himself up, he crawled to the dazed man's side. "Saunders... talk to me. Talk to me!"

Reviving painfully, Sarge pressed his broken hand to his bleeding head and croaked: "Screw you, Hanley."

Gil sat back on his heels. Not exactly what he'd had in mind, but under the circumstances, it would suffice.

Reaching up, Saunders attempted to rise. Hanley gripped his arm and helped him to his feet. Standing with effort, Sarge soundlessly blew out a bracing breath, then pressed his lips together. When the room finally stopped weaving around him, he glanced at Gil and asked, "Give up?"

Hanley laughed in relief. Then he scowled. "You ever pull a stunt like that again, Sergeant, I'll leave you where you fall...." It was an old, inoffensive quip, but suddenly it left a sour taste in Gil's mouth.

In the awkward silence, he pretended to survey the wrecked room. Clearing his throat, he joked, "Think they'll notice?"

Saunders never had an opportunity to answer. In that brief moment of silence, the two men heard the distinct sound of breaking glass. Glancing at each other, they both said, "Caje" and rushed for the door.

Doc felt squashed flatter than a flapjack in the backseat of the black sedan. The two big men sat on either side, crowding his shoulders and knees. The medic knew it was on purpose. They were trying to intimidate him and, frankly, it was working.

The kidnapers were well-muscled men, dressed in heavy woolen coats of European design. Their accents were foreign, although Doc couldn't rightly place them. The older man was graying at the temples, and the younger man had piercing eyes and flaring nostrils. Whatever their motivations, Doc knew they intended to succeed at all

costs.

The car meandered through back streets, affording the two men time to interrogate their captive. "Don't be afraid, Doctor; we are not here to harm you. We only want information," the older man said in a soothing tone.

Staring at him, Doc swallowed with difficulty. When he spoke, his voice was reedy with fright. "It's 'Doc', mister. It's just a nickname from the Army...I'm not a real doctor."

The man smiled, and the corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement. He leaned closer to the medic, his tone avuncular. "'Doc,' is it? Well, then, we shall call you 'Doc.' Now then, 'Doc'... as I said, we require information."

Doc shook his head. "I don't know any—" The air exploded from his lungs as the henchman grabbed the front of his jacket roughly. The medic flinched as the young thug yanked back a meaty fist to strike him.

"Wait..." The older man averted the impending beating with a flick of his finger. The medic's panicked gaze darted between the henchman's ham-sized fist and the mildly interested onlooker nearby.

"We are tired, Doc," the older man explained with a sigh. "It was a very long flight. Please don't try Yuri's patience with pointless lies."

Doc's complexion was dead white. "What is it you want?" he asked weakly.

"The notebook your friend had in his coat, give it to us."

"I don't know about any notebook, mister. Cajé was robbed—they took everything!"

"If that is true, then he must have told you some names," the man argued.

"What—what names? Who are...?"

"Do not lie to me, Doc, the consequences could be very grave. Those names are of the utmost importance, and time is short. You have been at LeMay's side for days. He must have told you something!"

Oh, yes, Doc thought, Cajé told him many things. He told of how he'd shot a man who was on a fishing trip with his grandson. Later at the hotel, Cajé pressed the pistol to his temple and almost blew his own head off. He told of exterminating men like vermin; taking their lives and trying not to care, but failing. He revealed his fear of letting the squad down, of losing his nerve or his edge.

Of course, none of this came from lucid discourse. It came from three days and nights of pure hell, for both of them. Deeply respectful of a man's right to privacy, the medic would never reveal what he'd heard. Yet Cajé's fevered confessions only confirmed what Doc already suspected—the scout was lost.

Meeting the kidnappers' intense scrutiny with a level gaze, Doc answered quietly. "He didn't tell me anything I didn't already know, mister. I can't help you."

The older man held Doc's gaze for a moment, then leaned back in the car and shook his head. "Such a pity," he said in false remorse.



"Got any peanuts left? Anything? Chewing gum?"

"No!" The bigger man sighed in exasperation. "For cryin' out loud, Kirby, stop

beggin' for rations I don't have!" Littlejohn glanced at the bus station behind them. "I'm about ready to stuff you in a duffel bag and send you back!"

"Aw." The wiry man kicked the curb petulantly. "I'm so hungry my stomach thinks my throat's been cut!"

"Don't give me any ideas," Littlejohn muttered darkly, searching in vain for the cab they'd called. Kirby scowled, but said nothing. A few minutes passed in silence, then: "Think they're servin' breakfast at the hospital right now?"

Littlejohn let his suitcase drop. As he turned to shove a finger in Kirby's face, a long black sedan screeched over the top of the hill. The thunder of its pistons echoed off empty brick buildings as it raced down the boulevard, heedless of pedestrians or traffic. Fortunately, at this hour the streets were deserted.

The two soldiers stood transfixed as the sedan wheeled and swung wildly down the broad avenue, its headlights flashing off storefront windows. Watching the bizarre display, they wondered where and when the car would finally crash. Their curiosity was soon satisfied.

"Watch out!" Littlejohn yelled as the sedan headed straight for them, gobbling up the pavement like a roaring monster.

Grabbing Kirby's collar, Littlejohn yanked the BAR man out of the way just as the car jumped the curb in a tremendous spray of sparks and smashed into the side of the bus station. An almost-human screech of rending metal filled the air. Geysers of fluid gushed from the crumpled engine. A hubcap flipped and spun wildly across the intersection before coming to rest. Sirens went off as the night manager panicked and hit the burglar alarm.

The two soldiers ran toward the wreck at once, yanking the dented doors open and peering in. The driver was alive, but moaning and clutching at an ebony-handled switchblade embedded in his shoulder. In the backseat, three men lay tangled in a heap, the one in the middle writhing in a desperate attempt to escape the unconscious weight of the others.

Littlejohn reached in and grabbed the man's arm and pulled. His deep voice rose in delight as the medic tumbled out onto the pavement. "Doc!" he said with a baffled grin. "What're you doin' in there? Who're those men?"

