

SINNER'S CROSS

by Miles Watson

Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall.

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*For Dr. Günter Stüttgen. You carried out your oath and broke it not, and
gained forever reputation among men for your life and for your art.*

PART I: THE DRIVE

When you lose, don't lose the lesson.

1

The replacements came by truck in the late afternoon, with the bleak winter light already dying and the sleet as cold and keen as blade steel. The olive-drab deuce-and-a-halves, with their canvas backs and white-starred, mud-splattered sides, jumbled and bumped and snorted over the corduroy road like a line of nervous cattle being driven into the slaughter pen, and Halleck shuddered when he saw them.

“Cold?” Duffy said from behind his cigarette.

“I’m from Texas,” Halleck replied, not looking at him. “I’m always cold.”

The trucks came to a hissing, squealing stop, and the staccato sound of tailgates banging down made Halleck wince. The replacements—*Reinforcements*, he thought, *they’re calling ‘em reinforcements now*—jumped clumsily down from the trucks one after the other in a steady stream of thuds, grunts, and curses. One of them did not know to take his pack off first and went sprawling face-first in the greasy, yellowish-brown scum of water that swam over the mud on either side of the log road.

“Un-goddamn-believable,” Duffy muttered. His nickname was Mad Dog, but he wasn’t quite mad enough yet to ignore his own safety: he had daubed some of that same greasy scum over the captain’s bars on his helmet to mask their distinctive shine and reduce the chances of them

drawing the attentions of a sniper. "Don't they teach these kids anything?"

Halleck shrugged. "In one ear out the other."

"I'll tell you what's in one ear out the other." Duffy produced a chrome flask in a monogrammed leather sleeve, unscrewed the cap, and drank an ounce or so of something that smelled like paint thinner. "A bullet."

Halleck made the sound you make when you acknowledge a joke without laughing.

"I've warned them about busting down the goddamn tailgates," Duffy muttered, flicking a nervous glance at the dark, mist-blurred woods to the east. "Why don't they just beat some drums? Don't they know this whole area's been pre-registered by Kraut artillery since goddamn 1939?"

"No."

"You know what happened the other day with First Battalion, don't you?"

"Yeah," Halleck said, because he didn't want to hear the story again.

But Duffy, with his young face and old eyes, went on as if he had not heard. "They were supposed to attack, except half the poor bastards have trench foot and can hardly walk. So the major says: 'If they can't walk, drive 'em!' and has the deuce-and-a-halves bring 'em right up to the line, I mean just a couple hundred yards from the Kraut positions. So you've got two companies dismounting in this little assembly area the size of a baseball diamond, and of course the Germans heard every damn thing—every engine, every tailgate, every G.I. praying to Jesus—and they pasted the whole area with Screaming Meemies. I mean they just *shellacked* the bastards. Cullen from Fox Company says it was burning trucks everywhere, and heads and legs and guts and blood, and everybody screaming, and of course they had to call off the attack. He

said the major was just sitting in his CP with his head in his hands, bawling like a goddamn baby, and he was still crying when they came to take him away.”

“We’re out of range here,” Halleck said.

Ignoring him, Duffy dragged hard on his Lucky Strike, dropped it into the mud. “Well, you better get to it.”

“Me?”

“I’m not doing it.”

“You really should.”

“I don’t want to.” The captain’s voice was not petulant. It was toneless, ragged with cold and shouting and weariness. He did not look at Halleck when he spoke. He did not look at anything at all. “I can’t.”

Halleck said nothing. The replacements—the *reinforcements*—were still coming down off the trucks like meal spilling out of a torn sack. Even in the fading light, their faces looked remarkably well-rested and clean-shaven above their clean khaki uniforms. He was glad they were not wearing neckties. On his last R & R, he had done some drinking with a sergeant from Third Army who said Patton had issued a standing order that every infantryman had to wear a necktie at the front. It was one of those stories that was so unbelievable that you had to believe it. Halleck was glad he was not in Third Army. He did not think he could have handled that.

“I’m not doing it,” Duffy said again, more firmly this time. “I can’t look at them anymore.”

Halleck was silent.

“It’s the faces. The goddamn faces. I can’t stand the way they look at me. I can’t stand to know their names. Why bother?”

“It’s your job,” Halleck said.

“My job,” the captain laughed. “The only job I ever had was in my father’s garage. I got fired.”

“Captain—”

“Don’t ‘captain’ me. You know perfectly goddamn well I was a private six months ago. *You* outranked *me*. Fucking field commission. I wish I’d never taken it. You’re the best soldier left in this outfit. Why didn’t they offer it to you?”

Who the hell says they didn’t? “Captain—”

“What did I just tell you? Goddamn it, Top, you know what the skinny is.”

“Sure. Schmidt. Same as last week and the week before.”

“And next week too. It’s always the same. We can’t go forward, we can’t go back, we just push, push, push, and we never get any further, and all these kids, they show up on the trucks all green and eager, and they’re lined up by the side of the road two hours later like sides of beef, and they never even learn the names of their damn squad leaders. There’s no point to it. There’s no goddamn *point*.”

In the cold drizzle, Duffy’s breath plumed out in a continuous stream as he spoke the great rush of words, so fast that they ran into one another, became one gigantic sentence that went on and on, and then abruptly stopped. The plume dissipated into a ghostly trickle. He shoved his bare hands into the pockets of his field jacket and stared at the ground, his stubble-framed underlip quivering. Halleck waited a moment to make sure he was finished, and then he said, “You really should do it. It should be you.”

“Tell you what, just hand me your Tommy gun, and I’ll shoot the whole bunch of them right now and save the Krauts the trouble.”

Halleck sighed slowly out of his nose.

“No.” Duffy said again, as if Halleck had challenged him. He took the Texan’s hand and pressed a moisture-softened piece of paper into the palm. “We’re attacking Schmidt again tomorrow. Just tell them anything you want, then take them up to the line and put them in their holes for the night. They’re going to die in the morning, so no, I’m not doing it, you do it, and that’s an order.”

The captain walked away, back toward his waiting jeep. Halleck did not watch him go. He had been waiting for Duffy to crack and now it seemed to be happening, but it was difficult to tell. Mad Dog had never been entirely there to begin with—hence the nickname—but there was good crazy and there was bad crazy. In recent weeks, Halleck had taken to going over a certain passage of *Army Regulations*, specifically 615-350, Section Eight, paragraph 148 ½—“regarding mental instability or sanity.” The boys in the command post liked to joke about it. *A little light reading, Sarge?* But Halleck did not laugh. He wanted to know if the Army had some dope on how to spot a man who was ready to trade in his olive-drab field jacket for a white one that tied up the back. It was important because there were a lot of ways to crack in this place. And with Duffy, old-young Duffy with his Rockwellian face and Methuselean eyes, it seemed the crack was a tiny one but ran all the way to the core, not big enough to let out the courage or the sanity, just the willpower, the strength, the desire to go on.

That was Bad Crazy.

Halleck peeled off a glove and scratched the hard-to-reach spot under his helmet liner. He was a solid-looking man with a sturdy, immobile face, all deep-set blue eyes and hard cheekbones half-overgrown with stubble, and he had the sculpted shoulders and brawny forearms of a lumberjack and a lumberjack's methodical, no-nonsense approach to problem-solving. But he was not a lumberjack and never had been. He was from cattle country, and he had the longhorn's outlook, and he was convinced that if more men had it, less of them would go Section Eight, which was where Duffy was headed.

If he wasn't there already.

Halleck watched the milling crowd of soldiers that had disgorged from the trucks, all of whom wore the same shamrock-shaped divisional shoulder patch that he did; but you could not have mistaken them for veterans if you were flying overhead in a damned B-17. Everything

about them from the top down looked so *new*. New helmets, new rifles, new overcoats, new leggings, new boots. The boots especially gave them away. Halleck's boots were crusted with layers of hardened mud, and over that mud was the aforementioned greasy scum for which there was no name, something that was like the red clay of Georgia except it was yellow. Halleck had seen tanks and half-tracks flounder in it like dinosaurs in a tar pit. The only way vehicles could get through this nightmare of a forest was Indian-file down the corduroy roads, and if there was slower, noisier, more jarring way to move men and supplies short of firing them out of a cannon, Halleck didn't want to see it. No, if you wanted to go through that muddy scum, the trick was to walk with a shallow, forward-sliding gait, as if you were cross-country skiing. Then, when you got a chance to sit down somewhere, you took a sharp stick and scraped as much of the disgusting slop off as you could. But it was hell on your clodhoppers, and the sad fact was, when a *reinforcement* showed up on the line, the first thing a veteran usually asked him was, "Hey, sweetheart, can I have your boots when you get killed?"

Halleck glanced at the dirty piece of paper the captain had given him. Forty new men for Second Battalion, but only five for Easy Company. It was ridiculous. The Battalion had lost forty men in the last week through trench foot alone, and never mind the baker's dozen cut down by self-inflicted wounds, pneumonia, artillery, S-mines, and those son-of-a-bitching Kraut snipers. You had buck sergeants leading platoons and a field-commissioned captain where a West Pointer should be. And Regiment's idea of 'reinforcements' was five greenhorns fresh out of the Replacement Depot sausage machine, five greenhorns who needed weeks of careful instruction if they were to have any real hope of survival, and who would have exactly one night to learn it all before the big attack on Schmidt.

All the replacements had departed except for a lost-looking group standing by the edge of the road, half-swallowed in shadow. They

seemed an ordinary-looking lot, almost faceless in the gloom. Their skin looked pale but healthy and not the dirty, sickly gray of the line. They had that replacement smell about them—a faint but definite odor of rifle oil and army soap, new canvas and clean leather—and part of him rebelled at the thought of what he was about to do. It seemed wrong somehow, like knocking freshly laundered sheets into the mud. It didn't help that, as always when confronting new men, Halleck was acutely conscious of his own filth: of his scratched and scoured helmet, his sunken, red-rimmed eyes, the unruly reddish-brown mat of his beard, his dirt-soiled jacket and filthy boots. *God knows that I must look like to them*, he thought. Well, they'd look no different soon.

Providing, of course, that they lived long enough to get dirty.

2

Much later, with a sigh that was half a groan, Halleck sank gratefully into a foxhole. He was not actually supposed to leave the command post at night, but he was a solitary man by nature and the presence of Duffy was not something he could endure for long periods of time. Not anymore. A few months before, at St. Denis-le-Gast, when Mad Dog had been a mere buck sergeant, Halleck had watched the man take out a Tiger tank with nothing but a sticky bomb and spleen. Now he was a captain, and the poor fucker couldn't even light a cigarette without help. Who the hell wanted to sit around and watch *that*?

Around him, the forest slept in absolute darkness: through the canopy of interlocking branches, neither moonlight nor starlight shone. The silence was broken only by the gentle writhing sound of the wind in the branches and the occasional hooting of a distant owl. A bad night for patrolling: you would be heard long before you had the slightest chance of seeing anything yourself. Still, before he took off his helmet and propped his Tommy gun against the dirt wall, Halleck lifted his nostrils into the cold night air and breathed deep for nearly a minute. It was a fact that if you spent enough time in the field, your nose became very sensitive to those scents that were peculiar to the enemy. The Krauts, for example, used a sort of ersatz soap called *einheitsseife*, which when mingled with sweat and the synthetic material of their uniform tunics

created a distinctly rancid odor, like twice-dirty sweat socks. They also tended to use leather field gear, which, in this sopping climate, left a smell like a baseball mitt left out in the rain. A whiff of *einheitsseife* and waterlogged leather on the breeze meant bad news coming. But tonight, Halleck smelled only the damp.

It was moments like this, he reflected, that reminded him of his cattle-driving days—the melancholy loneliness, the feeling of bone-deep exhaustion mingled with relief at the end of the daylight, the bad gritty-tasting coffee sipped around the campfire under a sky ablaze with blue stars. Except down here on the wet forest floor, with its nose-tickling smell of damp and rotten wood and leafy decay, the blackness was as absolute. It could smother you if you didn't learn to make peace with it, to rely on your ears as well as your eyes.

Halleck closed his own. He was very tired, but only in the bones. His mind was alert. He had always been able to get by on very little rest, and sitting alone in the silent dark did not draw him into sleep. Instead, he thought about tomorrow. The news of the attack had been announced to the men just after evening chow. They had known it was coming the minute they had seen the field kitchens rolling up. The hospitality wagons *always* showed up just before a big attack: the stuffing before the slaughter. No one was surprised by the objective. Of course, to get at Schmidt, you had to break through the Kraut lines, something First Army had been trying at for months with nothing but corpses to show for it. The trouble was that the town was not only shielded by this wretched impenetrable forest, it was protected on both flanks by geographical features that made you wonder if God wasn't wearing a swastika armband. Northwest of the town lay a series of almost sheer pine ridges, five hundred feet or more in height and a quarter mile or so in length, between which ran cold, fast-running streams. To the south, the so-called Badlands—a deep, sheer-walled canyon full of rocks, blowdowns, and scrub-growth—formed a huge crescent-shaped trench

that covered almost a hundred degrees of arc. It was impassable to vehicles, and while it had many points of entry, there was only one exit on the enemy side—a broken trail that resolved into a narrow escarpment, which was about twelve feet wide at its broadest point. Several foolish attempts to storm that escarpment in September had ended in catastrophe, and it had subsequently been declared a No Man's Land, home now only to the moldering bones of the dogfaces whose bodies had been left where they fell.

No, the only way to get at Schmidt was by head-on attack, launched from somewhere between those two God-made obstacles. This latest plan called for a reinforced two-battalion assault with minimal frontage: maximum concentration of force to space. Since the weather was horrible and getting worse, there would be no air support. To maximize the element of surprise, there would be only a short artillery bombardment. The idea was to clench everything into a fist and hit hard with no windup. It looked like a good plan. Plans always looked good when you saw them on paper, neatly typed up in five-paragraph blocks by the company clerk. What happened when they were put into practice was usually quite different.

Halleck came from people who regarded a slight change of facial expression as adequate to convey the pain of a severed limb. He was not given to complaining. If First Army HQ said that bludgeoning through fifty miles of the densest forest he had ever seen or imagined, forest studded at every point with booby traps, ambushes, tank traps, ditches, concrete obstacles, bunkers, pillboxes, and machine gun nests, forest registered down to its last quarter-inch by heavy artillery and strung with barbed wire and land mines, forest defended by men who could only retreat by giving up the soil of their homeland...if First Army HQ said *that* was the best way to go, who was he to say they were wrong? No doubt they had maps up at HQ, and no doubt the Krauts would fight just as hard no matter where you hit them. But Halleck could not look at

the woods around him, feel their brooding weight, the pull of their merciless, murderous gravity, without wondering if maybe somebody Up There had just gone plumb loco. It was not for nothing that what had once been named the Hürtgenwald was now known simply as The Death Factory. Duffy was not the first man to think that gunning down the reinforcements as they climbed off the trucks was more humane than sending them into this green hell.

He started thinking about the new guys again. Tried to summon up their faces, the names, to tag one to the other, as if he were snapping identical parts into a line of half-built machines. There was no real reason to do it; it was simply a mental exercise, a test of his own commitment.

It was the usual mix. Lonehill. Levitt. Cleburne. Kazmarack. Smith. They'd sounded off readily enough. Quick, nervous responses to the big first sergeant with the Tommy gun. He knew what they were feeling. In the Army, that was the way it was your first six months or so. They sent you to basic and you met your first sergeants and learned to hate and fear them. Then you went to infantry training, and it was no better, more ass-kickings, harder ass-kickings. Then you took that long, slow boat over the Atlantic and you were stuck with them week after boring, tension-choked week down there in the hold. You scarcely saw a gleam of brass down there among the tiers of bunks, only those miserable stripes and rockers and the grumpy sumbitches attached to them. Then you hit the Repple-Depple, and it was more sergeants, cruel and petty in the way only rear-echelon sergeants can be, and they chivvied you around that big, depressing tent city in the rain and gave you chickenshit details to keep you busy while you waited to plug some hole in the line somewhere. After all that, you got to the line and the first thing you saw, other than the mud and the trees, was another goddamn sergeant, and you wondered what kind of man he was, and more importantly, what kind of sergeant he was, and you hoped like hell he

knew his business because his business had changed—*his* business was keeping you alive.

He'd given them a speech, of course. It wasn't much of a speech, but then Halleck wasn't much of a speechmaker. Where he was from, men who made speeches weren't taken seriously. Nothing he said would matter much anyway. Words were words. What mattered was the action, which would come soon enough, and when it was through it would be a miracle if one of those kids was still breathing. Still, he forced himself to remember the names, repeating them silently until they stuck in his head like the words of a rhyme: Lonehill. Levitt. Cleburne. Kazmarack. Smith. Of course it was harder to remember what name belonged to what face. Lonehill was the dark one—Injin blood there; they'd be calling him Chief if he lived long enough to get a nickname—and Levitt was a New York Jew with glasses, and Cleburne had blond eyebrows and an aw-shucks way of talking that screamed Middle West farm boy. Kazmarack...was he?...no, that was Smith, with the face as nondescript as his name. Kazmarack was the tall, awkward-looking one with buck teeth and the prominent Adam's apple. Well, it wouldn't be hard to keep track of them; they'd all gone to the same platoon.

It was so much easier back in '42, Halleck thought. None of us knew nothing and so we all learned together. And those who learned best survived, grinding against the whetstone of war until they held an edge that could cut damn near anything. When you saw an infantry outfit back then, in Tunisia, you looked at the faces and saw the hard, staring eyes and the hollow cheeks and weather-beaten flesh, and you knew you were dealing with veterans and that the veterans moved together and fought together as one. Now it was different. A lot of the units that had landed in Normandy had already turned over a hundred percent of their personnel. If you got wounded and came back to the front a month later, you might not recognize a single face in your squad, your platoon, even your company. The door kept revolving, ushering in

the live and turning out the dead, like a high school that turned machine guns on its graduating class. And if you were one who lasted past the first day, the first week, the first month, you could get pretty damned hard, pretty damned careless. And that was the biggest problem of all. Because if they pinned those stripes to your sleeve or those bars to your collar, it was your *job* to care, and there were too many who didn't. They had seen the door turn one too many times and their focus got very narrow, like not outside their own skin kind of narrow, and when a man got to that stage, replacements meant nothing to him. They were all faces without names or names without faces, and after they got clobbered, when the slam of the ambulance door cut off their screams, he never thought of them again. He just did not care. But Halleck still did. And if anyone had asked him "*Why?*" he would have replied, with a drawl as stubborn as the Texas hardpan he had come from: "It's my job."

But that was only half the answer.

Again his mind returned to his days on the Chisholm Trail, driving the longhorns north to Abilene. You rose in the predawn darkness on the iron-hard ground, in your nostrils the scent of the animals and the earth and the chill and the coffee boiling over the campfire, and in your ears the bray of the cattle and the whinny of the horses, and just before you opened your eyes you saw the whole day ahead of you, compressed into a single instant, and you were whipped. It was all just too goddamn much. Yet something always prevented you from admitting it, drove you the way a spur drives a horse, and made you do things you couldn't rightly understand.

He recalled something that had happened between Dover Stage Stand and Caddo Springs. Some prairie wolves had gotten among the cattle, scattering them into the darkness, and amid a ringing chorus of blasphemies the cowboys had leaped into their saddles and tried to round them up by a sliver of moonlight. Sunrise found Halleck alone

and empty-headed with exhaustion, trying to get eighteen frightened, bellowing longhorns across a waist-deep river and up the long steep-angled bank. All of them had made it except the sole calf, whose hooves scrabbled hopelessly against the crumbling rust-colored mud as it called for its mother. He knew he should leave it for the buzzards. There was no time to lose and no reason to risk seventeen head for one measly calf. If he didn't rejoin the herd before it started north, he'd most likely never catch up. Furthermore, he'd probably break his horse's legs or possibly his own neck playing half-ass hero. It made no sense. It made *less* than no sense. Halleck was still reflecting on the senseless of it when he wheeled his mare and spurred her screaming down the bank. For a horribly exhilarating moment, he was sure he was going to be thrown right over the saddle horn, and there was an instant where both his boots came clear of the stirrups and it seemed he was held in place only by force of will; then his ass hit the saddle with a teeth-clicking thud, and the horse was in the river, neighing and splashing in the sun-dazzled water. Halleck wheeled her about and drove the calf ahead of them, *hyah, you little sumbitch, hyah*, and somehow the frightened beast managed to scamper up over the bank and onto the plain with Halleck riding hard behind. No one had seen this; he had never told anyone and could never tell anyone, for the men he rode with would never have understood. He did not understand himself. He knew only that this memory was a source of strength and comfort to him, and it troubled him that he did not know why.

Dawn never really arrived. Around seven hundred hours, the fog-enshrouded night began to lighten with obstinate slowness; by quarter-after, the sky was a soiled gray and a mist as heavy as a smokescreen hung over the woods. It was cold enough to make your breath steam and to sheen everything with a slimy sort of dampness—weapons, helmets, skin. By half past seven, Halleck still couldn't see more than ten yards. It was a lousy omen.

There was no need to wake the troops. Very few people could sleep before an attack. Halleck had seen that in the faces of the men as they'd moved out of the assembly area to the jump-off point: bloodshot eyes, ghastly pallors, the arthritic step of old men. He'd tried to pick out the new boys from among the more familiar faces. It was difficult: in the dismal light, everyone looked alike as toy soldiers left out in the rain, but he was determined to keep his eye on them. There was pale-faced Levitt, nervously cleaning his glasses with a handkerchief; Kazmarack, in the act of lighting a fresh Lucky Strike off the burning stub of another; Cleburne, staring into the dripping woods with an expression almost touching stupidity; Lonehill, kneeling with his machine-gun team, a belt of .30 caliber ammo draped over his shoulder like a Mexican bandolier; Smith, nodding with pathetic eagerness at instructions from his platoon sergeant.