"Bad guys!" Doc cried shortly, still shaken by the horrendous accident. "We gotta get outta here! Help me up!"

Obliging without question, Littlejohn and Kirby helped Doc to his feet just as their taxi drove up. Hustling the medic into the cab, they fled the scene only seconds ahead of the police.

Twisting around in the taxi, his face bathed in the flashing lights of the local law enforcement, Kirby gave the other two men a reckless, brilliant grin. "Now this is my kinda town!"

A split-second after bursting into Caje's room, Saunders spotted the pistol aimed through a jagged hole in the window. "Sniper!" he shouted, shoving Hanley out of harm's way.

The startled assassin only had time to squeeze off a single wild shot before darting up the fire escape. Kicking the remaining glass out of the shattered window, the sergeant quickly gave chase as Hanley checked on Caje's welfare.

"Nurse!" the lieutenant bellowed before joining Saunders in the manhunt.

The sky was navy blue as night waned. The hospital was too high to benefit from the illumination of the streetlights. Saunders and Hanley were practically blind as they



searched for the assailant among the hulking rooftop obstacles.

Kneeling behind a grimy vent, Hanley dragged the sleeve of his expensive shirt over his bloody cheek and began to trace a plan in the dirt with his finger. "Let's try this; I'll swing around and flush him out, and when he heads toward the fire escape, you...."

Halting, Gil caught Saunders' eye. They hadn't discussed what they'd do if they apprehended the gunman;

Saunders had a broken hand, and neither of them were carrying even rudimentary weapons.

"What's Plan B?" Sarge asked softly. Incredibly, Hanley had to suppress a laugh. None of this seemed real.

Sobering quickly at the thought of Mary and their unborn baby, Hanley shook his head, his voice low. "Plan B is we get the hell out of here and call the cops, Saunders."

Sarge gave an ironic grin. "Lead the way, Lieutenant."

Suddenly they both ducked as a bullet sang off the vent with a hollow, tinny tone. They'd waited too long; the killer had found them. They couldn't stay there any longer, and they couldn't stay together.

Nodding in the unspoken language of the veteran soldier, Hanley crept to the left of the vent, Saunders eased himself to the right. Lowering himself to his belly, Sarge maneuvered along the ledge. He could see the fire escape, and he knew it was the only way down. The killer had to come through here.



Ignoring the pulsing ache in his hand, Saunders untied his boots and pulled the laces out. Wrapping the ends around his right wrist and his left hand, the sergeant waited with a predator's patience, listening. Every sound was amplified in the tense night. Every pebble carelessly kicked, every nervous breath, every button scraping against steel could be heard tenfold in the silence.

Suddenly there was a scuffle, then a shout of anger. Sarge couldn't tell who it was, but he scrambled to his feet and raced toward the noise. He was almost there when a deafening gunshot split the night. Immediately he heard the sound of running footsteps.

Throwing himself to the ground, Saunders rolled behind a short concrete structure. A second shot chipped jagged pieces off the corner. Ducking his head, the sergeant strained to see through the darkness. He still had the laces clutched in his hand, and he glanced swiftly around for something to use as a shield.

Tall metal air vents populated the rooftop. Taking a bold chance, Saunders rose and slipped soundlessly toward the nearest vent. The next gunshot was wild, aimed at

his previous position, and Sarge knew the killer was firing blind.

With ingrained stealth, Saunders made his way across the rooftop unnoticed toward a huddled form stirring feebly by the ledge. Kneeling at the lieutenant's side, Sarge gently turned him over. "Are you hit?" he whispered.

Gil nodded through the burning pain in his thigh. "It's not too bad," he whispered back. When he tried to sit up, Saunders shook his head and gently restrained him.

"No... stay down," he directed. Pointing over his shoulder at the nearest vent, he told Hanley the rest of his plan in a hushed tone. It wasn't until he was in position that Sarge realized he'd been able to see the lieutenant's features plainly as they plotted. The morning sun—and certain death—was on its way.

"Saunders!" On cue, Hanley cried out in a pathetically weak voice. "I'm hit...!" Gritting his teeth, the lieutenant glanced at Sarge; he hated even acting cowardly, and he was reminded of the sergeant's earlier words. True resentment tinged his false cries for rescue. "Help me, I'm hurt!"

It didn't take long for the killer to decide what to do. Saunders ducked out of sight as a man dressed entirely in black quickly approached Hanley, intending to use him as bait. The way the lieutenant was positioned, the killer would have to turn his back to Saunders in order to confront his hostage. Flattening himself against the vent, Sarge caught his breath and waited. His muscles strained to be released.

The moment the assailant appeared in his sight, Saunders burst out of hiding. Wrapping the boot laces tightly around the killer's neck, he dragged him backward off his heels. But the man in black was bigger and stronger than the sergeant. It took everything Saunders had to hold on as he put up a fight. Over by the wall, Hanley struggled to stand.

"Who sent you?" Sarge rasped in the man's ear. The killer swung around, throwing the sergeant off-balance, but Saunders hung on tenaciously. He twisted the cords until they dug into the man's flesh. "Who sent you?"

Instead of surrendering, the strangling man squirmed around in Saunders' grip and tried to turn the gun on him. Lurching to his feet, Hanley grabbed the killer's wrist, forcing the pistol down. A ferocious fight for dominance followed, then suddenly the three men tripped and fell and the weapon skidded wildly across the roof.

Scrambling to his feet, Saunders lunged for the pistol at the same time as the killer. Reflexes honed to a razor's edge, Sarge snatched up the gun and whirled in the same motion, stopping the snarling assailant in his tracks. The sergeant held the pistol awkwardly in his left hand. His right hand was useless, but it didn't matter; he was too close to miss.

Exhilaration sang through Saunders' body. Renewed purpose resuscitated his faltering heart, and he barely heard Hanley's shouts over the pounding of his pulse. "Don't shoot him, Sarge!" the lieutenant yelled hoarsely. "We need him alive!"

As Hanley's words rebounded across the rooftop, time seemed to halt. All three men froze in place as they looked into each other's eyes. In the distance, sirens echoed through the brick canyons of the city as police cars screamed toward the embattled building.

"*Hande hoche!*" Sarge snapped, gesturing with the pistol. "Hands up! It's over!" The man in black slowly straightened from a crouch, a hateful expression on his face. Stepping closer to the ledge, he glared defiantly across the rooftops at the approaching police force. He muttered something neither man could make out, then spat at the street below.

With dawning horror, Hanley and Saunders watched the killer weigh the consequences of custody and interrogation, and then reach a terrible decision. Before either man could stop him, the failed assailant flung himself off the building in a silent,

deadly dive.

"No!" Hanley shouted, hobbling to the ledge and peering over. The sickened grimace on his face was all Sarge needed to see.

Lowering the pistol, Saunders swayed on his feet. Now that the danger was past, he found he could barely stand. Moving to the wall, he collapsed heavily. Hanley slumped to the ground next to him, stunned. When the sergeant lit a cigarette and offered it to him, he took it in numb fingers without looking.

"Unbelievable," Gil murmured, dazed by the macabre spectacle he'd just witnessed. "What kind of a maniac...?" His voice trailed off, and he stared blindly at the horizon. It had been four years since he'd seen death at close range; four years, yet time had not diminished its power to appall.

Next to him, fully recovered from the gruesome drama of his enemy's demise, Sarge examined his right hand in the dim morning light. The knuckles were discolored and lumpish, and the boot laces had sliced into his wrist. It wasn't pretty, but at least he didn't look as bad as the lieutenant did.

Saunders glanced at Hanley, his gaze traveling from the blood-soaked trouser leg to the bruised cheek. Flexing his stiffening fingers, the sergeant remarked in a droll tone, "Good thing we're not old guys, yet."

Gil gave him a wan smile, then leaned back wearily and shut his eyes, struggling against depression. The dust hadn't cleared from the last war before another one waited in the wings. There seemed to be no end to the onward march of mad ambition.

Hanley no longer believed in Mankind's potential for peace, he'd seen too much. Every horror the front lines had to offer had been displayed before his unwilling gaze. He would spend the rest of his life trying to erase those indelible images. Now this.

"You okay, Lieutenant?"

Gil turned his head stiffly. Saunders watched him without speaking, that cobalt gaze searing through the barrier Hanley had built around himself.

"When will the fighting end, Sarge?" Bright eyes scanned the bleak horizon, visualizing ugly, burning mushroom clouds converting whole cities into charnel houses. Humanity was on a collision course with annihilation, and Gil was powerless to prevent it. "What kind of a world am I bringing a child into?"

Saunders hesitated a moment, then said quietly: "What kind of a world do you want it to be?"

Hanley swallowed back the desolation crawling up his throat. Unsettled by those simple words, he took a deep drag on the cigarette, blinking as though the smoke were to blame for his bloodshot eyes. "I guess I got into the habit of not caring anymore."

Saunders nodded solemnly. "Tough habit to break."

Hanley's gaze returned to the sky, but his focus was on the past, retracing the path that brought him to this place. His golden world had collapsed under the weight of the war. Nothing in his privileged upbringing had prepared him for the beaches of Normandy. Good breeding hadn't shielded him from the mud and blood and bullets.

Returning home a year older and infinitely wiser, Gil found his old life intolerable. Unable to go forward and unwilling to go back, he was stalled in place, fitting in nowhere and belonging to no group, other than the small family he was creating with Mary.

That was fine with him. Brick by brick, he built his castle walls high to keep out intruders. Only now did he realize that they kept out friends, as well.

Hanley glanced at Saunders. He felt a rush of remarkable memories; recollections of the many times a shrewd sergeant was the only thing standing between himself and disaster. The lieutenant trusted no man more. So why hadn't he trusted him with this?

"Saunders," Hanley said, his voice rough with remorse. "I've missed you these

last four years. I've thought of calling you a million times, but I..." He paused. How could he explain? What could he say?

That the telephone seemed to weigh a ton? That it was never Gil's intention to revisit the past? That he'd hoped the others would forget him, as he had tried to erase them from his memory? Averting his gaze, he struggled to lock his shame away; consign it to the same vault that held his unwanted memories of the war.

"I didn't keep in touch with the squad on purpose, Sarge." Disgrace inflamed Hanley's cheeks as he spoke. "I didn't want to be reminded of what I had to do to survive. Sometimes, if I try hard, the war doesn't seem real. Other times, like now when I see you, I remember every gruesome detail."

He dragged a hand over his face. "I wish there was such a thing as self-inflicted amnesia, but there's not. So I tell myself that killing was my duty, not my choice, and I try to forget. But every time I close my eyes, it's there, waiting to ambush me in my dreams."

Saunders stared at his former lieutenant, vivid blue eyes wide in a chalky face. "You have nightmares, too?"

Mirrored in that haunted gaze, Hanley nodded. "I haven't slept a sound night since D-Day."

"Yeah?" Saunders' voice cracked. Suddenly he seemed very young, the way he must have been eight years ago, before Africa, Italy, and the beaches of Normandy. The way he was before the war stole everything from him.

"Yeah," Hanley said softly.

This time it was Sarge's turn to fall speechless. He finished his cigarette in thoughtful silence, then flicked the butt away. Watching him, Gil felt warmth fill the stark center of his heart. But just as he opened his mouth to speak, the peaceful dawn was shattered by a bellowed edict.

"You men up there! We have you surrounded. Surrender now, and no one gets hurt!"

As the ringing echo of the police bullhorn faded, Sarge pushed himself to his feet with an audible grunt, then helped Hanley stand. As the two men hobbled toward the fire escape, each leaning heavily on the other for support, Saunders gave Gil a rare grin.

"So..." he jested lightly. "What're you doin' these days, Lieutenant?"