At some length, he moved back toward the company command post—a single radio leaning behind the base of bullet-splintered oak tree—and waited for the bombardment to begin. He glanced briefly at Duffy, slumped blank-faced against the trunk as if the weight of his submachine gun, field glasses, and map case were too much to bear. The fatigue rings under his eyes stated clearly that he'd had no sleep, and the unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth was trembling. Not a sight to inspire confidence. Even less so when he began to curse at his wristwatch. It was zero hour. The Long Toms should be going like hell...*now*. But nothing happened. Halleck heard the low whistle of a radio, the scrape and thud of boots as a squad of men double-timed across the trail to take up position on the line of departure. But no artillery. Thirty seconds passed in tense silence. A minute. Two. His gut was tightening to an uncomfortable degree, a hard fist clenching in the pit of his stomach like a hand knotting a bedsheet. He always felt this way before a push, and he felt it all the harder when he did not believe in it, felt it futile and foolish, as he did now. It was not so much fear of what was going to happen as an almost unbearable desire to have it happen and be over and done with. Why didn't those cannon-cocking muzzle monkeys ever get it right? Always started up too soon or too late, always fired too long or too short. But then why should they be any different? Nobody in the whole goddamned U.S. Army knew what the fuck he was doing. Take Schmidt! Sure. Why not ask for Tokyo too?

Now the guns started up all at once, shaking him from his reverie. No matter how many times he heard it, it always rattled him. Not the firing itself—the artillery park was miles back—but the resonance of the shells as they described their arcs overhead: a horrible ripping sound, gradually increasing in volume, as if air itself was being rent asunder. And when they hit, first came the bang that you could feel inside your skull, that stole your breath from your lungs and made your heart pound, fit to bust your breastbone. Then the pressure wave rolled

over you, coming monster-like through the trees, bringing that terrible impact sound with it, so that you wanted to throw down your gun and take to your heels like a frightened rabbit. The more guns, the worse it was; and only God and the general knew how many were firing now. The bangs rapidly blurred into one another, an unbearable cacophony, the drumbeat of Armageddon. In Tunisia, you'd been able to see the impacts in the distance, huge conical up-thrusts of earth five or six stories high, bodies cartwheeling through the air with the debris, gouts of flame when a shell struck a caisson or a gassed-up truck. Knowing the Krauts were getting smeared compensated some for that crazy-making noise, but here in the Hurtgen, you couldn't see a damned thing: you were stuck inside a great green gourd with the Devil for a drummer. And that pointy-tailed sumbitch had energy to burn.

Halleck closed his eyes. A Long Tom could fire forty shells an hour, a one-oh-five faster still, and by now the crews would be getting warmed up and have their timing down. They'd be getting those shells off the caissons and into the breeches as fast as short-order cooks could slap hamburgers on a grill. The explosions now ceased to be continuous and became individual, gigantic *BANGS* because now every gun was firing simultaneously. The shells were all hitting within a quarter second of each other, and the smoke cloud over the Kraut positions had to be a half-mile high. If Halleck hadn't known better, he'd have sworn that nothing beneath that cloud could still be living. *But if I were that lucky*, he thought, trying to keep his breathing steady, *I wouldn't be here*.

The shells were slashing overhead, trying to make the sky bleed. Several dozen had just hit all at once. High explosive, strong enough to tear steel, and white phosphorous, hot enough to melt it. The pressure wave washed over him and through him. The weather-beaten company medic, "Band-Aid" Bodreau, was trying to unwrap a stick of Beeman's, but his hands were shaking so badly he couldn't get the foil off. The radioman Bailey, a pallid clean-shaven youngster from New England

with a boot-camp haircut, looked to be exerting all his willpower not to cry. The two runners, Ramage and Felson, were making shows of nonchalance that would have been very convincing if they both weren't as high-strung as cats under normal circumstances. McKisk, the company clerk, was resolutely wiping his dirty eyeglasses with a dirty handkerchief. Halleck too commanded his face not to react, his body not to tremble. This wasn't nothing. Nothing was nothing when you were West Texas Tough. So Halleck's daddy had told him when he was eight and crying over a broken arm. The trouble was Halleck did not, at the moment, *feel* West Texas Tough. He felt like pissing his pants.

The barrage went on. Halleck tried to take his mind away, but every explosion dragged him back to reality. He had never really been able to endure noise. You didn't get much noise on the plains. The longhorns bellowed and brayed, the horses snorted, the heelers barked, sometimes there was wind or water, but mostly what you got was silence. The kind of silence city folk like the city-boy Duffy had never known and could not understand. A silence so deep it seemed to pierce you like a lost love. Halleck would have paid plenty for some of that silence now.

He looked up to see the captain's lips forming new curses he could not hear. Following his gaze, Halleck realized that the trail behind them was empty. The tank destroyers that Regiment had promised, which were supposed to be in position and ready to move the moment the last shell landed, were nowhere to be seen. Neither were the combat engineers, with their flame throwers and dynamite and Bangalore torpedoes. Lost in the woods? Confused about the time? Cowardly sons of bitches? It didn't make much difference at this point. They weren't where they were supposed to be. Duffy fumbled with the radio, but Halleck could only catch a word or two between impacts. *Nothing to be mad about, Captain*, he thought in disgust. *The situation's normal—all fucked up.*

As to confirm this, a shell fell out of the sky somewhere *behind* them, hissing as it bludgeoned its way through branches and boughs. Halleck cringed, but there was no explosion. Damned thing was a dud. He was just congratulating himself on this when a horrible descending whistle filled the air. Before he could even register the blast, the breath tore from his lungs and his eardrums stabbed with pain. The shell had struck a few hundred yards off to the right, almost dead-even with the line of departure. Halleck did not realize he'd thrown himself up against the tree until the hard, cold, slimy feel of the bark reached through his clothes. Rage kindled inside him. Bad enough to get shot at all, but did you really have to take it from your own side? He'd have a thing or two to say to the redlegs at the guns if he lived through this. The sort of things you said with your fists.

Again the horrible ripping noise. Christ! Where was this one headed? A one-five-five shell blew a hole the size of a tract home and killed everything within thirty yards of impact. There was no such thing as a near-miss. Duffy was shouting into the telephone again, but individual shots kept falling wild. Now there was another terrific crash to the right, followed in short order by a blood-curdling scream. Halleck lifted his gaze and saw Bodreau staring right at him, his coppery-brown eyes blazing with terror and impotent fury. Somebody's tiny mistake—a decimal point misplaced, a turn too many on the elevation lever—had just made the day a little brighter for Adolf Hitler. But there was no time to think on it. One last salvo, one last roaring explosion in the distance, and then a sudden death-like stillness, broken only by a persistent ringing in Halleck's ears. He counted to sixty, then released his grip on the tree and fell into a crouch, breathing hard. Duffy was saying something to the radioman, and now the platoons and squads were moving on the left and right of the main road, and all up and down the line whistles were shrilling in the fog as the companies picked themselves off the mud and started forward through the trees in a

sluggish khaki wave. Halleck felt a pressure in his chest, realized he was holding his breath, let it go, and with the pent-up air went some of his fear. It was not that he was less frightened than before, rather that the fear now had to contend with his relief that the waiting was over and now it was time to move. The plan was in ruins before it had even begun, but by God, they would stick to it anyway. As the preacherman said, *Lazarus is dead, but nevertheless let us go to him!*

4

It was strange, almost surreal, working your way through the dripping, fog-shrouded trees, knowing that you were part of a mighty attack yet able to see almost nothing except the guys immediately around you—like listening to some vast procession on the radio. Huffing breaths, mumbled blasphemies, the clink of equipment, the slushy sound of boots freeing themselves from mud, the drip of water from the branches—this was the only evidence there were 1500 men advancing along a half-mile line. It was easy to believe, pulling yourself up these steep sloppy brush-choked hills and then half-falling down their greasy forward slopes, jostling your personal weapon and trying to keep off your ass, that you were not really entering battle at all. It was just another goddamned training exercise, a ramble in the Tennessee woods.

No sooner had this thought completed itself than a sudden, deafening drone, as if from some monstrous pipe organ, made nonsense of it, assailing his still-jangling ears and turning his bowels to soup. *"Incoming! Incoming!"* The screams rose all around him, ghostlike through the woods. In the double-reflex conditioned by hard experience, Halleck started for the ground, then changed course and threw himself up against the nearest tree and held on for dear life. He willed himself smaller, forcing everything out of his brain except one thought, repeated

over and over again: *You can't get me—I can't get got—I'm ungettable. You can't get me—I can't get got—I'm ungettable. You can't get me—*

The Kraut rockets hit within a second of each other. Impossible to tell where; the sound came from every direction. A long rain of debris pitter-pattered about, followed by the agonized groan of some ancient tree falling in sluggish agony. Hard on the heels of it, the unmistakable bellow of a sergeant: *“Keep moving! Keep moving! You stay here you'll die here! Get up off your asses and MOVE!”*

Halleck knew the man was right. The smartest thing you could do during a barrage was run through it. Staying put was like hanging yourself on a target and making faces at the guy with the gun. The problem was that what was smart and what your body was screaming at you to do were two very different things when the Screaming Meemies were falling 'round your ears.

whhhoooooOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

You can't get me—I can't get got—I'm

CRUMP! CRUMP! CRUMP! CRUMP! CRUMP!

Screams rent the air along with rocks, clots of earth, smoking splinters of wood. Halleck let go of the tree and started forward, fell to his hands and knees as his terror-softened joints gave way, forced himself up cursing. Go. Go go go go go! He'd lost sight of everyone else, was running hard, jumping when he had to, wary of roots and burrows, remembering the obstacle courses at boot camp a million years before.

He had just splashed through a lake of muddy water when he heard the moan. He hurled himself at the nearest tree, clutched it in a death grip, and imagined himself disappearing into his helmet. *You can't get me—I can't get got that was close—I'm ungettable holy SHIT!*

Something struck him in the helmet like a fist and an odd whistling noise filled his brain and he was no longer in Germany getting bombed by Krauts, he was home, under a sky so big and blue it seemed

to be flattening the dusty plains beneath it. He was riding back with the heelers and the chuck wagon, pushing the great herd forward toward the river, and it was hot, so very, very hot, so many more miles to go before the sun stopped beating on his eyes, and the riddle of the calf was still unsolved. He did not know why he'd saved it, and in any case what had he saved it *for*? In a few weeks, they'd drive it up the chute and smash in its skull with a hammer, and after they slit its throat, they'd bleed it and butcher it and grind up the bones for meal. He hadn't saved the calf; he'd just let it live again to die another day. Risking his life for a cut of veal had been nothing short of foolery, and he understood that plainly enough. What he could not understand was why he'd done it in the first place—or why it made him feel so *right*....

Bodreau was over him, slapping his face, and Halleck was back, feeling as if someone had scooped out his brain and replaced it with fistfuls of cotton. He caught the medic by the wrist and said, through numb and tingling lips:

“Am I killed?”

“You got a wicked dent in your pot.”

“But I ain't killed?”

“No you ain't killed, Hayseed, but if you don't *move*—”

CRUMP! The medic cringed, screwing up his unshaven weather-beaten face so that for a moment he looked like Hollywood's version of a grizzled prospector. Then his eyes opened and he stood, brushing dirt and pine needles off his field jacket. “All that shooting, you'd think we'd have hit *one* of their fuckin' mortars! Let's get gone!”

Halleck got up and ran. It was much easier than he thought it would be, mainly because he couldn't feel a goddamned thing. He seemed to be blowing along the ground like a cloud pushed by the wind, existing in a kind of surreality where the memory-dream he'd just experienced was far more real than what was going on around him. He had to force himself to concentrate, to focus on Bodreau as the medic

ran and jumped and weaved ahead, cradling his medical bag like a football. The awful moaning soon filled the air again, but the next string of explosions had a muffled quality, as if it had fallen much further away or landed behind a hill.

The forest was loosening up steadily. Sometimes there was as much as ten yards between trees, and now he saw G.I.s everywhere, advancing at a jog-trot, skirting the huge smoking holes the artillery had ripped in the earth. The first scattered shooting erupted up ahead; rapid-fire shots from American Garand rifles, followed by the familiar metallic *ting!* of strip-clips being ejected. Probably some of the new guys, firing at nothing. It felt pretty good to let fly when you were scared green; everyone did it occasionally, no matter how much the sergeants yelled. But after a moment, a new sound rose as if in challenge, echoing and re-echoing through the trees: the high-pitched whine of a Spandau machine gun. Running, Halleck slapped a hand on the back of his neck. No matter how often he heard that sound, it always made his hackles rise. Artillery fire was nasty, but impersonal. Bullets were quite another matter. Big guns wanted to kill somebody. Small guns wanted to kill *you*.

He came upon Duffy, crouching behind a fallen log with the rest of the headquarters people, peering through a gap in the trees with his captured German field glasses. The officer glared as if finding Halleck's presence intrusive; then his glassy red-rimmed stare settled on the dent in Halleck's helmet, and his eyes narrowed. When he finally spoke, his voice lacked its usual hysterical edge. It sounded oddly exhilarated. "You still got your brains, Top?"

"What brains? We outta the kill zone here?"

The captain shrugged and grinned. The grin did not touch his eyes. "It won't be long before they shorten up the range and paste us again. Look, Spicer got clobbered by a mortar, and his handy-talky with him. I got nobody left to run Second Platoon, so you just drew the short

straw. Take over, and get 'em moving up just aside the trail till it hits the firebreak up ahead. If we stick around here—" He winced as a series of rockets howled overhead. "We'll get murdered."

Halleck's first reply was obliterated by the sounds of impact. He waited ten seconds, then repeated: "I'll take 'em. But we'll get murdered once we *reach* the firebreak if those TDs don't show up. The Krauts knew we were coming, and if they ain't dug in deep on the other side, I'm Marlene fuckin' Dietrich."

The captain's jaw clenched. He turned abruptly to his runners. "Felson, you get your ass back down that road *now!* Find me those fuckin' tanks and bring 'em up this road if you have to push 'em!"

Halleck didn't want to leave the safety of the log. He was sweating hard now despite the cold, and as the shock of the mortar blast wore off, his skull was beginning to throb and his hands to shake. The thought of taking forty men into battle felt like a grenade dropped on his lap. Nevertheless, he was up and moving almost as soon as the captain finished speaking. It was just like when a horse threw you. If you lay there in the dust, counting your teeth, you were liable to stay there; but if you jumped back in the saddle, well, by the time the pain really hit, you were halfway to Abilene.

Ahead of him, eight or ten soldiers were shooting through a gap in the trees as fast as their fingers could work the triggers. And as he watched, another soldier appeared, socked a Browning Automatic Rifle to his shoulder, emptied an entire magazine in one furious flame-spitting burst, then clawed for another. Before ten seconds had passed, Lonehill lumbered into view, panting, and slung two ammo cans to the ground. Behind him, the rest of the machine-gun team. Another minute, Halleck knew, and the whole platoon would be sending a fusillade of lead through that gap without bothering to ask what was on the other side of it. Very dramatic-looking, but unless the objective was chipping bark,

quite useless and stupid. In this forest, you looked for a man or a muzzle flash. Anything else was a waste of ammunition.

“Anybody know what the hell they’re shooting at?” Halleck roared, ignoring the stabbing pain his own shout produced in his head. The faces turned to him, wide-eyed and pasty below the glistening helmets: he recognized Kazmarack’s among them. “Then hold your fire. And spread *out!* This ain’t Gettysburg!”

Bullets clipped a low-hanging fir branch, and it fell all at once, flapping like the wing of some huge verdant bird before it struck Lonehill on the back of the neck. He jumped and threw himself flat, the belts of ammunition slung around his neck jingling like horse-brasses. Halleck crouched behind a decaying stump, taking in the scent of wood, earth, and cordite, and squinted through the trees. His thoughts were now coming in swells, with periods of stupidity between them, but they were swelling now, and the tactical problem presented and resolved itself almost simultaneously. “Y’all, listen up! That gun is somewhere ahead and to the right. I think he picked a spot where he can enfilade us if we move through the gap. On my signal, I want Gamber and Lejune’s squads and the machine-gun team to open up. Don’t worry about a target, just make noise. Certo, you take your people and work around to the right. Get on that Kraut’s flank and jump him.”

Certo, a small seal-sleek Puerto Rican with eyes as dark as bubbles of fresh tar, fitted a clip into his rifle. He was one of the last of the Old Gang, the guys who had landed at Omaha Beach, and had only two pronounced habits: extreme taciturnity and equally extreme reluctance to take prisoners. It was not so much that he hated the Germans, Halleck knew, as that he simply loved killing people. The squad leader nodded, face composed in the glassy-stared non-expression of the psychopath, and motioned for his squad to move out after him. As the men passed, bent double and moving that way, Halleck locked eyes with Kazmarack. He was a tall, bony, awkward-looking kid whose

mouth seemed to bulge with horsey, oversized teeth, and he looked frightened enough to faint. Halleck felt a brief stab of pity and was unaccountably reminded of the calf, braying with terror as it pawed fruitlessly against the muddied bank. *I must be workin' on a helluva a concussion*, he thought, massaging his temples. "When Certo moves, we take that clearing at a rush. If I'm right, this guy's just a skirmisher and there won't be no more Krauts between here and the firebreak. So keep the trail on your right and don't stop for nothing."

Sergeant Lejune, a wiry, sun-seared Cajun from Baton Rouge with a mouth like a jack o' lantern, glared at him. "Yeah, and what if you're wrong?"

"Then your mammy gets a gold star in her window."

The Spandau shrilled again, then fell silent. The Meemies had stopped coming, which meant their crews were even now wheeling them to alternate positions. Halleck reckoned he had maybe ten minutes before the serenade started up again, and if the platoon was in this spot when they did.... He waited until the last of Certo's men had vanished into the brush on his right, counted to sixty, and then bellowed: "Let 'em have it!"

Halleck was grateful for his temporary near-deafness. A thirty-caliber machine gun is not really a machine gun at all, but a species of cannon; from its muzzle, yard-long yellowish-white flashes furiously erupted, drowning out the sounds of the Garands and even the Browning, and throwing up a thick curtain of acrid white smoke through which the spent shell casings continuously flew. It hardly made a difference if the rounds were striking near the Kraut's foxhole or not; the sheer volume of noise would be enough to convince him that the *Amis* were coming. He'd be crouching behind the grip of his own gun, breath coming fast, eyes straining through the front sight for the first hint of movement into the gap, and then....

Halleck heard a sudden, urgent cry in German: half-angry, half-terrified. The machine gun started up again, but from the sound of it, it had abruptly changed direction. Then a sound like a great metallic cough stung his eardrums. It was followed by rapid Garand fire, and then silence. Halleck was on his feet in an instant, heedless of the pain that stabbed through his skull when he shouted, "*Move it out! Move move move!*"

The whole platoon rose, came forward at a run, first firing indiscriminately from the hip and then just running, running through the gap and into a small clearing, no larger than a barnyard, but somehow bigger than Texas. Every nerve in Halleck's skin was tingling, and this time it wasn't the concussion. His flesh always felt like this when it expected to be split open by a bullet, but no bullet came, and in the space of five quick-drawn breaths, the skirmish line plunged back into the woods. The tingling faded, but the relief was short-lived. The trees closed in again, shutting off Halleck from the platoon, from the company, from the trail, from the *world*. He could see only Smith, huffing along red-faced with one hand on his helmet, as if expecting it to jounce clean off his head, and to the right, the towheaded farm boy, Cleburne, weaving easily between the trunks with an idiot grin on his face, as if he were engaged in nothing more dangerous than running down a wounded deer. Figured that the new boys would stick together; in this forest, even a half-familiar face was better than none at all.

Shooting sounded ahead to the left—first Garands and then the diabolical band-saw buzz of a Kraut MG 42. Doubtless Dog company had emerged from the woods into the firebreak and come under fire from the bad guys dug in on the other side, just as Halleck had feared. He had no time to brood on it, however, because the rockets were coming again, smashing their way through the canopy of branches overhead on trails of silver-gray smoke, filling Halleck's head with a dreadful one-note song. Terrific explosions followed to send him

sprawling, rolling, scrambling through pine needles and mud. The Krauts were firing on their own first line of defense. That was bad news. It meant that whoever was responsible for holding this sector had been given orders to fight for every yard of ground—tooth and nail, eye and claw.

This was going to be bad.

The latest bombardment lasted two or three minutes—or two or three hours. Time had very little meaning when iron and explosive and human will joined together to destroy you. The air grew dim and then dark from the sheer weight of dirt and splintered wood flying about. In the intervals between the gales, Halleck moved—sometimes only a few feet, sometimes ten or twenty yards or more. He had no idea where he was going, only that with each movement he removed himself a bit further from the grid the German gunners had been ordered to destroy. The pattern repeated itself endlessly: cower, crawl, run, flop, cower again. It was agony on the belly muscles, agony on the forearms and the thighs and eardrums. Sweat stung his eyes despite the cold, and his clenched jaws ached. At long last he looked up from his efforts to see the rutted dirt track that was supposed to be on his right looming suddenly and inexplicably *ahead* of him...which meant either that the sketch maps drawn by G-2 were wrong, or that he'd gotten completely turned 'round and his platoon was heading at a right angle from where it was supposed to be going. He had just enough time to register this sickening surprise when he got another one, several thousand times worse.

The road ahead was full of soldiers double-timing forward in a harsh trample of hobnailed boots. They rushed past Halleck in loose groups of four and five, moving the way veteran soldiers do when headed into a fight, all coiled-spring tension and reluctant grace. A couple of them were steadying their helmets with their free hands as they ran, just as Smith had done. One had machine-gun ammunition

draped over his shoulders, just like Lonehill. And another, reloading his pistol as he ran, barked something in a hoarse, growling note that reminded Halleck of every overtired sergeant he had ever known, including himself. Except for the shape of their steel pots and the color and the cut of their combat jackets, they might have been men from his own platoon. But they were not. These bastards were—

Krauts!

Halleck hit the dirt. More precisely, he leaped into a muddy leaf-strewn shell hole, half covered by a rotting log, and struggled to bring his Tommy gun to bear on men close enough to hit with a baseball. As he did so, the very last German in the group turned and looked him directly in the eye.

He was an odd sight under his cut-down paratrooper's helmet; odd because his face, which was handsome in a thoughtful sort of way, showed neither fear nor surprise, only resignation and indifference. Halleck could see no badges of rank on his dirty camouflage jacket, but the scars of command were etched plain in the fine lines around his cold green eyes and the red-lipped, sensitive mouth that lay beneath them. He was running, but his stride was plodding and sullen, made awkward by exhaustion and the fact that he'd slung his submachine gun across his chest to free up his right hand, which was closed around what looked to be a flare pistol. It seemed that in the instant their gazes locked, they were speaking to each other in some strange sub-language that did not require words; then the German was past and giving Halleck his back. He knew the muzzle was pointed at him, but he did not throw himself flat, did not cry out to his comrades, did not even quicken his pace. He simply continued on, his breath streaming like a pennant behind him.

Halleck never decided *not* to shoot: the action simply failed to occur. The slide on his Thompson was pulled back, the butt was socked firmly against his shoulder, the fleeing backs of the Krauts presented. A couple of bursts would knock them all down like ninepins. A massacre.