"What the... how'd they get here before us?" Kirby's voice was strained with disbelief. Flashing red lights, identical to the kind they'd recently eluded, illuminated the interior of the taxi as it approached the hospital.

"Take it easy, Kirby," Littlejohn said in a soothing rumble, craning his head as they passed the traffic jam of police cars. "They're probably just after Doc."

Ignoring the medic's outraged bleats of innocence, the men exited the taxi a block away from the scene and followed the shadows to the besieged hospital. Watching from a remote corner of the alley, they saw cops and detectives storming around the structure.

"Guys, I got a bad feeling about this," Doc said softly. He started to walk forward, but the other two grabbed his sleeves and dragged him back into the shadows.

"Wait!" Kirby whispered frantically. "Doc, didn't you learn nuthin' on that hike to Berlin? You can't just walk out there! At least not until you know what's goin' on!"

"Kirby's right, Doc," Littlejohn agreed. "We gotta wait."

Chewing his lip, the medic shifted his worried gaze back to the scene. Dozens of armed policemen were braced behind open car doors, their spotlights aimed at the

rooftop. After terse orders from the commander, a handful of officers drew their pistols and began to cautiously climb the metal steps of the fire escape.

Halfway up, they halted and crouched in alert. Two men appeared at the edge of the roof. Before anyone could react, the slighter one shouted down at the crowd of cops. "Hold your fire!" Getting a firmer grip on his friend, he unsteadily descended the top stairs. "I got a wounded man here!"



Doc turned to the others with an incredulous expression. He could see it in their faces, too. The sound of that streetwise cadence still put a touch of starch in their spines.

"Sarge!" Littlejohn bellowed joyously. Kirby made a useless grab for his jacket as the big man burst from the shadows. Presenting a perfect target in the spotlights, Littlejohn waved both arms wildly as he galloped toward the hospital. "Hey, Sarge!" Unfazed by the dozens of guns aimed at him, he loped through the congregation of cops and hollered over their heads. "It's me: Littlejohn!"

He continued to grin hugely even as he was being handcuffed. In the watery gray of breaking dawn, Kirby gave Doc a baleful glance. Seeing no other way out of this mess, both men sighed deeply and stepped out to meet their felonious fate.

The wake of the murder attempt was almost as grueling as the act itself. In a restricted area in the emergency ward, Hanley and Sarge underwent treatment for their wounds while surrounded by government agents in dark suits. Grim and humorless, an air of secrecy infused the mysterious agents' inquiries.

Accustomed to debriefings, Hanley and Saunders' interviews went smoothly, if not satisfactorily. Grilled with endless questions, they weren't allowed to ask any of their own. It was all a little spooky. Doc didn't even want to know the implications of what Cajé was involved in.

As the dark suits finally left, the men gathered uneasily around Cajé's bed, disturbed by the direction their friend's life had taken. Even Kirby seemed subdued; he reached out and touched the sleeping scout's shoulder, but didn't speak.

Reluctantly leaving the somber squad to return to his hotel to rest, Doc tossed and turned all night, wrestling with his worries. He clung to his faith, trusting completely in God, even while his hopes for the men faded.

His fears proved unfounded. Rising early on Saturday, he returned to an entirely different atmosphere. Loud laughter greeted him as soon as the elevator doors parted. Raucous and raunchy and completely inappropriate in a hospital, the happy banter was the most beautiful noise Doc had ever heard.

Pausing in the doorway of Cajé's room, Doc grinned at the sight that greeted him. The scout was groggily awake; pale and spare, but growing stronger every hour. Eyes aglow, he was obviously touched by the presence of his friends.

Sitting near him in a posture of ease the medic had rarely seen, Sarge smiled in amusement at the antics of the others. At the foot of the bed, Kirby was collapsed in giggles over Littlejohn's comical account of waking Hanley up from anesthesia. The big man sat at Cajé's other side, a crafty smirk on his face as pantomimed his earlier actions.

"I can tell he's not all the way awake, see? So I lean in real close and whisper, 'Reveille, Lieutenant.' And he sits up and says, 'When do we move out?'"

Amid the laughter, Kirby interrupted Littlejohn, his voice loud and loose. "So I say, 'I dunno, when the wife catches ya? That's usually when I move out!'"

Kirby brayed at his own joke. It was seven o'clock in the morning and his eyes were already glazed with the blur of bourbon. Doc glanced at Saunders to confirm that he wasn't imagining this, but the steady blue stare held a hidden message he couldn't decipher.

"This sure beats a muddy foxhole, don't it?" Kirby crowed, beaming at Cajé. "They don't just dig the bullet out and give ya a kiss for luck. They got stuff here that'll get you so numb you won't feel any pain...!" His voice trailed off at a glower from Doc. He fidgeted uneasily under that righteous Methodist stare. "What?"

"I'm gonna want to talk to you later," the medic told the BAR man softly, a ton of meaning in his tone.

The only man missing from the reunion was Hanley. He was confined to bed for observation. In the privacy of his thoughts, Doc wondered at Hanley's unquestioning compliance with orders. Compared to the myriad other injuries the man had sustained in combat, this wound was not that severe. Cut off from his squad, the lieutenant seemed oddly unwilling to effect an escape from his captors.

Concerns for Hanley were pushed from the medic's mind as he watched four ravenous men pile money on Cajé's blanket to finance a feast. Doc sighed; the soldiers' respect for the sanctity of a sick room was no better here than in the ETO.

In the end, Doc relented to the suggestion of a party with shameful ease. Kirby phoned a delicatessen, and in minutes the men were eating and laughing and reminiscing with the heartiness of reunited brothers. They passed the day that way, until the sun sank and the stars bobbed to the surface of the night.

Finally the doctor ordered the men to go home and let Cajé rest. Doc gave Kirby and Littlejohn the keys to his hotel room, and they stopped in to see Hanley once more before leaving. Their promises to keep in touch were genuine; their final salutes crisp and regulation. Kirby said "sir" more often in twenty minutes than he had the entire duration of the war.

After they departed, Gil picked up the phone and called Mary, and they spoke together softly in the dark until very late.

The evening wore on. Around midnight, the sergeant crept back into Cajé's room. He had no place to go; he hadn't intended to stay this long. As he and Doc flanked the sleeping scout, they exchanged resigned glances. Not much had been resolved this afternoon, yet it was all right. Everything would be all right.

In the silence, Saunders stifled a yawn. Rubbing his eyes sleepily, the rugged veteran resembled a tow-headed tyke. Grinning, Doc whispered, "Why don't you let me take first watch?" He was the only one who'd slept in the last two days.

Wordlessly nodding his thanks, Sarge wandered over to a narrow sofa and flopped down with a sigh. Asleep in moments, he rested fitfully, his lips moving in whispered discourse.

Enigmatic as ever, Saunders sparingly revealed the details of his life, yet his turbulent dreams betrayed him. Watching him with worried eyes, Doc listened somberly as phantoms from the past robbed the sergeant of the peace he'd earned.

"Sarge?" His slumber disturbed, Cajé stirred and mumbled thickly. "Doc...?"

Setting his bible down, Doc rose and approached the Cajun with a glad smile. "Hey, you're awake. How ya feelin'?"

Shifting in bed, Cajé suppressed a groan, his muscles painfully stiff from the extended inaction. A headache throbbed behind his eyes, but it was nothing compared to the splitting migraine he'd had the day before. Not to mention the coma before that.

"Fine," Cajé claimed fraudulently. Yet as Doc bent to crank the bed to a sitting position, a nauseating surge of vertigo took the scout in its swell.

Sweat beaded Cajé's brow. Long fingers traveled over the bandages binding his fractured ribs; the bullet crease still burned beneath his touch. Lying in that alley in a spreading pool of blood, he'd felt the ebony robes of Death brush by. The ghostly sensation of that cold caress drew a shudder from Cajé even now.

"You okay?" Doc asked. His voice sounded fuzzy and far away. "You need me to get the nurse?"

Faking a smile, Cajé shook his head, "I'll be all right." Anxious to deflect Doc's pointed scrutiny, Cajé glanced at the sleeping sergeant. His expression softened and a fond smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "It's good to see him."

Doc nodded slowly, never taking his eyes off the scout. Whenever he wanted to avoid a sensitive topic, Cajé changed the course of the conversation. But not this time.

"Yeah, it is good to see Sarge," Doc said slowly. "I been worried about him, though... about all of you, Cajé."

Cajé didn't respond, and he didn't look at the medic. Moving into his line of vision, Doc compelled the scout to meet his eyes. While unsure of the nature of Cajé's profession, Doc clearly saw the toll it was taking on him, and fear drove him to be bold.

"Cajé... I want you to listen to me, and listen good." Doc's tone made it clear he would brook no argument. "Whatever it is you're doin', it's gotta stop. If not for yourself, then for the sake of the people who love and depend on you."

Cajé looked down, his dark gaze pensive. "You got the wrong man, Doc."

"Don't tell me that!" the medic retorted angrily.

Over on the sofa, Sarge stirred in his sleep. Doc glanced quickly at him. Lowering his voice, he implored the Cajun to listen before it was too late.

"All this time we've been meetin' up, reminiscing about the war and such, and now I find out that you never quit at all! Why, Cajé...why? War is an evil business. It's the closest Mankind comes to bein' in Hell! Why would you go back there?"

Cajé made a sound of derision. Hell didn't hold any mystery for him; he'd taken up residence there. "You don't believe in that— he almost said "crap," but held his tongue.

Doc's words were starched with frustration. "Yeah, Cajé, I'm convinced there's a Hell. I saw it with my own eyes, but the devils holding pitchforks were men!" His tone, normally so honeyed and mild, now stung the scout. "It was rough, but we fought 'em and won. The only way evil wins is if we let it crawl inside and poison our souls—the way you have!"

Cajé cringed involuntarily. The hard truth of the medic's words hurt worse than the wound in his side. Only then did the Cajun realized how barren his heart felt. In becoming a killer, part of him had also died.

"It's not true, Doc," he managed to say, but even he didn't believe the broken denial. "It's not what you think..."

"It doesn't matter what I think," Doc said softly. "What matters is what it's doing

to you."

The scout looked away and swallowed tightly, but didn't have a chance to respond. A soft knock came at the door, and a nurse peeked in. "You have visitors; security let them through. Shall I tell them it's too late at night?"

With a puzzled frown, Doc rose and crossed the room. "Who is it?"

Peering over the nurse's shoulder, he saw a man and a girl in the corridor, both dressed in jackets with a crest on the pocket. It seemed to be a uniform. The girl had the most soulful eyes the medic had ever seen; deep and dark and solemn. Mahogany hair framed flawless features.

The man's face was set in determined lines. When Doc opened the door a little wider, he stepped closer and spoke in a heavily-accented voice, struggling with the unfamiliar consonants. "We wish to see Mon—Mister LeMay. We are here under the auspices of the French Embassy, if you wish to inspect our papers and passports."

Doc opened his mouth to tell him it was too late for a visit, then something made him pause. Looking down, he stared at the girl. The telephone call; he'd forgotten in all the turmoil. "Micheline?" he said in quiet amazement.

Behind him, Doc heard the startled scout breathe, "What—?" There was a rustle of sheets as he pushed himself up in bed.

Standing back and swinging the door open wider, Doc gaped as the pair hesitantly crossed the threshold. Disbelief nagged at the medic, but when the girl saw the Cajun, a sob burst from her throat. Flying across the room into his arms, she cried, "Caje!"

Rising sleepily and scrubbing at his tousled hair with one hand, Sarge stood at Doc's side and watched the ecstatic reunion in silence. Caje and the girl were oblivious to their presence; their happy words tumbled over each other in their haste and mutual joy.

Moving to the window and lighting a Lucky, Sarge quietly questioned the medic. How did he know about a girl who had come and gone long before Doc joined the squad? Feeling like a hero in his heart, Doc leaned comfortably against the sill and explained.