Sinner's Cross

And yet he did not fire. His brain sent the signal, tapped it out urgently and repeatedly, like an S.O.S., but the finger wrapped around the icy steel trigger did not respond. And just like that, the targets were gone, engulfed by the woods, the sounds of their feet fading as fast as they had come.

5

Halleck stayed in his shooting pose for a good thirty seconds, stunned. He was vaguely aware that Smith had fallen gasping beside him, that Cleburne and half a dozen others from the platoon had emerged on his right and were crouching with baffled expressions right in the middle of the road. But he could not look at them. He wanted to say something, anything, just use his voice box to let himself know at least *that* was still working, when he heard yet another sound guaranteed to make an infantryman's knees buckle: the approaching grumble of big-horsepower diesels.

“Tanks! Take cover!”

In spite of his fear, Halleck rejoiced that he could still make decisions—until he realized it was Sergeant Gamber who had given the order. He tucked himself into the shell hole, his breath steaming against the Thompson that was cold against his cheek, and sighted again on the now-empty road. His head throbbed, and his vision had a slight blurriness he could not entirely ascribe to the mist. The smell of the earth, of mud and decaying leaves and icy stagnant water, suddenly seemed overwhelming and repulsive, and his stomach churned with nausea, but he was scarcely aware of these things. He had gotten the platoon lost, had refused to shoot at the best target he was likely to see

in this war, and did not even have the rookie's excuse of having left the safety catch in place.

Some soldier you are.

A tank destroyer lurched into view, filling the trail almost from end to end with its green-painted bulk. Halleck felt another hot rush of fear, followed immediately by relief when he saw the big white star on the glacis, and squatting alongside that glacis, a grinning Private Felson. More destroyers followed behind it single file, like a herd of primeval monsters traveling nose to tail. Ugly, sharp-prowed, and mud-spattered, half-buried beneath piles of sandbags, the huge thirty-ton vehicles advanced in fits and starts, as if the drivers could not quite make up their minds whether to go into battle. The vehicle commanders, grim-faced under their leather helmets, crouched in their open-topped turrets behind .50 machine guns: one of them had a cold cigar clenched between big white teeth; another, heavily unshaven, was tugging uncomfortably at his throat microphone. A third, looking devil-may-care in a white silk scarf, had a rooster—a goddamned *rooster*—under his arm and was stroking its scarlet comb the way a Catlick would worry his rosary beads. Halleck heard someone in the platoon give the Rebel Yell, but he knew how vulnerable these olive-drab behemoths really were. Kraut infantry had plenty of toys that could crack them wide open: Panzerfausts. Panzerschrecks. Tellermine 41s, and the ever-popular eighty-eight millimeter gun. Hell, on these narrow forest trails, where there was barely enough room for the tank to move, much less maneuver, one Nazi with a decent throwing arm could hit the turret cupola with a hand grenade, and the next thing you knew, somebody was regretfully informing the commander's parents that they'd never see their son again. Yells of any kind were premature, unless they were for help.

The engine blocks of the destroyers were crowded with hitchhiking G.I.s: Certo, staring stonily, passed by on a tank whose

turret bore the white-painted words: KRAUT KILLER. Halleck looked for, but did not see, Kazmarack among the soldiers of the Puerto Rican's squad and in that instant knew he was dead. There was no reason even to ask the question forming on his lips. Sometimes you *knew*, and Halleck knew now.

You get another chance to kill one of them bastards, he thought, don't blow it.

The last of the tanks was coming. HIDE AND HOPE, it was called. The destroyer jerked to a stop, snorting exhaust in a dirty gray cloud; its cigar-chewing commander waved him aboard impatiently, as if they and not he had showed up late to the party.

"At ease!" Halleck barked, sounding mostly like his old self. "I want a ride in a hearse I'll let you know it. Where the hell you guys been?"

"We got lost," the cigar-chewer said miserably. "Our goddamn guide never showed up, so we used the maps."

"The maps are wrong."

"Don't I fuckin' know it."

"Where's your C.O.?"

"Dead. A Screaming Meemie hit the trees right over him."

"Where's the Engineers?"

"No idea."

"Did you see any Krauts?"

"No. We heard a mess of shootin' through those trees there, but we couldn't get to it—the road back there just washes out into this huge valley fulla rocks and stumps and shit. So we pulled back to the fork, and that's when we ran into your boys. Do *you* know where we are?" The tanker added somewhat aggressively.

Halleck's head was throbbing with the effort of thought; he spoke in a rush, as if trying to get the words out before his stomach emptied itself on the tank destroyer's wheels. "If you came up to a

valley, that means we're on the edge of the Badlands. Which means *this* road must run right up to the firebreak."

"Hallelujah," the tankman said.

"But it don't make sense that there'd be shooting in the Badlands, dammit. We were ordered to stay out of that place. It's a death trap."

"Somebody didn't get the word, I guess."

"Or went lookin' for a Silver Star," Halleck said grimly, but he was spared from following this thought any further by a piercing whistle that ended abruptly in a *pop* somewhere above them. He looked up to see a brilliant sparkling of red through the overhanging branches rather like a Fourth of July firework. Abruptly, he remembered the Kraut with the flare gun, who had now alerted his fellow Nazis up ahead that the enemy was coming in force. He did not allow himself to think of how easily he could have prevented that message from being sent. He simply accepted that he had made a mistake and that now people would die because of it. Later, this would eat at him, if it did not kill him first; but for now, there was use crying over spilled blood.

"Shit," the cigar-chewer said. "We'd best move quick if we're gonna move at all. Which way do we go, Sarge?"

Halleck didn't want to think anymore, and when a sergeant doesn't want to think, he gives orders. So, orders he gave: *Gamber on the left! Lejune on the right! Certo with me up the middle!* And from there it went fast. The road was slippery and deeply rutted, cratered here and there by shells and obscured by low-hanging branches and close-pressing trees, but there was no more resistance. He doubted any more Krauts were left on this side of the firebreak; they'd be dug in tight on the other side.

Waiting.

Sinner's Cross

6

He wasn't wrong. After a few minutes' advance, the clearing appeared through the last of the forest: a muddy shell-torn strip of earth maybe fifty yards across. On the opposite side, through the screen of brooding trees, scattered flashes of pallid yellow light, and the zip-and-whine of bullets all around indicated the presence of the enemy. That was bad enough, but what gave him that gristle-in-the-windpipe feeling was what lay beyond: green mist-shrouded hills, infested with expertly camouflaged cast-steel bunkers, whose firing apertures gave them a God's-eye view on the doings below. Damn near impossible to see in this zero-zero weather. Muzzle flashes, puffs of smoke, branches seeming suddenly to trim themselves—that was the only evidence of their existence. That and the corpses they left behind.

There were no orders to take—half of Easy Company seemed to be missing, including the captain—and few to give. Devin's machine gun was rapidly positioned where it could do the most damage during an assault, and the rest of the men took up positions well inside the tree line. A few of the more enterprising souls fired at the flashes across the way, and an out-of-breath mortar team came up, lugging the tube, baseplate, and bombs like porters hustling luggage, but before they could set up, the first of the tank destroyers rolled slowly out of the woods and into the clearing.

You could say what you wanted about the war, but sometimes it was a show, and now was one of those times. Taking small-arms fire that sparked all over their frontal armor, the teedees deployed along the road in an extended line and began to open up on the tree line with high-explosive shells. The *crack* of their high-velocity cannons was like music to Halleck's aching eardrums, every explosion a feast for his eyes. Glancing around, he saw Smith and Cleburne gazing open-mouthed as they lay on the ground; Lonehill, crouched low beside the thirty-cal with a belt of machine-gun ammo between his fingers, had the expression of a hungry man watching a pig roasting on a spit.

The unequal duel did not go on long. The flashes and coughs of smoke from the German side of the woods ceased almost entirely. Halleck was just beginning to wonder if this fucked-up plan was going to work, if the Krauts had pulled back up the hill, when something hissed out of the woods on a thin trail of white smoke. It hurtled past one of the destroyers, missing by mere yards, and struck a tree some distance behind it with a sound that made his breastbone shake. A moment later, it was followed by two others, reaching out like spectral fingers for the same vehicle. The second of these struck KRAUT KILLER on the left-rear track, near the engine, with a great metallic *bang*: the tank vanished momentarily in a great cloud of jagged metal, torn canvas, and sand; when it reappeared seconds later, the spare jerrycans on the tow bar were shedding gasoline like piss from a ruptured bladder.

"Panzerschrecks!" Halleck roared. *"Get those sons of bitches!"*

The whole platoon opened up at once, joined almost immediately by the platoons on either side, and finally by the companies to the left and right, so that the air itself seemed to waver from the sheer volume of lead hurtling through it. Tracer rounds screamed across the gap in golden-yellow chains, bouncing and skipping along the earth before vanishing into the Kraut positions. A bazooka rocket screamed among

them, exploding in an opalescent flash of phosphorous that set the trees around it aflame despite the rain. The mortar crew, working with such speed that the muzzle of their tube fumed like the mouth of hell, sent round after round arcing almost vertically over the road: the bombs smashed apart the firs and pines and tossed sprays of mud in every direction. It seemed inconceivable that anything could live in such a firestorm, and yet another half-dozen antitank rockets loosed defiantly from German lines. One struck a tank called KILROY'S REVENGE square on the gun mantlet just as it had lurched into reverse; the destroyer, its turret canted inward as if by the kick of a giant, ground quickly to a halt and began to smoke. Meanwhile, the gasoline gushing from KRAUT KILLER had burst into lurid flames. It too went into reverse and promptly shed its blast-severed track, which reared snakelike into the air before toppling over in a horrible grinding squeal of metal.

The remaining tank destroyers had ceased their barrage and were stampeding about the clearing like a herd of panicked cattle amid the contrails of anti-tank rockets that continued to stream from the Kraut positions. Halleck leapt to his feet and began to pace up and down the length of the line, heedless of the bullets that occasionally clipped and whirred about him, using his fist on anyone who wasn't firing as fast as they could pull the trigger. Even the new boy Levitt, whose ashen cheeks were glistening with tears of fright, managed to squeeze off a whole clip when he saw the big hoarse-voiced Texan coming. But somehow it wasn't enough: something struck KRAUT KILLER again, this time with such force that the whole turret slid off the chassis like a severed head. Halleck's brain registered the sound of a big-bored antitank gun, and in the midst of his shouting he began to realize, with sickening certainty, that it was all over. The battle was lost. Lost because the tank destroyers would pull back into the woods and refuse to come out again until the antitank fire had been suppressed. Lost because the

company commanders would refuse to take their men across the road unless the tanks were ahead of them. Lost because the battalion commanders would refuse to admit they'd been licked and call Regiment for more artillery support. Lost because while Division was considering Regiment's request to pound the whole area to matchsticks with the big guns, the Screaming Meemies would start up again and that would be all she wrote. The men wouldn't wait for orders to displace, and they sure as shit wouldn't stop to dig in with the rockets coming down. They'd run, and they wouldn't stop running until they hit the line of departure. Maybe not even then. Which meant that everyone who had died today, everyone who had lost a limb or put a hand to their face and discovered half of it missing, had done it for nothing, and tomorrow, next week, two weeks from now, all this would start over again....

Halleck was knocked sideways and would have fallen if a sapling had not checked his momentum. Looked down to see a body slumped over his boots. Rolled it over and saw the nondescript face of Smith staring back at him, an obscene black hole sizzling above his left eyebrow. His collar was open, and a little gold medallion, its chain tangled with that of his dog tags, had spilled out onto his jacket. *ST JUDE THADDEUS*, its inscription read. *PRAY FOR US*.

Rage detonated in Halleck's heart, a great bomb whose shockwave carried itself on his blood into his legs and had them moving, into his hands, which brought the Tommy gun up, into his finger so that it convulsed on the trigger and sent death spraying out ahead of him in wild, uncontrolled bursts as he ran. He was out of the trees, boots slapping on the muddy grass, the roar of the submachine gun falling on ears deafened by battle and by madness. He was crossing the road whose surface was scarred by tire tracks and tread tracks and wagon tracks and still-steaming shell holes, littered with scraps of scorched metal and hazy with greasy smoke and icy rain. He could hear the bullets cracking overhead, see the gun flashes in the trees ahead and the rows of spurts

chasing themselves along the ground all around him, but he didn't care. The desire not merely to kill the Germans but to kill them personally, to watch their faces react in horror and agony as he shot them at point-blank range, to keep shooting them after they were dead and then toss a grenade on their bloody corpses and move on, had obliterated all other thoughts.

Halleck ran and fired as he ran. When the gun clanked empty, he flung out the dead magazine and jammed in another without breaking stride. He was raving, cursing, spitting at the Germans, daring them to kill him, barking insane laughter because they couldn't do it. He tripped into a shell hole, hit the loose, stony, acrid-smelling earth hard enough to dislodge his helmet and knock the gun from his grip, scrambled around on hands and knees looking for the weapon, found it, clawed up out of the hole and fired off a whole magazine without looking for a target. Reaching for yet another, he saw that he was only yards from KILROY'S REVENGE, sitting motionless with its hatches open and its turret empty. In an instant, he had slung the Tommy gun, crossed the distance, and was hauling himself up the tank by the chainguard, scrambling over the great heaps of protective sandbags and half climbing, half falling into the great steel bucket of the turret. His mud-slimed hands closed on the grips of the commander's machine gun, and the weapon traversed with unbelievable smoothness toward its target: the point of origin of a smoke trail that had just missed HIDE AND HOPE. He depressed the triggers and was rewarded by a great explosion of bloody vapor, mingled with splinters and chunks of bark and severed branches, as the milk-bottle-sized bullets destroyed everything in their path. Next came some muzzle flashes on his extreme left. A couple of two-second bursts and they abruptly ceased. A moment later, he glimpsed flitting, rain-blurred figures through the scrub brush and saplings and let them have it, kept the great gun blasting until the saplings were gone and the movement stopped. He heard the *cracks* of

retaliating Mausers and then the *brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr* of an MG 42, an almost continuous series of whines and thuds as the German bullets glanced harmlessly off the turret armor or smacked into the rain-soaked sandbags draped around it. He refused to duck but simply kept firing, wielding the fifty-cal like a firehose, each burst calculated not to save his own life but to produce the sheer pleasure of ending someone else's. "*You can't get me!*" He was repeating, over and over, in a cracking scream he could only hear between the bursts. "*I can't get got! I'm ungettable!*"

The ammunition belt was flowing into the breech like water down a drain; spent cartridge casings were overflowing their box and jingling around his feet, and the gun itself was steaming along its whole length as rain, now mingled with snow, struck the barrel. Enemy fire shirred past his head, but he could no longer see anything save flame and smoke, smoke and flame. The gun jammed. He could no longer hold it anyway; the handles were hot enough to burn the flesh off his palms, and his eyes were streaming from the stench of gunpowder. Something struck the turret again, much harder than before, and even in his fury he knew that this was it, that the game was over. He'd run a good race, but one man couldn't unseat the whole Kraut line, not where the firepower of a battalion had failed, and now they were zeroed on him. Well, he hadn't made it easy on the bastards before, and he wouldn't make it easy now. Crouching low, he unslung the Thompson, reloaded it carefully, and after a couple of steadying breaths stood up to fire with a curse on his lips. And he got his thousandth surprise of the day, this one being different only in that it was a good one.

Men in khaki were streaming past him on all sides, screaming abuse, giving the Rebel Yell, shooting as they jogged forward. Here and there one of them went down, not the way they did in movies, with a screwed-up face and stylized contortions, but all at once, like puppets whose guide wires had been abruptly slashed. The others pressed on

heedless; as he watched, the first of them crossed into the smashed and smoking tree line, and the slackening enemy fire died away completely. Halleck gave a growl of triumph and jumped off KILLROY'S REVENGE into the mud. His bloodlust had not abated; on the contrary, it had intensified to the point where inaction, even in the sense of shooting from a stationary position, was no longer bearable. Nor was killing from a distance. He wanted to be *close*.

He was in the woods now and saw for the first time the terrible carnage inflicted by the barrage that he and the others had unleashed: shell-stripped trees, fallen boughs, smoking craters, burst sandbags, an overturned machine gun with the ammunition belt spilling out of the breech, a severed human arm whose white hand still clutched the shaft of a *Panzerfaust*, and everywhere, slewed over the bullet-torn ground or slumped down in foxholes, heaps of helmeted bloodstained rags that had moments ago been German soldiers. He leaped clean over a dug-in mortar whose crew crouched dead at their posts, the commander with one eye pressed against the sight, the assistant gunner with his hands tight on the traverse, the ammunition bearer caught in the act of reaching for a bomb, all of them perfectly intact save for the carmine that streamed from their ears, noses, mouths—and then he was past the abattoir and hunting.

And the hunting was good.

7

The Krauts were running. Halleck could see them, ghostlike ahead of him in the foliage, swept ahead by a wave of khaki, some throwing down their rifles and helmets and bandoliers to run faster. He fired from the hip as he chased, taking savage satisfaction in the feeling of the recoil as it rattled up his arm and shoulder, of the sight of the men ahead, turning to face him only to fly apart like bundles of paint-soaked rags before the hammer blows of his Thompson. He shot everyone he saw—a boy in a helmet and long gray coat with his hands high in the air; a bareheaded little officer in steel-rimmed glasses, wearing the ribbon of the Iron Cross on his tunic, who was trying to drag a wounded comrade to safety by his boot heels; the wounded man himself, who was holding his intestines in with red-slicked hands. Halleck had forgotten his earlier act of mercy on the trail, forgotten his bond of empathy with the German soldier, now only wanted to find the man and kill him, to kill his fellows, to drink their blood and drown in it.

Clack! The Thompson was empty again. Gasping for breath, his face stinging from cordite, he staggered behind the stump of a fir tree and scabbled for a fresh magazine. By the time he'd jammed it into the receiver and yanked the slide back, there was nothing left to shoot. Then, far ahead, he began to hear a lively firefight brewing, mingled American and German guns—Garands, B.A.R.s, .30s, Mausers,

Schmeissers, MG 42s. He started to his feet, then crouched back down and forced his fuming brain to think. The Krauts always organized their defenses in depth, and they never conceded the loss of ground. If he were right, a counterattack would be brewing up soon. It would be nice if he were in charge of his platoon when it hit and not playing Lone Ranger in the leaves.

Crouching low, he set off toward the sound of the shooting, as heedless to the snow that fell on his throbbing scalp as he'd been to the German bullets. Eventually, he came upon a stand-up fight in progress: G.I.s in a long skirmish line, too pumped-up by their own adrenaline to seek cover, firing from the shoulder and the hip at German gun flashes only sixty or seventy feet away. Cleburne, standing a few yards behind the others, was winding up and hurling hand grenades across the distance as if it were only yards. Halleck had never seen such good pitching outside a stadium. No sooner had the blond kid let one go than he would turn around and accept another grenade from the man behind him. There was something oddly beautiful about it, and in spite of himself, Halleck paused momentarily to watch. The grenades daisy-chained their way one after the other along a row of grubby hands until they reached Gamber, whose nicotine-yellowed fingers yanked the pins clear with the ease of long practice. Cleburne accepted the grenades, released the spoons, and hurled the pineapples in an arc as hard and predictable as that of an artillery shell.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The supply of grenades exhausted itself. Gamber, brushing a dirty sleeve across an equally dirty forehead, grinned at the sight of Halleck. "Well, if it ain't John Wayne."

"Can that talk. What are we up against?"

"Whole goddamned Wehrmacht, I think."

"Flank 'em?"

“Already tried. Lejune on the left and Certo on the right. They ran into a mess of those two-man bunkers the Krauts use. They’re deployed...” He paused to yank the pin out of a grenade and clasp it into Cleburne’s hand, then waved it like a shiny pointer across a hundred degrees of woodland. “...all the way across.”

There were moments on the battlefield where things unfolded exactly the way they were supposed to. They didn’t happen often, and you sure as hell couldn’t set your watch by them, but they *did* occur. So it was now. Before Halleck could even form a reply, one of the tank destroyers rolled up, crushing saplings beneath it, and the platoon parted on either side, whistling and cheering. LI’L LIZA JANE, the beast was called, and the cleft-lipped commander was all business. In a huge, roaring voice, he ordered high-explosive rounds fired into the Kraut positions one after the other, the whole vehicle seeming to rock as it sent shot after shot booming forth from its main gun. Trees came apart in huge explosions of confetti; branches rained down from the sky; great torrents of water, released from innumerable leaves and cones, made a glittering swirl in the smoke-choked air. The Germans could not stand up to it. The sound of their firing receded quickly into the woods, but nobody was going to leave it at that. The destroyer started forward, moving with the grace of a dragged anvil but steadily, implacably, with the infantrymen alongside it. The Krauts occasionally made some noise—a rifle shot here, a machine-gun burst there—but there was no organized resistance until the bunkers appeared.

Whoever had chosen their location had chosen well. Ahead was neither hillside nor plain, forest nor field, brush nor barren, but a mixture of all these things, and the deep line of bunkers looked like a huge, segmented snake caught in mid-passage: it had neither a beginning nor an end but extended itself as far as his eyes could follow on either side. At the rear rank, seeming to shimmer in the rain, were the blind humorless faces of the concrete pillboxes, built into the military crests of

the hillocks so as to command every inch of the ground beneath them. And all around the bunkers, plainly visible where gaps in the foliage allowed, an elaborate system of trenches, shielded by more sandbags, anti-tank obstacles, and mounds of earth. Painted in crude white lettering over the firing aperture of the centermost pillbox, blurred in Halleck's vision but still plainly legible, was the greeting:

Welcome to the Death Factory!

I'll give you a goddamned welcome, he thought. The lump on his head was throbbing in time with his heart, and it was getting more and more difficult for him to keep his thoughts in order. Irrelevant observations and impulses kept intruding. Meanwhile, the Germans who had streamed away from the tanks had crossed into the open and were now leaping into the trenches one after the other as American bullets pecked the dirt all around them. Halleck belatedly raised his weapon but did not fire; the act of staring down the foresight made his head spin, and the Thompson was notoriously inaccurate. *Save it for when it counts*, he thought.

Duffy appeared, riding on the back of a destroyer called MURDER, INC. and staring up at the bunker line through his field glasses. Raising his voice to be heard over the engine, Halleck said: "Captain, get down off that goddamned thing before you get your head blown off!"

"I can't direct the tanks if I can't see."