Sitting in a room day and night for the better part of a week, a man starts to look around for something to read. Caje's chart was a good place to begin, and there, listed next to Doc's name under "Family," he found Micheline.

Orphaned in a wartime tragedy by Caje's hand, Micheline was cared for by an old village couple, yet she pined for the Cajun. After VE Day, Caje reunited with her and enrolled her at an exclusive boarding school in France.

As her legal guardian, the remorseful scout ensured her comfort and education the only way he could—by selling his soul to the C.I.A. Assassination agents were highly compensated for their time and expertise, and no one was better at it than he.

Yet now, by some miracle, Micheline was on American soil. And according to the Agency, here she would stay. Caje had no more need to earn blood money. He was free; the war was over at last. He couldn't stop hugging his daughter, and this time his tears were from an overflowing heart.

"I swear, Caje, if I didn't know better, I'd say she really was your daughter," Doc said, smiling at the pair.

"She's the spitting image of my mother, Doc. I can't wait for them to meet," Caje said, smoothing the girl's long dark tresses. He broke into a grin as he met Micheline's gaze. "I still can't believe this. I must be dreaming."

"I don't understand how she knew the phone call came from Doc," Sarge remarked.

With charmingly broken English, Micheline somehow managed to convey how

she came to be here. It was simple deductive reasoning: Washington rarely called the boarding school. It could only have been one man. A special number Cajé had provided her put her in touch with an embassy liaison. The next thing Micheline knew, she was in America, and now at his side.

Eyes alight, she tenderly touched the scout's hand and spoke softly in French. Nodding, Cajé said "*Ou*" and turned toward the men.

"She says she remembers you, Sarge," he said in a knowing tone. "She wants to know if you are still fighting the war."

A startled look crossed Saunders' face. Tugging his head in her direction, he met the shy, insightful gaze of the girl. In his mind, he heard the echo of a child's pitiful laments for a lost father, and his ice blue eyes thawed briefly.

With a steadiness that belied his inner turmoil, Saunders shook his head. "No," he quietly lied.

"If you want the window open, Kirby, do it yourself," Littlejohn said distractedly, writing in neat lines on a piece of hotel stationery. "Just try not to fall out."

"Oh, you're a riot..." Kirby muttered. The BAR man approached him unsteadily, one hand clutching a silver flask. "I wouldn't hafta open it, ya big ox, if not for you!"

The big soldier shrugged and continued writing. Kirby noticed and snatched the paper out from under his pencil. "What's this?" he demanded irritably. "A letter home to your wife? You'll be there before this is!"

"Yeah, but I thought she'd get a kick outta seein' a letter on hotel paper," Littlejohn said reasonably. He took the note from Kirby and carefully smoothed it out on the table. "Besides, I need to be a little nicer to her. I haven't been so attentive, lately."

Kirby made a rude sound with his lips. "Aw... ya can't make women happy, don't matter how hard ya try."

Littlejohn looked up from where his huge frame was huddled at the desk. "That's not true, Kirby. Where'd you get that idea?"

"From their divorce attorneys." Kirby sneered the last two words. He staggered to the window and hauled it open roughly, then leaned on his arms on the sill. Something about his posture made Littlejohn nervous.

"What're you doin'?" he called.

"Gettin' ready to jump!" Kirby shot back. That was good: if he was smarting off about it, he wasn't gonna do it.

Raising the silver flask to his lips, Kirby drained its contents, then snapped the cap shut with a sigh. Returning to his letter, Littlejohn shook his head in disapproval. "You oughta dry out, Kirby. That stuff just gets you into trouble."

"Nah, I get myself into trouble. This just helps me deal with it," Kirby said softly. He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder at the duffel bag in the corner. "I got more. Why don't you get two glasses and we'll drink to old times?"

Littlejohn's pencil stalled on the page, his gaze resting sightlessly on the words he'd just written. Old times... what did they have to offer? Nothing but memories of moments that couldn't be altered. His ma taught him that, and it was true. Watching the past was a waste of time: Littlejohn had his eyes fixed on the future.

Yet he didn't understand what made some people cling so tightly to yesterday. What was done, was done; the only direction left to take was forward. Once a man started thinking his glory days were behind him, he may as well be dead.

Suddenly Littlejohn felt inexplicably sad for his pal and onetime nemesis. In the field, he and Kirby used to buck at each other like two ornery mules. Kirby was always

bragging about how he'd blow the lid off of Chicago when he got back. 'If you get back,' Littlejohn remembered saying ruefully. Now he looked at the former BAR man and saw the reality behind those words.

Littlejohn set his pencil down. A thoughtful look crossed his face and he chewed his bottom lip as an idea formed. He was gonna catch hell from the missus when he got back, but she was a sweet girl; she'd understand. That's why he fell in love with her. She'd waited for him when there were plenty of others to take his place.

"Hey, Kirby," he said. "You don't have anything holdin' you down. Why don't you come to Nebraska with me? Lizzie and I would love to have the company." When Kirby didn't respond, Littlejohn rose and strolled over to him.

"What're you doin'?" he asked, leaning casually against the wall next to the BAR man.

Kirby stared glumly at the traffic below. "Gettin' ready to jump."

Littlejohn cleared his throat. Never in his entire life would he have ever believed he'd do this. When he got home, he was going to have his head examined. "Hey, Kirby, would you consider going into business with me?" Kirby's expression immediately turned scornful, but Littlejohn rushed on before the dour private could speak.

"Lizzie doesn't even know my plan, but lately I been taking off for a couple days at a time and scouting out areas where I could start a small store or two. You know, bait shops and the like near popular fishing spots. I been readin' up on marketing strategies and such, and we can't lose!" He gave Kirby a wide, gap-toothed smile. "How'd you like to invest in a small business venture with excellent growth and earnings potential?"

"Are you outta your mind?" Kirby said incredulously. "I'm a city boy, born and bred. Ain't no way I wanna get dumped in the middle of some godforsaken cornfield!" His gaze raked over Littlejohn. "Especially with you!"

"Yeah?" Littlejohn responded, his feelings hurt. "From what I can tell, the city ain't done you any favors, Kirby. You're about two steps away from bein' a bum! Maybe if you sobered up once in awhile, you'd see that for yourself!" He waited for the inevitable argument, but it didn't happen. Instead, the BAR man's cocky posture seemed to deflate at his words.

Ashamed of himself, Littlejohn kept talking, rescuing them both from addressing his remark. "Look, fresh air and sunshine are just what the doctor ordered. I heard Doc tell you that, myself. It would do you good to get out of the city, Kirby. It's too lonely there. My wife knows a buncha pretty gals you can meet, and if you go in with me on the bait shops, maybe after awhile we could expand into hunting and camping gear. Or groceries!"

Eyes narrowed in doubt, Kirby didn't agree, but he didn't object, either. Littlejohn's words kept rattling around in his head. He was lonely. He'd had probably hundreds of women, some of 'em decent, and he always ran from them like the plague whenever they got that certain look in their eye.

But it was getting harder to face that empty apartment at the end of the day. Kirby had to admit, Littlejohn was right: a man wasn't no good without a good woman at his side. He blinked up at the big private and listened more closely.

Anxious to convince Kirby of the merit of his idea, Littlejohn talked himself dry, his eyes alight with ambition. Fetching the bottle from the duffel bag, the two men spent the remainder of the night huddled over hotel stationery, building their business from the basement up.

Soon it was time to depart. Saunders had a job to return to, and Gil had a

growing family. Yet as they clasped hands on the train platform and vowed to meet again soon, Hanley had a bleak premonition he'd never see Sarge again.

Saunders maneuvered through the crush of commuters, his khaki-colored hair unadorned among a sea of felt fedoras. The lieutenant watched his friend recede from sight. The wreck of a noble vessel, the sergeant navigated this world alone.

Suddenly Gil was stepping forward, shouting over the crowd. "Saunders!" Halting, Sarge turned with a questioning look. Hanley limped toward him, but the sergeant met him halfway.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" Saunders asked, even though rank meant nothing anymore. Not here. Maybe not ever, really.

Hanley felt the years fall away as he regarded the sergeant. Then as now, Saunders had a stillness about him that seemed to deflect the hustling world beyond. The two men might have been facing each other in a silent coliseum.

"Every year the war fades away a little more, but I don't want that to happen to us," Hanley said. "You're like family to me, Saunders. I care about you... even if you don't care about yourself."

Sarge tilted his head and blinked rapidly. "I don't under..."

Hanley interrupted gently. "Doc told me about the nightmares... about your father."

That trapped look returned to the sergeant's eyes. Unsettled, he reached into his pocket and used the small ceremony of lighting a cigarette to gain time, gather his thoughts. Watching him snap the lighter shut, Hanley's gaze rested on his right hand, noting once more the way Sarge favored it; hid it, as though it bore a telltale secret.

"Saunders," Hanley asked quietly. "Did your father do that to your hand?"

Blind-sided by the remark, the color drained from the sergeant's face. Sudden dread gripped Hanley at the sight; what had he done? Saunders had confronted the enemy countless times, drunk the distilled essence of evil they'd forced to his lips, yet he'd never looked as sick and hurt as he did now.

Glancing down, Sarge curled his damaged fingers into a fist, grimacing as old wounds felt freshly inflicted. Memories shot through his brain like bullets.

Although wary of his father's wrath, Chip should've been more diligent in watching over his youngest brother. He should've protected Joey, should've stood up to his father, but he failed. Then one horrible day they were both gone. And while Joey was never far from his thoughts, the only reminder Chip had of his father was the badly broken, poorly set bone he wouldn't allow himself to remember receiving.

"Sergeant—"

Saunders cuffed his nose with his sleeve and straightened, his voice catching as he answered. "Yessir?"

"You told me your father was dead," Hanley said quietly.

Saunders' words seemed dragged out of him by ropes of shame. "I wanted him to be."

Hanley's brow furrowed in confusion. "I—I don't understand, Saunders. When was the last time you saw him?"

Saunders didn't answer right away. Casting his eyes downward, he took a long drag off his cigarette, exhaling the bitter words in curlicues of smoke.

"The station responded to a call last winter," he explained quietly. "A fire at some greasy spoon in the center of the city. Pretty routine; lots of smoke and noise and people gettin' in the way. After we got the blaze under control and the debris cleared, I glanced across the street and there stood my father."

Hanley's breath caught in his throat. Saunders settled his shoulders as though adjusting the weight of a weapon in its strap. "He was leanin' in the door of this bar with

a drink in his hand, watchin' us fight the fire. I looked him right in the eye, Lieutenant. He saw me. It was like lookin' in a mirror."

"What did he say?" Hanley asked hollowly, anticipating the answer.

Saunders shrugged. The tough voice that could wither a stout oak in its fury grew so faint, Gil had to strain to hear it. "Nothing," Sarge said. "He went inside and shut the door, and we mopped up and left. I never saw him again."

Hanley felt bruised by the callousness of the encounter. He also recognized it as a catalyst to his friend's distress. Rediscovering a man he was desperate not to resemble, Sarge was haunted by the similarities between them. It wasn't the war that dominated Saunders' dreams, it was something much older and more primal. He'd simply given his violent nightmares a familiar face.

"Maybe he didn't know what to say, Sarge," Gil ventured quietly. "Maybe he's changed.."

Saunders' jaw muscles jumped with tension; the pain of reviving those memories was excruciating. "Sure, Lieutenant," he said in a hard voice. "Maybe I just... *misunderstood* all those drunken rages."

Unintentionally revealing too much, Saunders fell silent and looked away. Staring at him, Hanley knew very well the painful rites of passage between fathers and sons. He remembered thinking as a boy that he'd do anything—anything—to get his father's approval. It never happened, and he never knew why.