"You can't direct 'em if you're dead, either!"

Duffy paused to accept with his lips the lighted cigarette passed to him over his shoulder by the radioman. He took a drag and then spoke as if Halleck had not. "Have you seen Lieutenant Breese's platoon?"

"No."

“Me neither. They musta got turned ‘round in the woods. I can’t raise them on the radio and nobody knows where they are.”

“Breese is a goddamn fool.”

“Well, he’s got company. Fucking engineers never showed up, either. What a mess! We’re gonna have to take these bunkers out with what we’ve got. That means rolling the destroyers right up to point-blank range and cracking ‘em open with armor-piercing rounds. You hear me?”

“Reckon I got ears.”

The captain was silent for some seconds, staring through his Zeiss at the distant bunkers. Tracers were flashing yellow and scarlet against the gray morning light; tank engines were roaring and rattling; a sergeant was bellowing to bring up them mortars, bring up them god-dang mortars *now*, and everything was noise, confusion, upset. But Duffy’s voice was conversational, almost bored. He might have been sitting opposite Halleck in a Pullman car, talking about the weather. “Top, do you know what an honorific is?”

Halleck thought that maybe the captain had cracked completely. He blinked the sleet out of his eyes and said: “You mean like when you give somebody a fee for speakin’?”

“That’s an honorarium. An honorific is a title, like ‘sir.’ *As in, call me sir when you finish a fucking sentence!*”

The scream was so piercing, so very much like a man gut shot with an incendiary bullet, that the gum-chewing tank commander, who was trying to clear a jam in his machine gun, turned around in his turret to stare. The captain’s pale blue eyes were bulging with fury and the cigarette had come loose from his mouth and dangled, lit and smoking against his thickly stubbled chin like the world’s smallest censer.

Better crazy mad than crazy scared, I guess, Halleck thought and said, “Yessir.”

Duffy felt for the cigarette, shouted some coded jargon into the R/T, waited for a response, and then continued in a voice so tight it seemed to shiver: "All right, we'll have to walk the tanks in and flush the Krauts out the trench line as we go. *On my signal*, we advance one platoon to a tank under the heaviest possible fire."

Maybe it was the concussion, but it all seemed to happen very rapidly after that, like a series of photographic images dealt out by a cardsharp. In the first image, the squads were advancing through tangled, sodden underbrush as the tracers bounced and skipped and whined around them, cursing and slipping in the icy mud, not pausing to fire, flinching as the tanks fired over their heads. In the second, someone had thrown a bucket of chum into Halleck's face, hot blood and scraps of flesh, and the detonation of the mine ahead of him came merely as a distant echo, a blow fallen on already deaf ears. In the third image, soapy with gore, he saw a high-explosive shell land squarely on one of the dug-in bunkers and the whole thing vanish in an enormous cloud of detritus only to reappear, intact and still firing, a few seconds later. In the fourth, a mortar had struck the Kraut line, and a whole section of parapet was crumbling in on the trench behind it like a wrecked sandcastle, and he saw Cleburne toss a grenade right through the hole, saw the gratifying explosion and the even more gratifying sight of a Kraut going end-over-end and then landing in a smoking boneless heap in his own barbed wire, screaming. In the fifth, Devin was carrying the thirty in his big-muscled arms, Lonehill by his side feeding him the belt as he walked, a continuous stream of fire spitting out ahead of them, chewing up dirt and sandbags and Germans, and the tank commanders taking up the challenge and opening up with their fifties, so that the air was alive with the searing strings of molten light.

Then they were over the parapets and down into the trenches and it was fighting at close quarters, so close you could hear the enemy sergeants shouting commands in their harsh, guttural voices, and the

potato mashers were whirling through the air hissing, and the Kraut submachine guns were going off, *brrrrrrrp, brrrrrrrp, brrrrrrp!* Then the click and clang of bayonets, grunts, curses, pistols, shrieks. Somebody was crying for a medic, OH GOD GOD PLEEEEEEEASE, and Halleck came across a G.I. whose thigh looked like a raw, glistening side of beef, slumped down in the mud, trying to reload his carbine and cursing at the unseen voice to shut up, shut up, SHUT THE FUCK UP!

It went on like that for minutes that lasted eons. Oceans had flowed and dried up, mountain ranges risen and fallen, stars been born and burned out in the time it took to conduct a single grenade fight at close quarters. Halleck hardly saw a German face. He saw their potato mashers sail overhead, sometimes two or three at a time, exploding with a flat, hollow *bang!* that spattered his already filth-crusted form with fresh patterns of clay. He saw their corpses in field gray trampled down in a trench, blood and muddy footprints on their backs. He saw a medic, sliding down a parapet with a musette bag over each shoulder, hollering to someone Halleck couldn't see that he was coming, he was *coming*, dammit. Someone passed Cleburne a Gammon grenade, and with an underhanded softball toss, he bullseyed it through the firing aperture of the closest bunker. No sooner had it detonated, sending brilliant flames gushing out of the opening, than Certo appeared with half a dozen men, carbines spitting fire, and swarmed over the top of the structure, the whole group of them silhouetted briefly against the fathomless sky before they jumped out of view.

The fight carried past the now-smoldering bunker, deeper into the trench line. A sort of bucket brigade formed along the crowded mud-walled passageways; ammunition and grenades were passed up, wounded men carried back, some stoic, some defiant, some sobbing for their mothers. The Krauts had called in mortars, and the bombs whistled down ceaselessly, knocking in the walls of the trenches and adding to the chaos and the frightful din, but Halleck had a sense of the battle

carrying itself forward. He did not need to be told this any more than he had needed to be told that Kazmarack was dead: it was simply something he knew. The looks on the gaunt, gunpowder-stained faces, with their fever-bright eyes and curled lips, showed the monomania of heavy battle: the fear of death had been eclipsed by the desire to destroy, to plunge bayonets in bellies, smash jaws with rifle butts, explode bullets into chests close enough to set the uniforms in which they were clad aflame.

He was exhausted—in fact beyond exhaustion, running not on reserves long consumed but something else, something for which he had no name, something he only half-understood. His head reeled, his ears rang, vomit forced his mouth open and mingled with the blood and mud on his jacket, but still he pressed on, merciless and methodical. When he ran out of grenades, he stripped the belts of the wounded for more as they passed him. When he came upon the crumpled body of Levitt, whose star-fractured glasses had slipped down over his nose and whose shell-stripped arm still clutched redly, bonily, at his rifle, he stepped over it without a change of expression, still firing. And when a Kraut boy-soldier, whose helmet fell down over his eyes and whose girl-smooth cheeks had never known a razor, came before Halleck screaming for mercy, the Texan turned the muzzle of the Thompson on the stripling's face and jerked back the trigger, kept it down until not merely the face but the whole head were shot away, so that his decapitated body fell down in a shower of its own arterial spray.

The Thompson clacked empty for the final time. Now the Colt was cold in his mud-crusting grip, bucking behind a muzzle flash the size of a basketball. The men were wrenching the sandbags down, using corpses as a fire step, blasting over open sights at Germans blasting back not twenty feet away, close enough to see their spit-shiny grimaces, to hear the curses of *Verdammt Schwein!* as they worked the bolts of their Mausers, to feel the heat of their near-misses. Grenades filled the air like

stones at a rock fight, sometimes crossing the distance two or three times before bursting, filling the air with shrapnel and dirt and shards of stone. Once again Halleck felt as if he were trembling on the cusp of his own personal extinction, one loud noise from perdition or paradise. But when the noise came, it came for the Krauts across the way, in the form of a storm that swept over their trench from the side, bursting the steel-helmeted heads like soup cans left too long in a fire. Halleck followed the searing streaks of light to their source and saw two men, obscured by a continuous eruption of fire from the muzzle of a machine gun. When at last Devin and Lonehill appeared, wreathed in smoke, the trench ahead was empty.

Halleck looked out over the roiling, smoke-shrouded battlefield, wanting to savor the moment of victory. The Germans would not let him. Something whistled out of the sky and struck the ground nearby, something that exploded with a tinny little cough, a sound so feeble it did not even make him flinch, yet enough to knock Devin and Lonehill apart in a glut of blood and broken limbs and torn, gleaming lengths of bandolier. He screamed something, a huge inarticulate sound of refusal, of denial, of negation—and then he was scabbling down in the trench for a weapon, any weapon, because the Colt's slide had locked forward over an empty chamber and the Krauts were coming again.

They came all at once, a great mass of them, boiling up from some hitherto undiscovered length of concealed trench not fifty yards distant, and through the now-swirling snow, the muzzles of their guns were winking and sparkling like flashbulbs at a stadium. But even as he pried a Mauser from the dead grip of a German soldier and began to wipe the mud from its bolt assembly, Halleck froze in sudden horror; not even the dull slap of bullets in the dirt around him could stir his limbs to action. From behind one of the shell-torn hillocks ahead had emerged a King Tiger tank, sloughing off great heaps of sodden straw and pine branches as it broke loose from the camouflage netting that had concealed its presence. The sound of its awakening engine filled the air with a hard basso growl like the burr of some enormous saw, drowning out completely the sounds of the tank destroyers closer to hand. The Tiger rolled forward with a horrible nonchalance, a great land battleship sporting a cannon fit to knock down heaven's gate. He could see its black-jacketed commander standing in the turret cupola, grinning as he lifted a pair of field glasses to his eyes. Halleck saw the blued glint of their lenses and felt a prickling sensation over his face and hands, knowing in that instant the Kraut sumbitch was looking directly at *him* and wondering if it was the expression on his own face that was making

the German smile. Then its great muzzle swung around and ignited with a thunderclap, and everything went to hell.

The long line of tank destroyers, moments before advancing resolutely at three miles an hour, suddenly broke apart as if it had struck some huge invisible obstacle. Some blundered forward heedless, a few went immediately into reverse, and one simply came to a stop as if rooted to the mud by shock. It was no wonder. Compared to the Tiger, they looked like runty bobcats. The debris of the near-miss had hardly settled when the Kraut's muzzle began to traverse, waxing in Halleck's vision from a crescent to a half moon, taking a bead on the motionless destroyer called SECTION EIGHT, on whose engine block were crowded a half dozen G.I.s now swinging frantic legs over the sandbag wall that was about to become their tomb unless they could move faster than the German gunner could—

Fire! The whole world was roiling with it. Leaping red and yellow flames engulfed the whole of SECTION EIGHT even as it skidded forward, driven by the vicious impact of the armor-piercing shell. It shed sandbags, lengths of smoking track, road wheels, and burning American soldiers before it finally slewed to a stop, momentarily obscuring the thing that had destroyed it. The commander fell blindly out of the turret and ran in fiery circles, looking like a devil escaped from hell, before flopping to the snow-powdered ground in a wreath of oily smoke.

Halleck's paralysis broke. He socked the butt of the Mauser to his shoulder and sighted in on the bobbing mass of soldiery that was swarming toward him. After the heavy recoil of the Thompson, the light German carbine hardly seemed to have any weight at all: he fired, worked the bolt, fired, worked the bolt, fired again. The bayonet fixed beneath the muzzle was spoiling his aim, but he dared not remove it; his hands were shaking so badly, he feared he might saw his fingers clean off in the attempt. It didn't make a difference: the Krauts weren't

interested in charging the final distance yet but instead reclaiming the trenches ahead, the skirts of their long gray coats flaring as they cleared the spiral of barbed wire and vanished into the zigzag furrows that formed a rough W ahead and to either side of the American position. And suddenly the German strategy became clear. Raising his voice to a volume that had his head cracking with pain, Halleck shouted: "Y'all, listen up! We been had. The Krauts ain't tryin' to flush us out of this trench, they're fixin' to trap us *in* it. Drive off our tank support and surround us. We're pullin' out of here—*now*. Certo!"

"Here."

"How many men you got left?"

"Six." There was a short pause. Then: "Five."

"You'll provide cover. Cleburne, how's your throwin' arm?"

The farm boy's reply was an aw-shucks grin, as if he'd been asked to lead the dunking contest at the county fair. Halleck nodded. "Gamber and Lejune's squads: hand your grenades to Cleburne and get ready to run on my signal. Don't stop till you're back in the woods."

Gamber, pressing a blood-soaked bandage to one ear, turned with open mouth as if to say, *What about you guys?* when the Tiger fired again with a doomsday *crack*. The sound of a hundred pounds of armor-piercing explosive hitting armored steel at supersonic speed was like a kick in the skull. Halleck didn't see the impact and didn't want to. He simply wanted to be anywhere on earth where there was no Tiger. "Never you mind. All right, on my mark—*go!*"

The air erupted with flame and smoke. Certo had found a machine gun, and a soldier named Toombs, cut badly over the forehead and cheek, was feeding him a belt of ammunition that jerked through his dirty fingers in fits and starts. Halleck, weaponless, handed Cleburne one grenade after another, yanking the pins or unscrewing the caps and pulling the fuses as the case required; the remaining soldiers fired anything and everything handy. When a weapon clacked empty, they

simply discarded it and found another. Numerous Germans rose to the challenge, leaping into view long enough to fire short bursts from submachine guns or hurl bombs of their own before vanishing back beneath the sandbags, and quickly the ground between the two trench lines began to churn like the surface of a lake in a storm. It was an unequal contest and could have only one outcome. So, as Halleck handed the farm boy the last grenade, he stole a glance over his shoulder. The remains of Gamber's and Lejune's squads were running like scared rabbits, jumping shell holes, darting around anti-tank obstacles, staggering and sometimes falling when brilliant streaks of tracer fire drilled up spurts of earth around them. It helped that thick curtains of greasy black smoke from the stricken destroyers was blowing all over the battlefield like an artificial fog; as Halleck looked on, the last of them disappeared inside it.

“All right!” he screamed. “Amscray!”

The men needed no encouragement. They turned as one and began to push, shove, and scramble down the cluttered, half caved-in trenches until they abruptly ended, whereupon they pulled themselves into the open and ran. Halleck, searching among the corpses until he found his empty Thompson, went last. Or thought he had: after a hundred paces, he realized Cleburne was not with the others ahead of him. Had he been hit, or had the simpleminded son of a bitch stayed to buttonhole that last grenade?

A terrific explosion knocked Halleck to his face on a great gush of superheated air. A third tank destroyer had been hit directly in the ammunition rack and exploded in a flaming dragon spout of scarlet and gold, its burning debris tumbling out of the sky in a hundred-yard arc. He reached for the rim of a small shell hole nearby and pulled himself over it, down into its water-filled bottom, and lay there, gasping, as the deadly rain fell around him with the snow. For at least a minute, he held that pose, unable to move, staring up at the snowflakes as they swirled

down to meet him. He was at that stage of fatigue where one can remain conscious only by continuous effort, and the effort was very nearly more than he could give. Then, each movement burning a little bit more of the substance from his marrow, he pulled himself upright and looked back whence he had come.

Cleburne stood atop the parapet, firing from the hip and blasting at any head that exposed itself, even momentarily, above the sandbags. On either side of him, a three-way duel was taking place between the King Tiger and a pair of plucky destroyers, all three of their guns blasting at once, the smoke from the muzzles swirling whitish within the denser black fog that swept, wind-driven, from the burning hulks that lit the battlefield. This fog swallowed Cleburne momentarily; when it disgorged him, he was crawling on red-smearred legs down the parapet, dragging the gun with him.

Halleck knew he must let the boy die. To run back those hundred paces, in this hailstorm of gunfire, amid the mortar bombs that struck at random, among the tanks that drove about blindly crushing everything in their path, simply to retrieve one foolhardy private, was not heroism but pointless suicide. Even if he somehow dragged Cleburne to safety, he would have accomplished nothing. The Army would not be better off for the return of one private who could no longer fight. REGRETFULLY INFORMING parents was far more cost-efficient than employing surgeons. That was the cold and brutal truth, and he was still nodding to himself at the inescapable logic of it when he went to save Cleburne.

There was no adrenaline, no raging fury to drive him this time. He was quite certain he was going to die, and the knowledge was mere data to him. He moved at a low crouch, helmetless and unarmed, half-blinded, half-deafened, limbs quivering, yet oddly calm. Ahead, a tank destroyer called FIGHTING MAD had charged to within mere yards of the Tiger, looking to do at point-blank range what could not be done at a distance. White flame gushed from its muzzle and Halleck could

actually see the armor-piercing round as it rocketed into the Tiger's turret and then, with a resonating *clang*, ricocheted straight into the air like a meteor going in reverse.

Halleck ran. No one was shooting at him yet. The Krauts were too entranced by the duel; some were even standing up in the trenches to watch. He was near those trenches now, closer still, almost there. The Tiger rumbled forward, its muzzle nearly flush with the turret of FIGHTING MAD, and Halleck slid for the trench as if he were stealing second base. He was spared seeing the destroyer destroyed by half a second and now was down hard among the muddy snow-flecked corpses and abandoned guns. Cleburne must be close. Halleck, crawling, clenched his jaws at what his hands were encountering beneath him. A cold, bristly cheek. A canvas belt. Icy water. A pulpy slime of still-warm intestines, spilling digested food and blood. At last, he found the farm boy. He'd slid down the parapet and fallen in upside-down at the bottom of the trench, with the gun across his belly and his bullet-shattered legs heaped uselessly atop him. His eyes bulged from their sockets, and his mouth stretched open in a vein-popping scream. Halleck did not speak but shoved the gun aside and, taking a deep shaky breath, slung Cleburne over his shoulders in a rough fireman's carry. The boy made a wretched gagging noise but nothing more. *At least you don't weigh nothing*, Halleck thought deliriously. Moving with all the grace of Frankenstein's monster, he clumped back down the trench and climbed into the open, jogging along as fast as his overtaxed legs could carry him.

He'd lumbered maybe twenty yards when he heard the first cry of alarm from behind him. A few more steps and the first shots rang out, just Mausers at first, crackling feebly against the general backdrop of noise; and then suddenly it seemed the whole Wehrmacht was having at him. spurts of earth chased themselves all around his feet; a bullet plucked at his jacket, and he heard the horrid banshee-whine of a

machine gun round miss his head by mere inches. He was waiting, waiting for the shot that would get him, actually wishing it would arrive and put an end to this nightmare, when he looked up from the shell-tortured earth before his feet and saw MURDER INC. rolling toward him. Duffy stood in the blood-splattered turret, blazing away with the fifty caliber as the men on the engine block shoved and kicked the sandbags away and reached out their hands.

Halleck staggered toward the tank. His head, shoulders, and back were in agony, and his knees buckled with every other step. Something kicked at his boot heel and he nearly fell, did not fall, kept going somehow, and now the destroyer was alongside and he was passing Cleburne up to Certo, to Toombs and Bodreau, the others grasping for him, and as the strong hands clasped on his own wrists and he felt his feet leave the ground, everything seemed to shift, and he was not in Germany anymore, he was riding in a snowstorm south of Abeline, and the sky was white, and the plains were white, and there was no motion anywhere and no sound at all, except that of the wind, and he was smiling because he was home.

When Halleck awoke, he was looking at a dead man.

He had come back to consciousness in stages. First, there was only sound. Voices, the squeak of boots on snow, and on what seemed to be every side, gunfire. Then he had sensation. Pain thudding over his ear, cold air against his skin, and when he opened his mouth, the taste of snowflakes on his tongue. Smell came next. There was the snow and vehicle exhaust and a rich earthy scent that was part dirt and partly what was contained within the dirt, the living things gone dormant for the winter. He opened his eyes, and after a moment of disorientation and another of nausea, he saw the corpse that was laid out before him.

There were a lot of corpses, actually, arranged in a line in the snow with ponchos draped carelessly over them so the living wouldn't have to look at their faces. This one was uncovered, which was unfortunate, but understandable, because he didn't have a face to look at, just a gaping red hole that was even now filling with snow. Halleck stared at the body for a good long time, neither saddened nor disgusted. In the last two years, he had seen thousands of dead men. He'd got so that the sight of them meant absolutely nothing to him, but it was wrong to say that he'd gotten hard. He wasn't hardened to anything. He simply accepted reality. He had been a cowboy once and driven cattle. Now, he was a sergeant and drove men. They all ended up the same way—bloody

meat and bone meal—but because he could accept that fact and still do what he did, because he could recognize that his task was impossible and then coldly set out to accomplish it, the drive would never best him. Kill him, maybe. But never break him.

Without any real interest, he took stock of his surroundings: a modest clearing, surrounded on every side by close-pressing firs. Soldiers milling about here and there, puffing nervously on Lucky Strikes with their rifles slung muzzle-down, trying to ignore the corpses of men who hours or minutes before had been their closest friends. Some of them wore bandages over hands or cheeks and stared dully out of pain-filled eyes; others had that sick-with-fright, nose-to-the-slaughterhouse look that marked men going into battle for the first time. Past them, ghostly through the snow-encumbered branches of the trees, Halleck saw a line of idling ambulances. It seemed odd that they weren't moving, that everyone was just standing about when the sounds of battle were so close to hand. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have made a polite inquiry as to why—say, by dragging the lead ambulance driver out of his seat by his ear, then acquainting his ass with a size-twelve boot. Remarkably effective means of eliciting information, and now that he thought of it, it didn't sound like a bad idea. Slowly, he took to his feet, but as he did so, his gaze fell once again on the faceless corpse. After a moment's hesitation, he walked over to it. Knelt. Felt for its dog tags. Stared at the last name stamped into them until his eyes came into something approximating focus. Saw

Lawrence R. Cleburne
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and nodded. Sometimes, you just knew, and he had known as soon as he'd heard the Germans open up that they couldn't possibly miss. The bullets meant for Halleck had found the man he was trying to save, and

he supposed if you wanted to be a shit about it you could say that the very act of going after Cleburne had condemned the boy to death. That had not made it any less right to try. Lazarus *was* dead, but Halleck would always go to him. He knew that now, and it gave him peace.

Duffy was approaching in the gathering gloom. His whole face was cloaked in burned gunpowder, and the barrel of his captured German submachine gun beat time against his thigh as he limped through the bloody snow. He produced a flask, took a long swig, and coughed. "I was wondering when you were gonna come to."