It wasn't until he met Saunders that Gil stopped believing he was worthless, and he finally stopped trying to placate his father. Having the sergeant's respect meant infinitely more to him.

Hanley spoke quietly. "I wish I had a fraction of your strength, Sarge. I wish I were half as brave, but I'm not. There were times during the war I almost cracked. The one thing that kept me holding on was you."

Glancing at him, Saunders shifted his weight in discomfort. An innately humble man, he was clearly uneasy hearing praise. Yet Gil had always held the courageous sergeant in the highest esteem, and it had been an eternity since he'd told him that.

"During all those months on the front lines, I thought of you for inspiration whenever I wanted to quit. I never saw you surrender, even when it was futile to keep fighting." Hanley's words were as hushed as a murmur from a confessional. "You're a hero, Sarge, and not just to me."

Saunders looked away. "A hero's a sandwich, Lieutenant," he said flatly, his tone dismissive. "I did what I had to do, same as you. Same as everyone else."

"No, not the same. Don't you understand?" Gil stepped closer. "You can't quit now, Saunders. The past can't be changed, but you sure as hell don't have to let it affect your future. I don't know your father, but you're nothing like the man you describe!"

"It's not that simple, Lieutenant," Saunders argued, thinking of the nickname he despised: Chip. All his life, he'd been compared to his father: same looks, same build, same temperament. That last part terrified him, always had. His father's blood was like a black curse lying dormant in his soul.

"All right, it's not going to be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is," Gil said. "Don't let him destroy your life twice, Sarge. Either close the door on the past, or kick it open and confront him. But you can't go on like this. For your own sake, you have to fight the legacy he left you."

Saunders dropped his cigarette and crushed it out, staring at it a long time. "Tough fight," he finally murmured.

Hanley's throat tightened at the lifetime of agony encompassed in those two words. "Don't worry," he managed. "I got your back."

The train whistle blew. Sarge bent to pick up his duffel bag, but Hanley stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. His eyes were bright as he met the sergeant's gaze. "Take care of yourself, Saunders," he said gently. "Take some time off and heal. Then go see your son. That's your reward for surviving."

At the sergeant's reticence, Gil added dryly. "Consider it an order; I know how much you like taking those." He was rewarded with a small, baleful grin, a rarity at any time, but much more so now.

"Yes, Lieutenant," Saunders said, warmed by his friend's words. The dreary pall that had descended over his life began to lift, and for the first time in ages, he felt strong enough to go home.

A kid and a book of matches caused the fire. It suffocated or immolated twenty victims and razed an entire city block before it was contained. Hundreds were left homeless, but it could've been much worse.

Witnesses claimed they saw a blond fireman with what looked like grenades in each hand dodging through the conflagration. Moments later, explosions buried the gas mains, extinguishing the inferno. The fireman's body was never found.

In the stunned days following the disaster, a city forever linked with flames once again mourned its fallen heroes.

Hanley cradled his daughter and stroked her tiny cheek with one finger. He'd never known a baby who could sleep so soundly, at any time and any place, even a noisy airport.

"Saundra," he whispered. A chubby fist gripped his thumb with surprising strength. She was willful, but a daddy's girl. She never cried when she was with him. "Wake up, peaches."

Her nap disturbed, she stared at Gil with impossibly blue eyes, her tiny rosebud lips pursed in a pout. She seemed to be waiting to hear what he had to say.

"Daddy has to go now," Hanley told her quietly. "But I'll be home soon."

Kissing her downy head, he gently handed her to Mary and bent to retrieve his suitcase. His eyes were watery, and he felt old and fragile, as though his bones were made of glass.

He kissed his wife and wearily smiled, then turned and began the long walk toward the inevitable destination of pain. Dark thoughts tumbled through his head. Doc was right: none of them had escaped the war. All their names were on a casualty list; death was just a delayed reaction.

"Gil!"

Turning, Hanley dropped his suitcase as Mary ran to him. She threw her arm around his neck and gave him a kiss that left him breathless. Saundra's moist fist gripped his lapel tightly.

"Come back to us soon!" Mary said, beginning to cry.

Gazing down at his family, Gil felt such love for them his heart hurt, but quite differently than the ache he had endured before. He thought of the many times he should've died but didn't, all because of a valiant, unsung sergeant. Everything Hanley loved in the world, he owed to Saunders. Everything. It was a debt he could never repay.

So why had the lieutenant abandoned him and the others all these years? Could

it be that it took courage to care, and Hanley had none left? Or maybe he was just tired—tired of nightmares, tired of soldiers, tired of struggling to return to normal when he knew that was impossible.

Yet now he realized it was wrong to live in exile, wrong to turn away from his brothers-in-arms because they reminded him of his past. The only way to defeat his demons was to face them, to dash fearlessly into the fire. Perhaps that was the last, best lesson Saunders had taught him.

Hanley picked up his valise. It felt lighter in his hand, as though strength had replaced sorrow. He didn't want to say farewell to Sarge, yet at the same time, nothing could stop him.

He smiled sadly at Mary. "If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have you." Somehow he felt the sergeant's quiet presence nearby, and he spoke those words for his sake, too.

Nodding through her tears, Mary hugged their baby closer. "Tell him thank you for me, Gil. For us. I'll never forget him."

Hanley glanced at his infant daughter. Sandra: a beautiful name for a beautiful child. She stared at him, her sky blue eyes bright, bold and unafraid. Just like her namesake.

"Neither will I," the lieutenant said quietly.

The man squinted into the sun and let the warmth of the rays bathe his face. Gold streaks of light gleamed in his unruly blond hair.

A Greyhound bus idled nearby, diesel fumes tainting the brisk autumn air. With a last drag on his smoke, Saunders flicked the butt away and bent to retrieve a battered knapsack. It once held bedrolls and K-rations, now it contained paper and pen, camera, passport, and a hastily wadded up change of clothing.

Several thousand dollars were also stashed there, enough to go anywhere in the world. Perhaps even back. He would know that later.



end