The sergeant showed him an open palm. The captain's bleary gaze fell on the dog tags, and he shrugged, then glanced at his wristwatch. "He was dead when we pulled him up. Nothing you could do about it. Gonna put you in for the DSC anyway. Look, Top, this whole operation's gone to hell on a greasy rail. Things have quieted down here some, but there's a helluva fight brewing up in the Badlands. Don't ask me how it happened, but apparently that crazy son of a bitch Breese took it upon himself to try to storm the escarpment that leads out of the canyon. He's got most of the engineers with him, and somehow they managed to hack out a little bridgehead there on the Kraut flank. I don't know how; it was supposed to be impregnable. Anyway, battalion wants him reinforced, but all the companies are tied up fighting those King Tigers, and all I've got to spare is this squad I scratched together from engineers, truck drivers, and walking wounded. I realize you're busted up, but..." He suddenly ran out of breath. Lit a cigarette. Sucked it as if there were oxygen in the filter. "What do you say? Will you take 'em?"

Halleck stared at the captain in mute disbelief. He wanted to say: *Are you out of your fuckin' mind?* Bodreau had already pinned an evacuation tag onto his jacket, and rightly so. He was used up. Done in. An empty bucket with a hole in the bottom. *Hell no, I won't take 'em!*

Get Certo. Get Gamber. Get Lejune. Get somebody else. Get anybody else!

“Get me something to shoot with,” he said.

Ten minutes later, he had his new squad assembled. His vision was so blurry he could scarcely make out the faces, but it hardly mattered. Their names didn't matter either. They were all his calves, and he would put it out on the line for each and every one of them even though most would like as not be lying waxen-cheeked in the snow before the day was out. After all, you didn't save the calves because it made sense. You save them because you loved them, because it was in your nature to try. And because in the end it wasn't the calf that mattered anyway. The cowboy neither.

What mattered was the drive.

Sinner's Cross

PART II: THOUGH TOMORROW WE DIE

*Between them stretched the sleeping vine-clad hills
in whose slopes the path strayed and was lost.*

Sinner's Cross

1

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions. If Lieutenant Breese had no inkling that he was damned, it was perhaps because the road beneath him was not paved by anything at all. It was not, strictly speaking, even a road but rather a sort of muddy track that blundered aimlessly through thickly wooded hills.

Perhaps the woods themselves should have served as an indication of just where Breese was headed, for he had never seen trees like this—not in his native Ohio, not on Black Mountain, where he had once gone hunting with his father, and certainly not in New York City, where he had attended school. They were enormous, positively fucking *enormous*, rising up into the mist like the legs of prehistoric beasts, and they pressed in so closely to either side of the track that it seemed they had designs on squeezing it out of existence. Breese didn't like that at all. He was one of those people who thought of civilization as sitting atop the earth like a man on a throne, and not like a weed that had thrust itself up through a crack in the sidewalk.

The driver had identified himself as Corporal McKisk—a stocky, unshaven, heavy-muscled youngster wearing the filthiest glasses the lieutenant had ever seen. Perhaps because of that filth, the corporal drove as if oblivious to every obstacle, skidding round turns, sliding

down hills, and smashing over potholes, rocks, and exposed roots as if Satan himself were on his heels. Many times Breese had drawn breath to ask him to slow down, and each time the impact of the jeep's wheels had driven that breath from his lungs.

The jeep entered a gloomy, rain-drenched clearing that had a huge wooden sign and, beneath it, a pair of gum-chewing military policemen wearing white helmets and white gloves, which made them look decidedly ridiculous in their gleaming green ponchos. The lieutenant looked up at the sign.

YOU ARE NOW ENTERING GERMANY
AN ENEMY COUNTRY
BE ALERT

The driver stopped the jeep, and one of the policemen stomped over, red-faced with cold, the barrel of his Tommy gun poking out from the folds of his slicker in a way that was half-menacing, half-indecent.

“What's up?”

“I'm lost. Looking for Easy Company CP, Second Battalion.”

“Just keep on this road about two miles. Don't wander off. There are infiltrators everywhere, and the side-roads are mined. You'll know you're close when you see the burned-out tank.”

“Thanks.”

The driver pulled away slowly, so as not to spray the policemen with mud, and then quickly picked up speed. When the forest had enveloped them again, Breese turned and said, “How long have we been lost?”

“Since about five minutes after I picked you up.”

“You don't know your way around here?”

“Nobody knows their way around here, and anybody who says he does is a goddamn liar.”

Breese waited for the *sir* at the end of the sentence. Then he waited for an apology for the profanity. Neither came. After a few moments, he said, in the same tone he had once used with pledges in his fraternity, "That's all right, Corporal. The way you drive, it can't be your M.O.S. anyway."

"Well, yes and no. I'm company clerk. Pretty much I do what the C.O. tells me to do. He wants I should drive, I drive."

"I guess that beats serving in the line, eh?"

McKisk took his eyes off the road to stare briefly at the lieutenant. If the corporal was averse to soap and shaving cream, he was not proof against condescension. "I volunteered for the infantry, but my eyes are fucked up—nearsighted. Got clerk-typist instead. Now, I'm glad. Did *you* volunteer for the infantry, Lieutenant?"

"I went where they sent me."

"And here you are. The devil's asshole."

There was a place ahead where the trees gapped and the rain came down on the jeep's windshield like water out of an overturned bucket. Even with the wipers going full blast, the outside world took on the wavering quality of a heat mirage, and the noise on the canvas roof was deafening. Breese had never seen rain like this, and he wondered, not with unease but with the feeling that proceeds unease, if he had now entered a world full of things he had never seen, or wanted to. Then the forest shoved its way back in and the rain downpour once again became nothing more than an insistent mist.

"That's a bit melodramatic, isn't it? How bad can it be?"

"How bad can bad get? Whatever's at the very bottom of bad, the far reaches of bad, the furthest fucking outskirts of bad—that's how bad it can be, Lieutenant. That's how bad it *is*."

"But in the rear, they're saying the Krauts are finished, that the war'll be over by Christmas."

"Never believe anything that comes out of a man's rear."

“*You* don’t believe it?”

“I believed it in August. The Krauts were running then. Licked. But sometime between then and now, they got themselves unlicked. We’ve been catching hell ever since we got to this forest. Christ, I’ve heard guys praying they’ll lose a leg just to get out of here. That’s not normal. I mean, you hear guys praying to get a Million Dollar Wound all the time—you know, lose a finger or a toe or get shot through the ass. Something that’ll fuck ‘em up bad enough to get ‘em sent home but not bad enough to cripple ‘em. *That’s* normal. I been hearing *that* since Anzio. But I never heard anybody pray to lose a fucking *leg*. Not before I came here.”

Breese sighed. He had been in the Army long enough to understand its hazing rituals, and he was pretty sure this filthy-looking corporal was doing the same as his instructors at OCS had tried to do—namely, scare the shit out of him with a lot of tough-sounding talk. But Breese hadn’t enjoyed being hazed at Columbia, and he didn’t enjoy it now, particularly when the fellow giving him the business had such disgustingly dirty fingernails. “I’m not worried. My father won the Distinguished Service Cross in the last war. I’m pretty sure killing Germans runs in my family.”

“For your sake I hope it doesn’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The bigger a man’s balls are out here, Lieutenant, the more likely they are to get shot off.”

“Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t you, Corporal?”

A truck was coming the other way—gushing water, spraying mud. It barreled forward at a speed that plainly said it felt it had the right of way and ensured in any case that its driver could see even less than McKisk. The corporal bowed to force and jerked the jeep into the slop of dead leaves and the ruts of old tank tracks that made up the shoulder. The truck growled past, throwing up a huge curtain of filth that did not

Sinner's Cross

quite obscure the huge Red Cross painted on its side. It was followed by another and another yet, jouncing and banging over the ruts and craters, and Breese could not be sure, but as the last of the ambulances passed and struck an exposed rock with its back wheel, he thought he heard from within it a high-pitched shriek of pain.

“If you don't believe me,” McKisk said. “Why don't you ask them?”

2

The journey resumed, and soon the forest began to relax its grip on the road. Before many minutes it gave way entirely, revealing waterlogged stubble fields hemmed in on their furthest sides by more trees and by brooding green hills whose tops had been swallowed by the ever-present mist. They passed their landmark, a fire-gutted Chaffee tank surrounded by debris—broken chains, half-melted treads, torn-up sandbags, bent gear wheels. The rain fell slantwise, driven by a wind that whistled around the corners of the jeep as it plodded on, and it began to dawn on Breese that at some point very soon he was going to have to open the door and get out in this miserable mess—this mess that had produced, among other things, the destroyed tank and the horrible shriek he was increasingly certain he *had*, in fact, heard.

They drove up to a large black-roofed farmhouse, a bomb-damaged barn, and several outbuildings that looked as if they'd been the subject of arson. Soldiers were coming and going with the sullen, half-hunched movements of men who were almost, but not quite, exhausted enough not to care about the weather. Vehicles were scattered about haphazardly in the muck—jeeps, a deuce-and-a-half truck, a halftrack, and a Greyhound reconnaissance car. The Greyhound had a fist-sized dent in its turret armor, which had stripped the olive-drab paint clean

off, exposing silvery-white steel. Beneath the mantlet was stenciled the vehicle's name: PURPLE HEART BOX.

McKisk killed the engine and looked at him expectantly. Breese took a deep breath and climbed out of the jeep. It was like stepping into a cold shower fully clothed, and when he turned toward the farmhouse door, he found his boots were stuck fast in the mud—a soupy, yellowish-brown mess littered with cigarette butts and empty ration cans. The lieutenant had noticed before the odd color of the soil here, uncomfortably reminiscent of baby shit; and he filed this knowledge away with the rest of the things he had discovered he did not like about Germany—which so far was everything. He wrenched his boots free and went inside.

When his eyes adjusted to the light of the battery lamps, he saw around him the usual organized chaos of a company headquarters in the field: an SCR-300 radio, a portable typewriter, overflowing butt cans, half-eaten rations, helmets, and a Coleman pocket stove. The bare wooden floor was a swarm of muddy footprints, and the place stank of damp and bad coffee and body odor and dead cigarettes. There were half a dozen soldiers in the room, but no one paid him the slightest attention. He noticed a hulking first sergeant in a watch cap standing in the corner and growling into the radio's handset.

“Excuse me, Top, I'm looking for—”

The sergeant had to take the cigar from between his teeth to reply, but in his massive fingers it looked more like a Lucky Strike. “Fuck is your foul-weather gear?”

“What?”

“Your poncho. Why ain't you wearing it? You *tryin'* to catch pneumonia? 'Cause that's no ticket back to the States, that's a ticket to the fuckin' stockade. Goddamn self-inflicted wound is what that is. Fifty degrees outside and the sky pourin' like a dick after too much beer and you're goddamn bare-assed? Where's your fuckin' *poncho*?”

Breese swallowed. He wore an M1 steel helmet, muffler, combat jacket, pistol belt, cartridge belt, a pouch for field dressings, OD trousers with canvas leggings, and brand-new boots. He carried a dispatch case and a haversack and a .30 carbine with a folding wire stock; and he wore it all well, just like a soldier in a war movie—and he ought to know because he'd seen them all. He knew also that wearing the nylon poncho spoiled the effect, just as a condom spoils the effect of a penis. He'd rolled the thing into a tight cylinder in his haversack to sit alongside his cigarettes and chocolate bars and V-mail stationery and whatnot. But this was not a thing you admitted to a glowering ape of a first sergeant whose hands were fists, and whose fists looked as if they could inflict the type of damage he'd just seen on the side of that Greyhound. He opened the haversack and produced the article.

“Goddamn it, Lieutenant,” the ape shouted. “That’s a *Marine Corps* poncho. What the fuck are you doing with that?”

“I traded for it with an anchor-clanker on the boat coming over to England. I liked the look of it.” Suddenly, he was tired of being on the defensive. “Do you have a *problem* with camouflage, Top?”

The first sergeant slammed the handset into the radio with a bang that made every soldier in the room flinch. “I like camouflage just fine, Lieutenant. In fact, every time I see a man wearing camouflage I’m so fuckin’ happy, I show my happiness by shooting the sumbitch in the fuckin’ head!” The sergeant’s eyes were a hot black, like fresh bubbles of tar, inlaid in a huge, flesh-crammed, saturnine face that bristled with brown stubble, and they seemed to simmer with fury as he continued. “Don’t they teach you butter-bars anything? The only sumbitches out here wear camouflage are the Waffen-SS! You put that fuckin’ thing on, fuckin’ sentries’ll blast you for an infiltrator soon as the sun goes down. Give it here.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said *give it here.*”

Six months of training had beaten obedience to sergeants into his nervous system, and now that he wore the gold bar of a second lieutenant on his helmet and had every right to tell this one to go to hell, Breese found old habits too strong to break. His face hot and tingling, he handed over the cylinder. The Top—company sergeants were always called Top—tossed it into the corner like a piece of trash. “Get this man a goddamned poncho,” he bellowed at no one in particular. “I don’t want him getting blasted his first goddamned night in the line. Hard enough to keep a butter-bar alive out here as it is.” The simmering black gaze turned back to him. “Well? What the hell you waitin’ for? Go report to the old man. He’s in there jawin’ with the colonel.”

Breese unbuckled his dripping helmet, tucked it under his arm, and followed the pointing cigar through an open doorway. He found the “old man”—a stocky captain who appeared to be about twenty-five—leaning aggressively over an oak-plank dinner table whose surface was papered with maps and official correspondence, and upon which sat a dusty liquor bottle and a couple of tin mugs. He looked like a good man to have on your side in a brawl—angry-eyed, jut-jawed, thick-necked, like a collegiate wrestler. Opposite him stood a tall, paunchy lieutenant colonel who had not troubled to remove his own helmet, and who leaned forward in precisely the same way, so that the two men’s faces were no more than a yard apart.

“Damn it, Mad Dog,” the colonel was saying angrily. “I know what you’re going through out here. I know how it is when you see a lot of your friends knocked off. But you can’t talk to me like that. You want to keep those bars on your collar, you’ve got to show your superiors some respect.”

“Colonel—sir—I don’t *care* if you break me. I meant what I said. This patch of woods isn’t any damn good to anyone. Not to us, not to the Germans. What the hell is Regiment about, sending us into this fucking meatgrinder week after week? We don’t have any advantages

here. We can't call in air support because the flyboys can't see through the trees to bomb. We can't call for artillery because the observers can't see what they're shooting at. We can't use tanks because they can only travel Indian file and all the Krauts have to do is knock out the lead Sherman and the whole column sits there like a row of fucking ducks waiting to get shot. We lost eight Goddamn Shermans that way last week. *Eight*. The Krauts blew up the lead tank and the tail-end Charlie and then went down the line just as calm as you please, firing *Panzerfausts* into the engine blocks. They all went up like campfires and the crews with 'em. You know what that *smells* like, Colonel?"

"Of course I know what it smells like. I was at Kasserine. I was at Faïd Pass. I was at Saint-Lô, for Christ's sake. I've smelled plenty of burnt pork in this war. Expect to smell some more before it's over. What the hell do you want me to do about it? Regiment gets their orders from Division, Division gets their orders from Corps, and Corps gets their orders from Army. The general thinks this is the way to do it."

"Well, somebody needs to punch the general in the head and knock the shit out of his brains, if this is the best he can come up with."

"There you go with that talk again."

"I can't be the only one talking this way, Colonel."

"Goddamn it, Duffy, give me a slug of that Heine cognac. Of course you're not. Don't you think I listen to the other company commanders? Don't you think I listen to regimental headquarters? *Everybody's* talking. Except what they're saying is that somebody *did* punch the general in the head and knock the shit out of his brains, and the shit landed on the map and looked like a plan, so he's following it." The colonel accepted a tin mug and drank down the cognac as if it were chicken broth. "Christ, that hits the spot. Look...you're only a captain, you don't even know how bad it *is*. The division he sent in before us tried for two months to bust through the German lines, and they lost four

thousand men and got exactly half a mile of ground to show for it. Half a fuckin' mile!"

"Didn't that tell him anything?"

"Yeah, it told him he wasn't trying hard enough. But I say again: what do you want me to do about it? We've got our orders."

"Sure," Duffy sneered. "Kill the Germans. And we *are* killing Germans. Trouble is, they're also killing *us*. Hell, my boys aren't even actively engaged right now and we're losing four, five men a day to mines and snipers. We make another big push like we did last week, and this whole company'll go up like sugar in a fire."

The colonel put down his mug, wiped his mouth, and gripped either side of his gun belt. "Well, the general seems to think we've got more sugar to burn."

Duffy lowered his gaze, then covered it with a trembling hand. "Damn it all to hell, sir, this is no way to run a war."

"It worked for General Grant," the colonel said in a tone of finality, and he turned for the door, blinking in surprise when he saw the lieutenant in his path. "Get the hell out of my way," he growled, and left the room.

Breese found himself alone with the company commander, whose face was still half-hidden by his hand, revealing only a rude shock of helmet-matted hair. It was an uncomfortable moment, and it lengthened, so the lieutenant occupied himself by listening to specific sounds: the rain beating on the windows, the clack of the field typewriter in the next room, the sound of the colonel's jeep driving off. At length there was a great clap of thunder in the distance, whose sound seemed to roll over the farmhouse like a wave. Breese, still standing at attention, decided to use it as a conversational gambit.

"Helluva a storm out there, sir."

Sinner's Cross

Duffy lowered the hand from his face and regarded the lieutenant with eyes so bloodshot it was possible only with great difficulty to determine that their irises were blue.

“That wasn’t thunder,” he said.

3

The expression *so dark you can't see your hand in front of your face* had always been to Breese merely a phrase, much like *quiet as a church*. He'd had no experience with absolute darkness since the womb and, his parents being atheists, no experience with church, ever. Actually, where he had grown up—Alliance, Ohio—there was no such thing as absolute darkness and no such thing as complete silence. The trainyard at the end of Main Street was well-lit, and all throughout Breese's childhood, he had gone to sleep with the faint clanging of the couplings and the ring-a-ding-ding of the crossing bell in his ears, as well as the red glow of the bulb over the lineman's shack gilding the blinds over his bedroom window like a nightlight. This became the norm for him, and many years later, when he attended Columbia University, he found the lights and noise of Manhattan, which had annoyed some of the other students, to be as soothing as a lullaby.

He found nothing soothing about the slimy hole in the ground in which he was expected to spend the night. He found nothing soothing about the fact that the huge firs that loomed on every side sealed off the sky as effectively as the ceiling of a mausoleum. And he found nothing soothing about the silence—the horrible, oppressive silence, which seemed to be exaggerated rather than relieved by the pitter-pat of dripping branches and the heavy sound of his own frightened breathing.

Breese could see nothing. *Nothing*. The difference between closing his eyes and opening them was the strain it produced or failed to produce on his eyelids. He could, on the other hand, feel quite a bit. Feel the cold on his face and ears and on the space between his glove and his sleeve where the wrist lay bare to the elements and therefore stung with pain. Feel the hideous yielding mud in which he squatted and the icy water that was collecting beneath his backside and the soles of his boots. Feel the rocks and roots poking into him through the nylon fabric of his poncho.

He knew, intellectually, that there was a man on either side of him. Somewhere to his left crouched Loomis, the goggle-eyed platoon radioman known as Luminous because, during the fight for Hill 314 near Mortain, he'd been set on fire by a white phosphorous shell; and on the right was Halleck, the solid, square-chinned staff sergeant with the expressionless face and the Tommy gun. But he couldn't see them. And the furtive little movements he made with his elbows yielded not the comforting bulk of a human body but only empty air.

Breese found it grotesque that he was expected to sit here until morning, unmoving, unspeaking, uncoughing, unsneezing, robbed even of the comfort of his cigarettes, looking for Germans he couldn't see any more than he could see, as it were, his hand in front of his face. His one freedom was the freedom to shiver, and he exercised it frequently. While he shivered, he remembered Duffy trying to show him the position of the battalion and its companies and platoons on the map. Trying to explain the geography of the forest—which heights were important, which roads were crucial, which terrain was impassable. Where the Germans were, and in what strength. On paper, it all looked so simple. But then they'd taken him up here—first by jeep and then on foot, while such light as there was dwindled into a formless gloom that rendered the landscape a dull, shadowy, glistening monochrome, and everything Duffy had said suddenly seemed as meaningless as if it had been uttered

in a foreign language. Where *was* he? Where was *anyone*? Useless little images flickered in his head—the arrow that indicated a machine-gun nest, the three-pronged circle that denoted a mortar pit, the thing that looked like a cannonball with a fuse coming out the top, which was supposed to represent the three-inch gun emplacement. These were the anchors of his position; he needed to know where they were. But he couldn't see any of them, couldn't even imagine where they might be. All he saw was a dark forest getting darker, rank with the scent of cold and wet and sap and mud, and within it a scattering of unshaven gaunt-cheeked, poncho-clad soldiers he was told were most of his platoon.

It all happened very fast after that. *This is your platoon sergeant, Halleck. This is your platoon medic, Holzinger. This is your radioman, Loomis, and this is your call-sign, Decoy Red One Six. These are your squad leaders—Ryerson, Spicer, and Keesey. Tonight's password is "Ontario." Your position extends from the edge of that gully to the blowdown over there. We don't expect a push here, so your job is to keep the Germans from infiltrating. That means a one hundred percent alert all night, every night. Listen for the enemy. Don't make any noise at all or you'll take fire from both sides. Don't smoke, the Germans will see the light and blow you to hell. Don't fall asleep, you'll wake up with your throat cut. Don't give any orders, you don't know what you're doing. Let Halleck run things until you know the score. A guide will relieve you at 0630 hours exactly. If you hear anyone come up behind you before that, shoot him.*

It wasn't exactly the St. Crispen's Day speech. It wasn't even the rabbleroising harangue Errol Flynn had given at the climax of *Captain Blood*. It was just an outpouring of advice from a man who was too bitter and too contemptuous to care if anyone took it. Breese was so thoroughly reminded of his father that for a moment he was twelve years old again, telling the old man he wanted to become an actor, and by the time he'd come back to the present, Duffy had departed. The lieutenant

found himself alone with his men. *His* men, who he had been ordered not to give any orders, because he didn't know the score.

Halleck, on the other hand, did. The twilight had only given hints about the shape of his face beneath the mud-scoured helmet, but there was an odd solidity to his outline, a feeling of weight, of gravity, of *presence*. Breese had a feeling if you reached out and squeezed the man's bicep, it would be as hard as granite, not so much from muscle as from sheer toughness. Certainly his voice was hard—low and gritty, with a Texas drawl that summoned up images of an Old West sheriff who traveled with a noose and a Bible in his saddlebags. “Just sit in the hole and do like the captain said. I'll put the men in their positions and go check on the thirty caliber. In the mornin', we'll have a jaw about what's what.”

So he sat tight in a big, wet, muddy pit with Private Loomis, wondering if the prohibition on speaking was in effect already and deciding against it. He could hear the soldiers who were being relieved shoving aside the wet logs that roofed their holes and climbing out, and the men who were relieving them climbing in with grunts and curses, and a little more noise couldn't possibly hurt. Besides, he had to start somewhere in getting to know his men. And that was how he discovered how Loomis got his nickname. The boy was pantomiming how the white phosphorus had burned through his boot and would have cooked his foot to the bone if he hadn't accidentally stepped into some shot-up sandbags lying on the road to Mortain when Halleck returned.

“Got damn it, Luminous, cut out that jaw-jackin.” The sergeant's whisper was as vicious as a whip. “I could hear you a mile off. You want a mortar round in your fuckin' lap?”

“He was talking to *me*, Sergeant,” Breese whispered.

“And who the fuck told you to listen, Lieutenant? Didn't they teach you nothin' at that Shake 'n Bake school? Quiet means *quiet*.”

The darkness deepened into a blackness that swallowed the landscape so completely that even the trunk of a huge fir tree, which had not been ten feet from the edge of the pit, vanished as if it had never been there. When Breese uncovered his wristwatch, he was appalled to see the radium-painted hands indicating eighteen-thirty hours—*half past six in the evening*. Another twelve hours, easy, before the sun came up.

Twelve hours of this shit? It seemed absurd. The temperature had to be forty degrees, and even with the branches blocking most of the rain, an icy mist descended, sheening the barrel of his carbine and gradually driving the blood from his ears, cheeks, lips. That was when he noticed that he could not even see the two men with whom he was sharing the hole. It seemed incredible, but it was true. Straining his eyes until they ached, he peered at the places he knew them to be, but his gaze yielded nothing. It was as if someone had unscrewed his eyeballs and put them in a box for safekeeping.

There could be a German standing right in front of me and I wouldn't know it, he thought. This started as a disgruntled observation, but as time went by, it began to gnaw at him. There really *could* be a German right in front of him. How would he know, until it was too late?

This thought spurred another; had he released the safety-catch on his carbine? When his thumb found the catch, he discovered he couldn't remember which position was which. He'd been having this sort of problem all his life. The worst example of it had been during a collegiate production of *The Time of Your Life*. He'd walked out of the wings and suddenly forgotten whether it was the second or the third act. A nasty moment. Of course, he'd recovered quickly, but when the curtain came down, he'd touched his upper lip and found it wet—not damp, *wet*. He'd laughed about it later at the cast party, but it hadn't been funny at the time. Not at all. And this wasn't funny now. However, thinking about the play distracted him from his dilemma. Anything that reminded him of Columbia distracted him in a happy sort of way, because Columbia

was the only place on earth that he'd ever *been* happy. How could you not be happy at Columbia? Columbia wasn't the half-loveless house he'd grown up in. It wasn't the godless boarding school he'd matured in, either. It was the place where all the things he'd wanted out of life had been waiting for him, like jewels spread on velvet. He could never think of it without remembering those lovely Friday nights in the fall when he and his fraternity brothers had crowded round that old, battered Dannemann upright in the frat house living room, Pabst Blue Ribbon slopping over their hands, and bellowed "Stand, Columbia" and "Roar, Lion, Roar" and his favorite of all, "San Souci":

*Out on life's stormy seas
All of us soon may be,
Far, far away.
Still, hold your glasses high,
Here's to youth while it's nigh,
Though tomorrow we die,
This is today!*

He closed his eyes. It was okay to close his eyes because open or closed didn't make one damn bit of difference out here. Besides, it had been a long day on bad roads in the rain. He had earned a little rest. He wasn't being derelict in his duty; he was just resting. The night had a long way to go, and he had to keep his strength up. Couldn't do that if he just sat in the muck, staring at what may as well have been a blindfold, using up all his energy in suppressing the shivers. A man needed relief.

Relief. The guide would appear at 0630 to relieve them. To relieve *him*. To bring relief. The lieutenant began to fantasize about breakfast. It would only be K-rations, and ordinarily they disgusted him, but chopped ham and eggs and biscuits with instant coffee sounded

pretty damned good right now. Especially the coffee. Nescafe boiled up over heat tablets. A cup of that would hit the spot. It was so miserably, filthily, disgustingly *cold*. Every time he relaxed his jaws, his teeth clacked like a telegraph key. What was more, his bladder was throbbing. Dear old Captain Duffy hadn't given any instructions on what to do when nature called. Presumably, you didn't just piss your pants. You had to get up and relieve yourself elsewhere. But that meant moving, and he'd been told not to move. He wanted to ask Halleck what the S.O.P. was in cases like this, but Halleck had also told him not to talk. An hour passed. Breese forgot about breakfast and began to fantasize about toilets instead. Not latrines—toilets. *Soldiers* used latrines, and soldiers had greasy, matted hair and five-day growths of beard and dirt under their fingernails and smelled like unwiped ass. Breese hated filth and degradation. War should be shining armor and fluttering pennants, and it should smell like Eau de Cologne and not dirty underwear, and it should use toilets and not holes in the ground.

Toilets, toilets, my kingdom for a toilet! Breese went from mild to acute discomfort. He'd seldom appreciated the elegant simplicity of plumbing before: now, he couldn't think of anything else. And behold, he actually *saw* one ahead of him, its porcelain glimmering whitely in the darkness, beckoning him like a nightlight. Thank God! He was rising up out of the hole, hitching up his combat jacket, fumbling at the fly of his trousers....

Breese didn't realize he'd been dreaming until he awoke to feel the cold steel of the trench knife against his throat. He was suddenly and totally conscious, aware of absolutely everything, from the hot breath washing foul over his cheek to the tension in the blade that pressed his windpipe to the fact that he no longer needed a toilet because he was quite thoroughly and enthusiastically wetting his pants.

You ever fall asleep out here again, Sergeant Halleck whispered, his lips brushing the lieutenant's ear in a hideous pantomime

of intimacy, *I will cut your fuckin' head off and send it to your mammy C.O.D. Understand?*

Breese was too frightened to speak. He made a squeak of assent he hoped was louder than the sound of his trousers filling with piss. Nothing happened, so he made it three more times and threw in a sob for good measure. The knife withdrew, leaving a fiery streak of pain where it had touched his flesh. When he thought it was safe, the lieutenant touched his glove to the pain and then to his tongue and tasted something like warm pennies dipped in olive oil. The crazy sonofabitch had actually cut him.

Though tomorrow we die, he thought bitterly, tears of humiliation and rage stinging his eyes. But when he checked the luminescent hands of his watch, he got a rude shock.

It was past zero-hundred hours.

It *was* tomorrow.

4

Robert Breese had been in the Army for just about a year when he met Sergeant Halleck, but he swiftly began to realize that for all intents and purposes, it may as well have been his first day.

“All that shit they teach you at Shake ‘n Bake School is wrong,” the Texan said. “But don’t feel too bad about it. All the shit they teach you in basic training is wrong too.”

The lieutenant tried very hard not to resent Officer Candidate School being referred to as “Shake ‘n Bake School,” just as he tried not to resent the clotted cut that ran under his jawline, or the fact that he’d had to spend a wet and freezing night sitting in piss-soaked trousers because this yokel wanted to teach him a lesson. It wasn’t working very well. Now that he could see Halleck, he liked him even less.

Breese had thought the sergeant a big man, but Halleck was no taller than he, and his physiognomy was all wrong. Chestnut hair, enamel-blue eyes, and a square jaw stood to his credit, but the flat cheekbones and the utterly expressionless face—it looked as if it had been chipped out of granite—said that maybe one of his ancestors had eaten more buffalo meat than hamburger. He ate with a dull, unfocused look into the distance and a ruminative sidelong movement of the jaw, his thighs had a slight bow from years in the saddle, he smelled of flint

and leather and gun-oil, and his abuse of the English language made the lieutenant cringe. It was true that when he gave an order, it was obeyed at once, and that he handled his Tommy gun as easily as if it were an empty bottle of gin, but, damn it, the man did not know his *place*. A good platoon sergeant, in the lieutenant's mind, ought act like Kato on *The Green Hornet* and not a disapproving uncle with a taste for the strap.

It was true that Halleck never made any direct mention of what had happened between them that first ugly night in the woods, but it was equally true that Breese could not stop thinking about it—what it felt like to wake up with a trench knife breaking the outermost layer of skin over his Adam's apple. And the more he thought about it, the more his resentment grew. Halleck seemed oblivious to this. In point of fact, Halleck seemed oblivious to everything—manners, military courtesy, tact, sleeplessness, the weather.

On the lieutenant's first full day in the line, the sergeant had spent several hours familiarizing him with the platoon frontage, which was Army-speak for the ground the platoon was responsible for holding. As Duffy had indicated with a sweep of his hand, this extended from the shallow gully full of dead leaves and stagnant water to the knocked-over fir tree, whose roots writhed outward like the tentacles of a monster out of *Amazing Stories*. In theory, the distance between the two was about five hundred feet, but the density of the fir trees made it impossible to see more than a few yards in any direction, and the ground was such a nightmare of mud, rocks, fallen branches, and abandoned foxholes that despite the cold, Breese was gasping for air within five minutes. Halleck was not. He wanted the lieutenant to see *everything*, from the main line of resistance to the furthest listening post to the most likely avenues of attack for the enemy. This struck Breese as ludicrous. Who could attack through this obstacle course? It was difficult enough just to *walk* through it. He was already aching with weariness from his long night's vigil, and

dirty in the bargain, and while it had stopped raining, even the slightest breeze dislodged sheets of cold water from the boughs rustling far overhead. He said, "This is all well and good, Sergeant, but I thought we weren't expecting a push."

Halleck looked at him briefly, as if only now remembering he was there. "Neither was the guy you're replacing."

"What exactly happened to him, my predecessor?"

"Predecessor." Halleck rolled the word around in his mouth like a piece of candy he had never tasted before. "Your *predecessor* got his head blown off. Dumb sonofabitch got out of his hole to shit one night, got lost, and walked straight into a Kraut raidin' party. When we found him the next mornin' wasn't nothin' above his neck but some gristle. Though I do reckon that was an improvement over what he had before."

"A little respect for the dead, Sergeant."

"If the dead want respect, Lieutenant, they should be more careful when they're alive."

Halleck was terse and taciturn except on business, but if sufficiently prodded, he disgorged such homespun wisdom like cheap candy out of a busted piñata. When the lieutenant demanded to know whether his *predecessor* should have befouled himself rather than leaving the safety of his foxhole, Halleck replied, "Pants fulla shit are better than head fulla lead." When asked for his estimation of Duffy, he grunted, "He's got more guts'n you could hang on a fence, but he's a mustang, come up from the ranks, and he's lost too many of his buddies out here. Reckon he's a few sandwiches short of a picnic." And a few days later, when he saw Breese moodily fingering the scab on his throat, the sergeant cast a hard un pitying gaze upon him and remarked, "When you lose, Lieutenant, don't lose the lesson."

So passed Breese's first week in the line. Although there was no sign whatever of the Germans, it was one of the most miserable he could remember. Division had not yet issued winter clothing to the troops, and

so there were no heavy coats, no mufflers, long underwear, or overshoes. Everyone was cold and slimy with mud and sticky with sap and sullen in the bargain. The only food was cold K-rations, and by the third day, the lieutenant could not decide what made him want to puke more, the lemon powder or the pork loaf. Still, the days, dim and dripping though they were, slid along the bottom edge of tolerable. The nights, however, were unspeakably awful. He began to dread the appearance of the guide, a small, pale, sharp-cheekboned little creature from Joliet named Rapacci, who led him, unspeaking, through the slime to the forward positions, and he found himself wishing that Rapacci would be killed, as if somehow the boy's death would stop the necessity for spending twelve hours in an open grave, staring into the void and shivering his teeth loose. Every day, he prayed for the night not to come, and every night, he prayed for it to come to a swift end. Neither prayer was ever answered.

The platoon was rotated into the reserve position, providing security for the company command post. This should have been a welcome change, for during this period they were quartered in a barn when not on duty, but out in the open fields, unshielded by the trees he hated so much, Breese and his men bore the full brunt of November's wrath. Sometimes it was slow and soaking—a farmer's rain. Sometimes it fell in torrents driven by icy winds—a flood. But it never let up, not even for a moment. Day in and day out, the water fell until the barn's roof leaked continuously from twenty or thirty places, until the roads were washed out, until every last thread of fabric on every last man in the company was soaked through, and the skin beneath perpetually goosebumped and shivering.

There was no daylight, not as he remembered it. The darkness now lasted seventeen hours at a time, and it was impenetrable and suffocating. The occasional glow of a cigarette; the dull gleam of an oil lamp, fairy-ringed with moisture; the feeble luminescence of a

wristwatch—these things became pathetic substitutes for the moon and stars. Dawn, when it came, produced only a dull, flat, grayish suffusion, one that made it impossible to believe the sun had ever existed. The hills vanished into the clouds, and the clouds themselves pressed down so closely that at times it was impossible to see more than ten or fifteen yards.

It was cold, but not enough for snow, and the men cursed the thermometer with the sort of hatred they had previously reserved for supply sergeants, staff officers, and conscientious objectors. The Germans did not figure in these curses. They had been forgotten, and it was easy enough to forget them, for they made no appearance, and the incessant downpour blotted out any noises they might have been making, somewhere in the mist-shrouded woods.

Everyone got sick. Noses ran and became red-raw from incessant wiping on filthy rags, on sleeves, on sodden bits of cardboard. Joints stiffened and, in some instances, became inflamed, with knuckles or knees swelling grotesquely as if stricken by rheumatism. The sound of coughing was as persistent as the sound of rain and just as varied—hacking, whooping, rattling, piercing. Several men were evacuated with pneumonia, but to Breese, the choices seemed arbitrary. You may as well have evacuated the entire platoon or no one at all.

Military routine, of course, did not recognize the existence of either weather or sickness. The men still had to stand guard duty, to sit behind silent dripping machine guns, to crouch in foxholes drowned with icy water, and to bail them out with their own helmets. They had to dig fresh latrine pits in soil so waterlogged it had the weight and consistency of wet cement; to fall out, hacking and feverish, to unload the occasional supply trucks that plowed like skiffs over the flooded log roads to their position; to go on flank patrols, though they were so weak and wet that they had trouble flipping the safety catches off their rifles

beforehand, with feet so swollen afterward that they often had difficulty removing their boots for foot inspection.

Feet! Breese grew to hate the sight of them. Fish-belly white except where they were covered with weals and sores, the nails purplish-black and sometimes falling off, always exuding a stench like rotten fish guts; he began to see them in his dreams—an endless parade of bloated feet marching past him through the mud. He was responsible for every pair, but he couldn't even maintain his own. The Army issued each man only two pairs of socks, and the standard practice was to keep the extra one stuffed down the front of your underwear, where the heat of your groin would keep it reasonably dry. This method had its limits, however, and the limits were soon exceeded, so that in violation of orders some men held their socks over heat tablets, which scorched them so that the smell of burned, filthy socks hung over the barn at all hours like the smoke from cigarettes.

Cigarettes! Breese had never understood the depth of his dependency—or perhaps he had just never needed them this badly—until coming to this miserable place. With the supply trucks arriving only at random, and like as not carrying things like kerosene, tent pegs, and ammunition for guns nobody was firing, everyone soon ran out of cigarettes and became dependent on the Chesterfields that were issued with the K-rations, four to a pack. Twelve cigarettes a day might have been sufficient when the sun was shining, but in this biblical climate, it scarcely served to see the lieutenant through lunchtime. The pain of withdrawal only compounded his agony, and before long, he was picking butts out of the muddy straw the same way he'd seen the tramps in the Bowery pick them out of the gutters, in the hopes that they might yield one last drag.

There was no news, but there were rumors. According to the company medic, Band-Aid Bodreau (a red-headed, rooster-footed sergeant whose face was so battered and weather-beaten he strongly

resembled William Tecumseh Sherman), a big push was in the works. Band-Aid claimed that when he had been in the rear to do some horse-trading with Those Bastards From Supply, he had seen artillery parks big as football stadiums and ammunition convoys backed all the way up the Red Ball Express. Breese was wary of all rumors but found himself hoping this one was true. Anything, even the possibility of violent death, was preferable to this soggy earthworm-existence, and he said as much to Halleck one evening as the big sergeant was cleaning his Thompson with a bore brush. The Texan just shrugged and continued his work.

“It’s the old Army game, Lieutenant—hurry up ‘n wait. Spent months in the States waitin’ to ship out to North Africa. Spent months in Sicily waitin’ to ship out to Italy, and spent Christ knows how much waitin’ in Italy to ship out to France. Now I’m waitin’ again. I reckon most of what a soldier *does* is wait.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

Halleck jerked a thumb in a westerly direction. “You lookin’ for Will Rogers, start walkin’ that way. It’s five thousand miles to Oklahoma.”

Breese *did* in fact walk away then—but only to get out of earshot. There were some things better left under your breath.

In the end, of course, the lieutenant's prayer for action was answered—though in the habit of prayers, not necessarily in the manner he would have preferred. The divisional commander had declared that every man in the line would receive a hot turkey dinner with all the trimmings on Thanksgiving Day—"come Hitler, hell, or high water." That was the expression the man had used, so naturally no one had believed him, and indeed, in the week leading up to Thanksgiving his name was the subject of abuse so violent Breese had a great deal of difficulty pretending he did not hear it or approve of it. But lo, on the morning of the big day—the usual dismal, fog-shrouded, sleet-spattered morning, in which the cold made even the youngest draftee feel as if he'd developed rheumatoid arthritis during the night—the whirr and cough of truck engines had greeted the red-eyed, unshaven soldiery as they cursed themselves awake. Before long, eerily familiar smells had begun to haunt the woods—not only turkey but bread and onions and something that smelled suspiciously like hot gravy. Faces, which had long since lost the power of expression, began to resolve slowly into studies in hope. Even old Mr. Easter Island Face himself, Halleck, had acquired a curious gleam in his enamel-blue eyes and begun a restless, anticipatory drumbeat of fingertips on the barrel-guard of his Thompson.

The smell of the food, the anticipation of the food, had acted on the platoon like alcohol. Their apathy dissolved. They made stupid jokes and poked rude fun at each other, the appearance of their teeth startling after weeks of close-mouthed scowling. Some of them began to groom as if before a dance, running combs through greasy hair or shaving out of their helmets, while others boiled up coffee and began to reminisce about their mothers' and grandmothers' cooking. Even the weather fell in line: the sleet tapered off to a drizzle that tapered off to nothing, and before long the sun—rumored to have burned out long ago—filled the eastern sky with a golden luminescence that was not quite sunshine but the next best thing. It grew warmer, and the breeze that pushed gently through the trees was not heavy with damp and rot but rather a thick, rich, leafy smell, a smell that was like a ghost-echo of the summer the men had just left behind. Something within Breese began to thaw; the bitter self-pity and despair that had cloaked him began to thin even as the morning mist was thinning. He began to understand that it was going to happen—a moment of normalcy, a moment of peace. An islet of pleasure in a sea of pain.

It was a long wait to noon; Breese could actually hear the stomachs growling around him. The rich, lovely scent of food grew stronger, so that it became impossible to concentrate. Conversation and horseplay ceased. Men flared their nostrils and licked their lips; a few smoked in the absent, nervous manner of those going into battle. Someone attempted “Bonnie Blue Flag” on a harmonica but trailed off after a half-dozen bars. The lieutenant grew tired of looking at his watch. The relief platoon finally arrived, and in what seemed like an eyeblink, the lieutenant and his men were trampling down the log road through swirls of coppery leaves and watery shafts of sunlight. It felt good to move after days and days of squatting in mucky foxholes filled with icy water; the pallor of the men improved as the blood pumped into

tissues long benumbed by cold. Breese was not the least bit surprised when a soldier named Morrow broke into song:

*God be with you till we meet again;
By His counsels guide, uphold you,
With His sheep securely fold you;
God be with you till we meet again.*

In a moment, a half-dozen voices took up the refrain:

*Till we meet, till we meet,
Till we meet at Jesus' feet;
Till we meet, till we meet,
God be with you till we meet again.*

Breese turned around and, walking backward, saw the men take it up, one after the other, some with wiseass grins, others with sad, haunted eyes, still others with a fierce defiant air, as if the act of song were a middle finger extended at the very concept of war. All of them, Southerners and Easterners, Baptists and Methodists, city boys and country boys, teenage draftees and volunteers of twenty-seven, buck privates and buck sergeants, all singing in a hard, ragged rhythm:

*God be with you till we meet again;
When life's perils thick confound you;
Put His arms unfailing round you;
God be with you till we meet again.*

Eyes alight. Chests heaving. Boots tramping hard. Voices ringing among the trees, startling the crows from their branches. Breese's arms broke out into gooseflesh. The men looked beautiful to him. Bad as they

actually looked, with their crusted eyes and snotty noses and cracked lips, their bristling chins and unshaven throats, they looked good. Because they were *alive*. They had a sway, a bounce, a swagger that belonged partially to youth and partially to toughness but mostly to life itself. *They were alive*. He could almost hear their hearts thundering. Caught up in the moment, he began to sing himself.

*God be with you till we meet again;
Keep love's banner floating o'er you,
Strike death's threatening wave before you;
God be with you till we meet again.*

He saw Halleck hurrying toward him. The sergeant was not singing. The knee of his trousers was out, and it flapped as he moved, exposing and covering the soiled waffle-pattern of his long underwear, itself torn and revealing scraped pink flesh. He fell into step beside Breese, his face taut and grim. *Are you buckin' for a Section Eight, Lieutenant?* he said, hissing over his sibilants. *Tell these dumbasses to shut their fuckin' mouths before the Krauts paste us all over this road!*

At any other time Breese would have obeyed; he had reconciled himself to the fact that it was Halleck who ran the platoon, but he was swollen and throbbing with life, somehow aware of that gold bar on his collar in a way he hadn't been in a long time—aware that *he* was in charge, *he* was in command, that these were *his* men, and that included this bullheaded obstinate son of a bitch of a sergeant, who didn't seem to know the word *sir* but knew everything else. Maybe it was the adrenaline in his veins; maybe it was just the knowledge they were already out of mortar range, but instead of meekly doing what this acorn-cracking yokel wanted, Breese simply lifted his voice yet higher, straining his vocal chords:

Sinner's Cross

*Till we meet, till we meet,
Till we meet at Jesus' feet;
Till we meet, till we meet,
God be with you till we meet again!*

They were still singing when they swung up to the field kitchens, arranged neatly in what passed for a clearing by the road—though it was only a clearing in the sense the trees grew at intervals of ten or even fifteen feet instead of sidling up to each other like horny teenagers at a dance. No one gave a damn anymore about the damp rotting leaves mixed up with the mud or the slimy feel of the blowdowns, because lo, being thrust at them by sweating red-faced cooks in spattered aprons were metal trays, *and the trays were laden with food*. Not C-rations. Not K-rations. Actual *food*, the sort your teeth were designed to chew and your stomach to digest, served hot enough to shimmer the cool morning air. Slabs of turkey! Mounds of stuffing! Dollops of cranberry sauce! Ladles-worth of brown gravy! Piles of white corn! Breese's hollow belly seemed to quiver, his long-dormant saliva glands to awaken. He wanted to shove through the crowd of dirty soldiers and seize a tray for himself, but officers weren't supposed to do that, and for the first time since he'd arrived in this hell, an officer was what he really felt like. A leader of men.

The men in the first rank were already hustling with their trays to find places to sit—atop logs, on top of stumps, braced against the trunks of trees, on the hood of a Military Police jeep. A boy from southern Illinois named Braxton, a survivor of the terrible fight at St. Denis-le-Gast and the owner of two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star, was actually dripping tears of joy into his mashed potatoes as he walked.

The lines moved quickly, with the cooks (uncharitably known as “hash-burners” or “belly-robbers”—what slander that was to a man living on K-rations!) chanting “Happy Thanksgivin’, Happy

Thanksgivin'” as they ladled the food onto the trays like ammo bearers feeding machine guns. The heat from the burners and the smell of the meat and the leaves was making Breese almost giddy, but he was getting close, fifth in line, third in line, next, and now the glistening visage of a cook was looming; now the man's brawny bare forearm was lifting his ladle; now a stream of gravy was pattering onto a great mound of mashed potatoes, and just like that, the slick, heavily laden tray was in the lieutenant's sweaty grip. He was still standing there, staring down wondrously at the food, when the first shell struck without warning in the trees high above him. Breese only realized he'd been knocked down by the force of the blast when he tried to jump for cover and saw that his boots were pointing at the sky and that the sky was full of smoke and fire. He took a deep breath and found his lungs didn't work—they may as well have been filled with wet cement—but there was nothing wrong with his ears, aside from pain and a high ringing that partially muffled the next explosion and the frying-bacon sound that accompanied it.

Breese tried to breathe and got nothing, clawed at his trachea to see if it had been crushed by the pressure wave, found it intact, was knocked up onto his knees by a third blast and from that position saw Morrow disintegrate in a spray of gore. One moment the private was solid, intact, vital; the next he was a cloud of vapor that splattered everything within thirty feet of him a slick, solid red. The lieutenant's blinded eyes stung, and a hot coppery taste filled his open mouth, the taste of Morrow. He tried to scream and couldn't get any air. He tried to crawl for cover and something hot struck him hard on the rim of his helmet and knocked his face into the mud, filling his nostrils with the scent of dead earth. He felt like a fly with one broken wing, waiting for the last crack of the swatter, in an ecstasy of helplessness and terror.

The great shells came down in fast succession, traveling faster than the whistle that was supposed to precede them, scything through the treetops before slamming into the boughs, and the force of the

explosions had driven billions of fragments of smoking-hot wood downward like hell's hail. In an instant, the trays were abandoned and everyone was scrambling for cover, trying to claw out foxholes in the leafy mud with their bare hands, forgetting in their panic the holes were useless, that they were digging their own graves, because the shrapnel came straight down in waves, in sheets, and the only way to avoid it was to get beneath something solid or to fling your arms around a tree trunk like it was your best girl and thus make yourself the smallest possible target. Breese did neither. He lay in a ball on the ground with his fingers jammed in his ears and his mouth full of brains and blood, sobbing, and the shrapnel had not hit him because it was so clearly enjoying his anguish. Halleck dragged him into a hollow beneath a fallen log, and there he lay, for minutes, for hours, for epochs, with his pants soaked through with piss once more and Armageddon in full swing around him.

At some point, the Germans ran out of ammunition and the explosions ceased, leaving a smoking hellscape of fallen trees and burning earth and a jumble of writhing, screaming, bleeding men lying in smears of cranberry sauce and spatters of gravy and severed limbs and the broken, twisted wreckage of the field kitchens. Breese saw Corporal Franzese sitting on his knees, trying to stuff a flood of purple guts back into his belly with wet red hands; saw the once fleet-footed Private Holloway crawling white-faced through the muck with both his legs torn off and spurting blood behind him; saw Private Rapacci slumped against a tree, one coppery-brown eye opened in surprise, the other obliterated by a footlong spike of wood that had driven through it. He saw brains and intestines mixed up with kernels of corn and chunks of bread stuffing, saw a boot from which a shard of bone rudely jutted, smoking as if it had just been seized from a fire, saw a cook hanging limp-limbed from the branches of a tree twenty feet above him, half-veiled by the smoke.

That night Breese lay in the muddy straw of the barn loft, listening to his ears ring and trying not to think. He had washed his mouth out with soapy water and brushed his teeth so many times his gums felt raw, but the taste of Morrow would not leave him. Every time he swallowed, he felt as if infinitesimally small pieces of the man were sliding down his gullet, and his stomach would spasm with nausea. The worst thing about it was that the cramps did not entirely mask the pangs of hunger that periodically tore through him. It had been almost twenty-four hours since he'd eaten anything—anything but Morrow—but every time he tried to lift a cracker to his lips, he was reminded of calf's brains on toast and flung it away in horror.

He was weeping as silently as he could, and praying that this was all a nightmare and he'd soon wake up warm and safe in his bed in the fraternity house at Columbia, when he heard the aircraft motor grumbling overhead. From the commotion below him, he knew it could not be an engine of American manufacture. Snatching his carbine, he scampered down the ladder and joined the stream of men stumbling outside into the chill of the night. He saw Halleck in the barn doorway, standing bareheaded in a spill of pale orange light, and heard him shout angrily to douse those got-damn lamps, got-dammit.

The lamps were doused, and with a rind of silvery moon in the cloudless sky for once, the darkness did not have dominion. The noise of the engine grew louder. Halleck was barking at the men to take cover, but almost no one did. German aircraft were a novelty over the front, and whatever was overhead didn't sound big enough to be dangerous. It was probably a single-engine Fieseler, the Kraut equivalent of a Piper Cub, and it was flying very low indeed. A number of the men were hoisting rifles to their shoulders and licking their lips, almost as if they were on a duck hunt.

A shadow covered the moon, and the sky was suddenly full of paper—twisting, turning, falling like oversized confetti. A few men let

loose with their rifles, and someone opened up with a B.A.R., but the sound of the engine was already fading, and most of the men had slung their weapons and begun scrambling after the leaflets as they scattered onto the fields. One of papers side-slipped to the earth a few yards from Breese. He picked it up and held it in the moonlight for examination. Nothing but a half-sheet of gritty-feeling paper, stamped with two words in slightly smeared ink:

Happy Thanksgiving!

6

It was the last day of November. The rain had not resumed, but it had left the landscape looking like a badly smudged watercolor; sky, trees, and earth all seemed to blur into each other in a vast smear of gray, green, and brown. Fogs blanketed the mornings; mists hung thick till nightfall. Edges seemed to have been abolished, and the only solidity was in the air, which was as cold and sharp as a bayonet. With the roads more or less navigable, preparations for a push on Schmidt were in full swing. Trucks laden with ammunition and rations and reinforcements fresh from the Repple-Depple lumbered along the back roads all day long, and reconnaissance aircraft droned over the German lines until sunset. Breese's platoon was selected to provide security on a Signal Corps detail laying telephone wire along the log road. It struck him as a stupid assignment, but the push itself struck him as stupid, for though the plan hinged on surprise, the Germans obviously knew it was coming. They had begun shelling on a regular schedule. Twice during the day and once every night, the piercing whistle of the enemy one-oh-fives filled the air like the toll of some hideous clock. Many of the men grew used to it, to the ripping-linen sound of the shells, to the pitter-pat of mud and pebbles against their helmets and neck and shoulders, to the horrible ringing in the ears and the suffocating vapor of the spent explosives. They dealt with it as they dealt with the weather, with curses

and resignation. Breese could not. Since Thanksgiving, he'd lived in mortal terror of the enemy guns. He worried about them so much he forgot that the forest held other dangers, and in this he was not alone.

When the "afternoon hate" had ended—that was what the men called the shelling, with the prefix adjusted for the time of day—Breese stood up, holding a silk handkerchief to his bloody nose (it had begun to bleed every time the guns began to bark) and ordered his platoon to fall out. The men made their way stiffly and sullenly through the stubble fields to the log road, pointedly avoiding each other's gazes, their faces expressionless behind their cigarettes. The sky above them had the glint of tin, and the cold, wind-driven air smelled of snow. No one spoke, but he knew what they were thinking. That morning, the assistant divisional commander, a brigadier named Ornberg, had come by the farmhouse on a whirlwind inspection tour. Ornberg was a tall, silver-headed man with cold eyes and a warm smile, forever hitching up the gun belt that slid down his narrow hips and saying things like *Where you from, soldier?*, but unlike his boss, he was not regarded as a bad sort. If his intent had been to raise morale before the push, however, he had failed miserably, for no sooner had he and his eight-man entourage departed than the grumbling began:

"Did you see that? Did you fucking *see* that?"

"Every one of those guys had a waterproof mackinaw with a blanket collar."

"And fur-lined gloves."

"*And* rubber galoshes."

"That one bastard had a fuckin' snow smock with a hood over his coat. I'm wearin' a fuckin' blanket with a hole cut in it, and he's got a brand new snow smock. Ain't even hardly *snowed* yet!"

"Dirty sons of bitches sleep on feather beds in a frog *château*, what the hell they hoggin' all our cold-weather gear for?"

“Can’t even treat us right before a push. Can’t even let us *die* warm.”

Breese knew he should shut them up, but he’d been badly shaken by the afternoon hate, and with his nostrils clogged with blood and his cheeks stung by cold, he was not in the mood to interfere. Halleck barked, “You blank files just now realizin’ they got it better in the rear than you do in the mud? Quit your bitchin’ before I give you somethin’ to bitch about.”

They shuffled into the gloom of the woods and about ten minutes later found a small detail of Signal Corps men laying communications cable alongside the log road, via an enormous drum mounted on the back of a jeep. The leader of the detail was a short, gum-chewing buck sergeant in a dirty two-piece fatigue uniform, and he grinned a huge, yellow-toothed grin of relief when he saw Breese. “Ain’t you a sight for sore eyes. Damn jeep conked out on us, Lieutenant. We’re gonna need a hand pushing her along.”

Breese looked at the teeth in disgust. “We’re out here to protect you from infiltrators, Sergeant, not to do your job for you. Call your headquarters for another jeep.”

“We tried, sir; we can’t get a signal in this lousy forest.”

“Then push the damn thing yourselves.”

“This grade gets wicked steep, sir, and we need one man in the driver’s seat to work the brake and another to work the drum. It’ll take at least four or five guys to move it.”

“Not our problem.”

“Sir...if we don’t get this wire laid by dark—”

“Not our problem.”

The sergeant’s grin unraveled into a disbelieving line. “You’re really just gonna watch us push this jeep up the hill?”

“Don’t be silly,” Breese said savagely. “I’m going to smoke a cigarette and drink some of the coffee in my canteen and hum ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’ I’ll be much too *busy* to watch.”

The platoon had overheard this exchange and were smirking almost to a man, the exception being Halleck, who quickly came over after the sergeant had walked away and said in hushed tones, “Man needs our help, Lieutenant.”

“A lot of men need things they aren’t gonna get,” Breese said, enjoying his newfound ability to inflict pain instead of merely having it imposed upon him. “When we’re digging foxholes in the muck, I don’t recall anybody from Signal Corps coming to help *us*. These dime-store commandos can sweat a little; it won’t kill them.”

An hour passed, then another. The Signal Corps team struggled and slipped and sweated until their faces shone, cursing a blue streak while the platoon, arrayed carelessly along the edge of the road, watched without interest or pity. Ignoring Halleck’s disapproving frown, Breese sipped his lukewarm coffee and enjoyed the feeling of spite, mingled with power, that this incident had engendered. The world was full of people who had wronged him whom he could not hurt—his father, the draft board, whatever clod in the military bureaucracy had assigned him to the Infantry instead of Army Pictorial Services—but if he could not get back at them, if he could not strike out at the thieving bastards from Supply or General Ornberg or even the Germans, he could at least punish *these* fools. And they deserved to be punished. Anyone who got hot meals and a cot to sleep in, who got to drink Coca-Cola and listen to *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* on Armed Forces Radio, and who never, ever got the snot knocked out of them by one-oh-five shells, should be made to taste a little suffering when possible.

It’s the least I can do, Breese thought. *My contribution to the war effort.*

The hill got steeper, and the forest, shot away by old bombardments, no longer shielded anyone from the scouring wind. For the first time since he'd arrived in this place, Breese had a view; he could see pine-covered hills to the east and realized he was looking into German-held territory. By now, the Signal Corps men were puce-faced with exhaustion and measuring their progress in yards, and the light was beginning to take on that flat, disinterested quality that was the harbinger of the evening. Bored and cold, Breese was just beginning to wonder if maybe he shouldn't order his men to lend a hand after all, when O'Roon drove up in a jeep, chewing a cold cigar and looking as if he had just swallowed a hot iron.

"What in the name of Jesus Christ and General Jackson is going on here? You all were supposed to be linked up with the exchange at Battalion an *hour* ago. The captain thought ya'd been greased by infiltrators." His glowering black eyes focused on the doubled-over Signal Corps men, whose gasping breaths were producing more steam than a locomotive. "Did your jeep shit the bed?"

The Signal Corps sergeant took his hand off his knee to give a thumbs-up. O'Roon, his face incredulous, turned to Breese. "And you're just watchin'? This whole time you just been *watchin'*?"

Breese licked his lips. Everyone was staring at him. He was trying to think of a reply when he heard a faint *crack* somewhere in the hills; a half-second later, something struck O'Roon in the side of the helmet, knocking the dead cigar from his teeth. Another *crack* and the yellow-toothed sergeant sat down hard. By the time the third *crack* sent a bullet whistling harmlessly through the underbrush, everyone was flat, including Breese. He made love to the earth and waited for another shot. None came.

From somewhere nearby, Halleck bellowed: "Luminous! Bring me that radio!"

"With that sniper popping away? Nix to that."

Breese heard the distinctive sound of a submachine gun bolt being drawn back. “Luminous, you fuckin’ coward, I got my Thompson trained on your fuckin’ head. You don’t get over here right now I’ll kill you and get a hard-on doin’ it!”

Whimpering and cursing, Luminous combat-crawled to Halleck and handed over the handy-talkie. Halleck began to shout coded jargon into it—call signs, grid coordinates, military gibberish. Breese realized he was asking Duffy for artillery and felt as if an invisible hand had suddenly convulsed on his bladder. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Calling Philip Morris! Fuck does it sound like?”

“You can’t raise anyone in these woods.”

“We’re not *in* the woods. We’re on a bare-assed *hill*. How else do you think that sniper saw us?”

As if to second this, another shot spurted earth not fifteen feet from where the lieutenant cringed. Halleck put down the radio and shouted, “Who got hit?”

Breese recognized Holzinger’s voice: “The Top’s shot in the head!”

“It’s a scratch,” O’Roon sounded like a defiant drunk.

“You’re bleeding like a pig.”

“It’s nothin’. Helmet stopped it.” There was a pause. “Mostly.”

“*I’m* hit.” The Signal Corps sergeant said, in a terror-filled groan. “Oh, dear Lord Jesus, I’m shot....”

Heedless of the sniper, Holzinger scrambled over to the man, unfastening the straps on his medical bag as he ran. The sergeant seemed unhurt; he was not bleeding, but his face was turning white even as Breese watched—not merely going pale with fright but draining so thoroughly of color it was as if the blood within it were evaporating. He sagged back, his fingers scrabbling clumsily around a tiny hole in the fabric of his fatigue jacket, and his mouth jerked open, the tongue a startling red sight between lips that had already gone as translucent as

wax. "Oh, dear God, no!" The sergeant shrieked, and with convulsive strength, he seized the bony medic by his jacket. "I'm shot! I'm dying! I'm gonna die! Slap my face! Slap my face!"

Holzinger gave him the fore of his hand and then the back. The sergeant's legs jerked, his feet flopping like frogs on a skillet, his back arching at an orgasmic angle as his head rocked under the blows. But as rapidly as this frenzy of strength had come on, it was already fading, the boots coming to rest, the hands falling away to twitch spasmodically in the dirt. Tight-lipped, the medic replaced the bandage he was holding into his bag and crawled away.

"Corporal!" Breese shouted. "What the hell are you doing? He needs help!"

"The man's dead, Lieutenant. He bled out."

"There's not a drop of blood on him."

"Bleeding was *inside*, Lieutenant. I got to go see to the Top."

Breese rolled over and looked at the Signal Corps man. He lay on his back, eyes bulging and sightless, one clawed hand flung outward as if still trying to grasp at life. It didn't seem possible he could be dead; the hole in his uniform was no larger in circumference than the eraser on a pencil. But there he lay.

Without warning, the ripped-linen sound of flying shells filled the air. Breese heard himself hitch for breath and felt a single spurt of urine warm against his right thigh. Then he realized they were American shells, whumping hard into the hills to the east. Within sixty seconds, smoke and displaced earth began to unfurl into the sky over those hills like a huge, dirty banner. In the meantime, Holzinger had helped O'Roon into the back of the jeep and taken the wheel. The Top did not look good. The right side of his head glistened crimson below the bullet-canted helmet, and his eyes had the dazed look of a prizefighter who'd just woken up from a knockout. "Got to get him to the aid station," the medic said.

They drove off in a spray of dirt. Shells were still falling, plastering the enemy hills and sending their shockwaves across the valley. Breese rose shakily to his feet. When at last he looked away from the body of the Signal Corps man, he saw Halleck staring at him.

“Guess he don’t need our help *now*, Lieutenant.”

Breese felt a tremor in his lips. “Goddamn it!” he screamed. “Get this fucking jeep up over this hill! I want every man on it! Move, move, *move!*”

The men moved, and in less than half an hour the connection had been made with the Battalion switchboard. The hard gloom of afternoon had come in with the fog, and Breese double-timed his men back over the hill and up the log road to the company area, trying not to think about the murderous looks the surviving Signal Corps men had kept giving him. He made a terse report to Duffy and was up in the barn loft, working clotted blood out of his nostrils with his fingers and trying to forget all the names he’d just been called, when he heard Holzinger’s voice through the open window.

“Wasn’t anything they could do for him.”

“What do you mean?” someone replied. “Didn’t look so bad to me.”

“To me neither. But while we were driving, his breathing got slower and slower and he stopped talking. By the time I got to Battalion Aid, he was just slumped down with these glassed-over eyes like a stuffed moose. Figured it for a fractured skull with massive subdural hematoma. The sawbones put him on the table and started trying to evacuate, but the Top was already dead.”

“Son of a bitch. I always thought it would take an elephant gun to kill that big bastard.”

“Nope. Just a stupid-ass lieutenant.”

Breese shut his eyes. It had been this way his whole life. Someone was always bullying him into doing something for which he

had no interest or talent and then cursing him because he wasn't any damned good at it. And now the push was coming. Another chance to screw up. He lay back and clenched his teeth until the urge to weep passed. Then, he checked his watch and shouted down to Halleck to get the men into the sandbagged trenches outside the barn. It was almost time for the evening hate.

7

Dawn found the assembly area wreathed in a fog so thick it looked to Breese as if he were watching the world through a veil of gauze. He crouched beneath an archway of dripping branches, watching the first colors of the day appear in the form of glowing cigarette-ends all around him. He could see nothing, but then again, there was nothing to see: just suggestions of trunks, tall and slender and branchless, ghostly through the fog.

It struck him that whoever had ordered this attack could not possibly have seen the terrain beforehand. Some general had looked at the map and said, *Through here*, and just like that, as easy as turning a spigot, thousands of men gushed forward to quench the enemy's flame or be turned to steam upon it. A colossal expenditure of time, money, effort, sweat, machinery, ammunition, gasoline, and blood, all staked on the uninformed whim of an old man.

Fucking absurd, he thought.

Breese's cigarette had gone out in the rain, and as he fished for another, he looked up and down the length of the log—at his radioman and medic, his squad leaders and riflemen and automatic riflemen, at the machine-gunners, mortarmen, and bazooka teams lent to him by Battalion. It was astonishing how identical sleeplessness and tension made the human face. Take a look at Threlkis, there, with his miserable

eyes and heavy downturned mustache and blue-shaved chin. Not a thing in common with that pasty-faced runt Loomis, whose cheeks looked as if they had never seen a razor and would never need to. And yet sitting side by side, with their helmets agleam with moisture and their faces bleached from fear and fatigue, they may as well have been cousins.

He had no desire to know what *he* looked like; it was easy enough to imagine. The previous evening, after the hospitality wagons had rolled away, Halleck had taken the lieutenant into the icy shadows beside the barn and given him the bad news. *Cap'n says he wants me to replace O'Toole as Top Kick.*

Breese had been half-expecting this, but the news nevertheless came hard. As much as he disliked and resented the Texan, he also knew that he needed him. *Effective when?*

Effective now. He wants me to sew on some master sergeant stripes and go out with him to meet the replacements for the company.

The relief in Halleck's voice had been as palpable as it was humiliating. Breese heard his voice begin to crack. *But we've got the push tomorrow! I need your help.*

So does Duffy. He's halfway to a Section Eight as it is, and with O'Roon gone....

Breese didn't want to talk about O'Roon. *What am I supposed to do for a platoon sergeant?*

Pick one of the squad leaders.

Which one?

Halleck sighed. *That's your call to make, Lieutenant. I can't help you no more. You just got to do what you think best.*

Halleck turned and started away. In spite of himself, the lieutenant had called out, *I did what I thought best this afternoon. I got two men killed.*

The sergeant, a shadow dimly outlined by the glow of a Coleman lamp, hesitated. He did not turn, and for a moment Breese thought he

wasn't going to respond. Then he said, in a low, faint voice: *Just remember: when you lose, don't lose the lesson.*

Now, squatting by the slimy bulk of the blowdown, he was pretty sure he looked like a man who'd not only lost the lesson but had spent a long, solitary night in the stinking darkness of the barn, sipping from a pint bottle of Cream of Kentucky and listening to his heartbeat.

He was scared absolutely shitless.

Breese hadn't known much about fear when he arrived in the forest, but every day since then had been a furtherance of his education, and graduation day had arrived. There was no amount of Cream of Kentucky that could wash the taste of terror from his mouth now. With Halleck by his side, it might have been manageable, but Halleck was gone—nothing left of him but glimpses through the swirling, writhing fog as he moved along the line of departure, doing whatever the hell it was a company sergeant did on the eve of battle.

I'm on my own, he thought.

Of course, he wasn't the only one. The tanks were apparently late, and according to the angry crackling on the radio, the engineers hadn't moved up yet either, despite the fact that the entire plan hinged on both groups being in place on the main road at H-Hour. Breese bit his knuckle to prevent it from pounding into his own helmet. All this planning, all this preparation, and the Army couldn't even get the players into the ring before the opening bell.

The guns started up. The sheer number of them was impressive, but for Breese, the experience was more surreal than awesome. He could see nothing, and the crushing, rumbling, smashing sounds that rolled over him and through him like the sternum-shaking concussions of thunder seemed to have no direction, no target. The rain, the fog, the hills, the bizarre acoustics of the forest, all conspired to warp his perceptions. Some moments, the noise of the explosions was breath-snatching, painful; other times, it took on a muffled quality, as of

powerful but distant fireworks. Sometimes the firing came steadily and other times in volleys that made the ground shake beneath his feet. A few shells even careened into the American line, making Breese think bitterly of those lines from "The Caisson Song":

*Was it high, was it low,
Where the hell did that one go?
As those caissons go rolling along.
Was it left, was it right,
Now we won't get home tonight
And those caissons go rolling along....*

A lot of folks wouldn't be getting home tonight if *that* kept up. Before long, a smell came drifting out of the forest, a prickly smell of spent explosives and disinterred earth, and still the guns raged, as if trying to shave the trees as flat as the stubble fields that adjoined them. He knew that just a mile or so away, the Germans were catching hell itself, yet this knowledge provided him no comfort, no assurance. He was trying to remember the operations order, also known as the Five Paragraph Order, which McKisk had handed out to the platoon leaders last night. A single typewritten sheet of paper that contained the Army's plans for his platoon, down to the very last detail. The trouble was at that moment, Breese couldn't remember a word of it. It was as if someone had reached inside his skull and wiped down the slate of his memory with a wet sponge. The only thing he could recall was a strict injunction from Duffy to stay out of the Badlands, and he didn't need to be reminded of *that*. Halleck had already warned him that the place was a death trap, easy to stumble into and nearly impossible to get out of. His last, parting advice had been a quick, lantern-lit lecture over a map at five o'clock that morning:

Your platoon's on the extreme right-hand side of the advance, right up on the edge of the valley, see? You get turned around, chances are you'll find yourself down there. It slopes down real gentle in some places; so gentle that with all these trees and rocks and underbrush and shit you won't even know you're headed into it until you hit the bottom. I know, 'cause it happened to me once on patrol. One minute, I knew where I was, and the next I was steppin' in a fuckin' boneyard. Bodies everywhere. And remember this, Lieutenant; whenever you come on bodies on an old battlefield that ain't been buried, chances are it's because whatever killed 'em is still there. Don't stop to pray, just do like I did—turn tail and run.

The guns were fading, fading, replaced by whistles and the barks of sergeants. He saw flits of movement to his left, a wave of olive and khaki rippling through the harsher green of the forest; the other platoons were moving. Breese looked at his own platoon and saw everyone staring back at him, waiting on his word, but the word was stuck fast in his throat. Even a man soused in Cream of Kentucky could see this was nuts. Hell, anyone who hadn't been lobotomized could see this was nuts. Visibility was zero. The ground was shit. Half the assault force hadn't showed up. And the Germans knew they were coming. Yet there they went, stepping off smartly and without hesitation, a few dozen that he could see, hundreds more that he couldn't, two whole battalions moving as one. Breese watched for a moment, silently and in wonderment, the unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth, and then suddenly he understood. No one had *expected* things to go right; all the men cared about was releasing the pent-up energy of these long terrible weeks. They'd had enough of mutely absorbing punishment; now they wanted to dish some out. And if they got killed trying? Well, you might as well die going forward as cowering in a hole. Your parents would get the same telegram either way.

Fucking absurd! His mind insisted, but there was no more time for thinking. If he waited even a second longer, the fear that was weakening his muscles would paralyze him completely. He flicked the cigarette away and stood up, wanting to sound manly and decisive when he shouted *Let's go!* But he was unable to make any noise at all. It didn't matter; Ryerson blew a whistle, and the platoon rose as one and followed him into the fog.

They got about two hundred yards before something howled out of the unseen sky with a noise so awful that the sound of it caused Breese's entire body to break out in gooseflesh. Of course, he'd heard of the *Nebelwerfer*, the six-barreled rocket launcher the Germans were so fond of; his instructors had even showed him a captured one during Basic Training. But the captured ones didn't shoot at you. The bomb exploded in the trees not fifty yards away, and along with a searing wave of heat, threw out such a hail of shrapnel that the very air seemed to waver like water disturbed by a stone. Breese felt icy-cold slime on his knees, realized he'd fallen, was trying to get up when a second detonation followed the first. Now, he was face down in the slime and another rocket fell, and another and another and another yet, each one howling that godawful damned-soul howl that was worse than the explosion. He knew that his fear of artillery would paralyze him if he let it, and so when the last rocket had gone off with an ear-jangling *whump*, he forced himself to his feet and broke into a staggering run, binoculars jouncing, map case beating the advance against his thigh. The howling was everywhere now, a whole chorus of the damned, a chorus that shook the earth so hard that fragmented wood and rocks and dirt showered down along with the icy rain. Smoke mingled with the curling mist,

giving the whole world a vague, ill-defined appearance, like the backdrop in a nightmare. It was through this nightmare that he ran.

There was no organization. The companies and platoons and squads had disintegrated like figurines struck with a hammer, and the splinters bounced everywhere, some singly, some in groups of two or three, sliding down slopes, splashing through creeks or brimming shell holes, jumping over blowdowns. Breese no longer had any idea where he was going. He passed a corpse that looked like no more than a scorched heap of rags and then a teenage boy from his own platoon who was down on his knees, eyes screwed shut, mouth twisted in a continuous scream for his mother. Then there was another *whump* and something flew into him, hit him hard like a football tackle, and the wind exploded from his lungs with a grunt and he was down and seeing stars among the dead leaves and the pebbles and the half-exposed roots. He rolled away from the pain, his chest throbbing, and came up to his hands and knees. He was slippery with blood, but his frantic fingers could find no wound, no rupture in his precious flesh. Face, neck, chest, arms, stomach, groin, thighs—all intact. A waft of scorched fat suddenly stung the back of his throat, and he turned to the source of it and saw a bloody torso lying a few yards away, guts dangling redly in the dirt. The torso retained an arm, whose spattered sleeve held three chevrons, and a helmeted head, whose face was contorted so terribly it resembled a Halloween mask—all eyes and nostrils and lips and teeth. It took the lieutenant a moment to recognize from within those contortions the features of Sergeant Spicer, who would never again see Nitro, West Virginia, even as a corpse.

He got up and stumbled on. It hurt to breathe, and his boots felt like buckets of wet cement, but he forced himself into a shambling trot. Twice he fell, and twice he was helped up by firm hands, whose he could not say. The terrible scream of the rockets kept up unabated, but the explosions were falling further and further behind. At last, he saw

what he was looking for: another fallen log, this one arched like a half-buried eyebolt, and he fell down in its lee. Loomis fell with him, gasping and mud-spattered, followed immediately by two others—Luckner, one of the B.A.R. men, and Huntley, a sharpshooter. Breese glanced about, his chest heaving, and each heave touching a red-hot nerve of pain like a barrel loop all around his heart. Fucking Spicer must have cracked his rib. Spicer, the human cannonball, had done what all those German rocket bombs could not. The lieutenant found the bottle in his jacket, unscrewed the cap, and swallowed an ounce of peat moss and flame. At once the pain abated, as if driven back by a whip. The fear, however, persisted, threatening to become horror. He looked around for the rest of his men and saw only glimpses of movement, as if a herd of deer were flitting through the forest instead of two battalions of infantry. Somewhere a German machine gun started up with a horrible sound that seemed to come from everywhere, echoing off the hills so that now it was coming from ahead, now from behind. Breese heard Huntley breathe deeply, Luckner flinch as if they'd been slapped. Pavlovian reaction: they'd heard German machine guns before. But the lieutenant hadn't, and the rate of fire appalled him. You could go through a belt of ammo in two seconds flat at that speed, and God help whoever you were aiming it at, which in this case would be...

Me, Breese thought, and then automatically added: *Us*.

He shouted for Loomis but got no response, and there were no landmarks, nothing with which to orient himself. Just forest, forest everywhere. A number of riflemen blundered out of the underbrush, saw him, and flopped down gratefully behind the log, panting as if they'd just run five miles. Evidently, the fight had gone out of them already, and the look in their eyes said plainly that if he, Breese, wanted to spend the rest of the war behind this blowdown, well, they weren't going to mutiny over it. Breese was just turning over that idea in his mind when the radioman appeared, staggering like a drunk, and fell down at his

boots, sobbing. His face and neck were cut in twenty or thirty places—shallow little nicks like shaving cuts, each of which was welling up with little red jewels of blood—and one of his eyes was shut and watering furiously.

“Are you all right?” Breese said before he could help himself.

Luminous made a sound that translated roughly as: *What the fuck does it look like?* The riflemen began to shout for the medic, and the power of their voices drew not only Holzinger, red-faced and wet, but Staff Sergeant Ryerson and another half-dozen men. The new platoon sergeant was a plain-faced, even-tempered, unswearing boy from Salt Lake City, unremarkable-looking save for his right hand, which was a livid, shiny pink—a souvenir of the fighting at Saint-Lô, when he’d pulled four wounded men out of a burning tank. Seeing that plain, quietly determined face, whose sole feature of interest was a spray of freckles across a snubbed nose, Breese reluctantly decided the war would have to continue after all. He wrenched the handy-talkie from Luminous’ belt, ignoring his cry of pain, and after a lot of shouting, managed to locate Sergeant Keesey and his missing squad, along with a machine-gun team. The sounds of battle were coming from all directions now, or seeming to, and the crowd of men around him grew. He’d been warned about that in training—*you bunch up like grapes, you get stomped like grapes*—and he was just about to shout an order to spread out when ahead of him, the forest began to destroy itself with a blinding, ear-splitting fury.

Somehow he hadn’t heard the approach of these rockets, but now they were detonating one after the other among the trees, in a straight line that was advancing almost directly toward him—one, two, three, four. For a moment, he watched in appalled fascination as an invisible leviathan bludgeoned its way through the towering firs as if they were saplings. Then the air went dark with flying dirt and burning wood and something stung his ear, and the pain jolted him to his feet, and

everyone was running in a kind of panicked unison, like a herd of maddened animals. The ground ahead of them fell away from a rutted cart track into a tangle of rocks and broken stumps and mud and stagnant water and underbrush, and they staggered and slipped and cursed their way down, conscious only of the desire to flee and nothing else. Part of the lieutenant wondered if this ugly mess was the edge of the Badlands, but the other ninety-nine percent didn't care. Wherever they were, they were not in the path of immediate destruction. Already the sound of the battle was fading to a dull roar; Breese could feel the impacts through his body, but his ears were no longer throbbing painfully with each blast.

The ground became roughly level, and as their momentum waned, they came upon a sunken stretch of half-hardened mud, formerly a road, upon which a German supply wagon lay submerged to its axles, with a skeletal driver driving two skeletal horses heaped among bridles and harnesses and rusty trace chains. The grinning driver wore a tarnished steel helmet and a rotting greatcoat, and his bony fingers clutched whitely at the leather reins. The men stopped running; the sight of death can induce a panic, but it can also end one. They crouched nervously around the wagon, red-faced despite the cold, fingering their triggers and patting themselves down for wounds.

"You're hit, Lieutenant," Ryerson panted. Breese touched his ear; his fingers came away bloody. *Fucking Germans tried to kill me*, he thought incredulously. He wanted to scream for a medic, but Holzinger was busy pressing a field dressing to Luminous' blood-drenched face, and the word died in his throat.

"Where'n fuck you figger we are?" Sergeant Keesey rasped. He was a dart-eyed, sharp-nosed, hollow-cheeked Kentuckian with a coarse, vicious way of talking. Breese fished out his compass, but the wobbly needle showed him nothing, except how badly his hand was shaking.

"Somewhere in the Badlands," Ryerson said. "That was a long way downhill."

"They don't look so bad to me," Breese replied shakily. "Like to build a damn summer home here about now."

Ryerson looked surprised. "We can't *stay* here, Lieutenant."

Breese was about to ask *Why the hell not?* when the unmistakable rustle and snap of someone stumbling through the thick underbrush on the opposite side of the washed-out road made Keesey bellow, "*Hit the dirt!*"

Breese fell on his face, the mud and leaves icy-cold and slimy-wet against his knees, crotch, and palms, and struggled to get his carbine untangled from its strap. Through the scrub, he saw flits of movement, a glimpse of the dome of an olive-drab helmet. The Germans usually used dark, unfinished steel, but he couldn't be sure. A sleety silence descended, broken only by the *whump* of the rocket bombs bursting in the distance. Breese shouted over the lock of his carbine: "Who the hell are you?"

"Engineers." Came the curt reply. "Who are *you*?"

"Infantry."

"The hell you say."

"What, you want the password?"

"I don't *remember* the fucking password."

Me neither, Breese thought. "All right. Who's the Secretary of War?"

"Henry L. Stimson. Who's dem bums?"

"Um, the, ah—" He read the words silently moving on Ryerson's lips. "The Brooklyn Dodgers. Who's Lamont Cranston's best girl?"

"Margo Lane, and to hell with this," the voice snapped. "I'm coming out. You shoot me, you're gonna answer to my mom."

The bushes parted. A short, ferocious-faced, blond-bearded first lieutenant in American khaki emerged, waving a fuming cigar like a

white flag. He was so uniformly dirty that it looked as if his helmet, face, jacket, belt, trousers, leggings, and boots had been hit with shotgun-blasts of fresh mud. Breese lowered his carbine and went out to meet him. The two men regarded each other at the sleet drummed on their helmets, breath smoking.

“Breese. Easy Company, Second Battalion.”

“Schillinger. Combat Engineer Company.”

“What are you doing down here? You’re supposed to be up on the road with the tanks.”

The little officer’s jaws clenched through their beard, and for a moment, Breese thought he was going to shout back, *So are you, asshole!*, but instead the man burst out in an agitated flood of words. “We were waiting for them in the assembly area at Heartbreak Crossroads at oh-six-thirty. It was dark and raining, and the tanks didn’t show. Quarter to seven, seven, seven-fifteen and still no tanks. Finally, we hear the engines coming up the road. Captain Ringway steps out with a lantern to wave ‘em down, and the fucking tanks just *ran him down.*” Schillinger slapped one palm flat with another. “Not one, mind you. *All* of ‘em.” More slaps on the palm. “We were shouting and hollering and screaming to beat the band, but it didn’t do any good. The whole fucking herd of tanks just runs over him one after the other after the other. Ever step on a tube of toothpaste? The Captain’s guts came right out his mouth. And the tanks just kept goin’—mind you, down the *wrong* fork in the road. Those dumbass tank drivers musta been holding their maps upside-down and mistook which set of crossroads they were at—there’s another one atop the escarpment over there called Sinner’s Cross, but that’s on the *German* side of the line. Well, the Captain had the handy-talkie on his belt, and there wasn’t much left of it, either, so I decided to take the men up the *right* fork in the road. *I* wasn’t gonna get court-martialed for being at the wrong place at H-Hour. Except then we got clobbered by those Moaning Minnies. They must have killed eight or ten

of our guys and Lieutenant Sweeney too. So we scattered every which way, and most of us ended up down here. I been collecting strays for twenty minutes.”

“How many men you have?”

“Say half the company. Sixty or seventy guys. You know where the tanks are?”

Breese went as cold as the sleet prickling the backs of his hands. *Sixty or seventy guys*, the officer had said. Sixty or seventy armed men hidden in that tangled mess not twenty yards ahead of him, and he hadn't seen a thing. He wondered if it was always this way in battle, one fuck-up compounding another compounding another, until there was nothing of your confidence but gristle.

“I don't even know where *we* are,” he said feebly.

“Snafu as usual,” Schillinger grunted.

Ryerson came over and handed Breese a field dressing for his ear. “Don't mean to interrupt your powwow, sirs, but we've gotta get out of here. This guy—” He pointed the muzzle of his rifle at the dead driver. “—didn't die of old age. Either he got killed by one of his own shells or one of ours; either way, this place is in the artillery fire-pattern for both sides. Anyway, we need to move out and link back up with the company.”

“You want to go *back*?” Breese blurted before he could stop himself. “Listen to that! The Germans are pounding the hell out of that ridge.”

“We're *not* going back up there,” Schillinger said. “I just put my company back together again; I'm not gonna have it blown apart trying to get back to that road.”

“What other choice do we have?” Ryerson looked baffled. “We can't stay here.”

“Nobody said anything about staying here.” Fitting his cigar between his teeth, Schillinger knelt, rested his carbine by its butt-plate,

and began to scratch a crude map in the dirt with his K-bar. "There's an exit to this valley about a quarter mile northeast of here. A broken trail that leads up out to the bottom of Sinner's Cross. It'd put us behind the Kraut lines."

"That 'exit' is a trail about as wide as my hand," Ryerson said. "And it's covered by Kraut machine guns. It's a death trap."

"This whole forest is a death trap, Sergeant!" Schillinger snapped. "Besides, how do we know what the Krauts have got over there? There's been no recon anywhere in this valley since the middle of September."

Ryerson's voice rose two octaves. "That's because the guys that did the recon in September got slaughtered."

Schillinger sheathed his bayonet and stood. A combative gleam had come into his whiskey-brown eyes. "Well, that was then."

"Damn it, Lieutenant, the plan—"

"Is shot to hell, Sergeant." Schillinger turned abruptly to Breese. "Look, between us, we've got a hundred men or more. And my boys have bangalore torpedoes, bazookas, TNT, rifle grenades, and enough pineapples to start a plantation. We got thermite bombs too. Whatever the Krauts have up there, we can handle 'em. Nobody's pushed on that escarpment for almost three months; they'll never expect it. Not now of all times."

Breese licked his lips. It seemed like the whole world was staring at him—narrowed eyes in unshaven, weather-tortured faces. Impatient. Expectant. Demanding. He didn't know what to say. He'd never wanted the Infantry. He'd wanted to spend the war at Kaufman Astoria Studios making training films for the Army, a job where you could knock off precisely at five and then slip into a tailored dress uniform, hail a cab, and catch Art Tatum at the Café Society before bedtime. Instead, he was here in this horrific place, bleeding and filthy and frightened, with the fate of dozens of men hanging on his every word. It was too much. Like

a man warding off a blow, he lifted the handy-talkie and tried to raise the captain, Halleck, anyone who could relieve him of this responsibility. Static was the only reply. Breese wanted to scream. If only the Germans would stop their artillery. But it came on and on, a relentless pounding. He could not take his men back into that. He could not.

“Radios don’t work down here,” Schillinger said. “We need elevation. And we can get all we want up that trail. When your regimental commander finds out we’ve flanked the Kraut line, he’ll send every man he’s got to support us.”

“Lieutenant Breese,” Ryerson said loudly. “This is your call to make.”

Schillinger pointed at the silver bar on his helmet. “Not by a long shot it isn’t, Sergeant. Or didn’t they teach you what this means in Basic Training?”

“You’re here to support our attack.” Ryerson said, sounding as if he were quoting from a manual. “Which means Lieutenant Breese has tactical command, and that supersedes your rank. *His* call, not yours.”

Breese couldn’t stand the savage intensity in Schillinger’s stare. He dropped his gaze to the man’s mud-crusting boots and mumbled, “I guess we’ll do like you say.”

The engineer officer grunted in satisfaction and began to shout orders to his non-coms. Ryerson took his platoon leader hard by the arm. “Don’t let him do this.”

“I can’t stop him.” *Jesus Christ I sound like I’m about to cry.*

“You’re in command here!”

“He ranks me.”

“He’s a *first lieutenant*, not a general. If he wants to take his men up that trail, let him. We have a job to do, and it’s not here. You could get court-martialed for this.”

Another salvo hit the ridge somewhere behind them—huge, roaring explosions that sent a litter of debris pattering down the slope. The impacts, distant as they were, drove everyone to their knees and finally to their faces. Breese felt a trickle of blood run warmly down his neck, and that decided him.

“I’d rather be in the stockade than dead. Let’s move out.”

They moved and met no resistance—except from the terrain, which rambled and curved, plunged and rose, and turned alternately into greasy rock, ankle-twisting root, or boot-sucking mud. In the depths of the Badlands, the light was poor, a dull gray glow tintured with green, and currents of snow now fell through the torn canopy of branches and leaves and needles as through a leaky roof. The echoes of battle were all around them, but no battle presented itself, which was just what Schillinger had predicted. The Germans had left this hole in the battlefield just that—a hole, empty of troops.

Well, live ones, anyway. The dead were everywhere. In the scrub-growth and the shell holes lay careless heaps of bones in bullet-canted helmets and moldering khaki rags, some curled up in vaguely fetal positions around their rusted Garands, others scattered over ten or twenty feet of ground where explosives had riven them apart. All of them wore the octofoil shoulder patches of the division that had been first into the forest. Among this human litter was also the litter of battle: spent shell casings, wadded-up field dressings, belts of unused ammunition, rotting haversacks, unused hand grenades, torn paper, this, that. Breese was reminded of pictures of Civil War battlefields months after the fighting had ended, and he remembered Halleck's words of caution: *Whenever you come on bodies on an old battlefield that ain't*

been buried, chances are it's because whatever killed 'em is still there. But the men who had killed *these* men seemed long gone. Except for the slosh of canteens and the scuffs of boots on rocks and the occasional gasp for breath, there was nothing to hear except distant gunfire.

The ground began to rise violently in a random pattern, as if it had been struck blows from beneath its surface: hillocks, jutting boulders, thickets of tangled scrub. Often, the old trail upon which they stumbled disappeared entirely for ten or twenty yards at a stretch, washed away by floods or gouged by vast shell holes, and presently the ground on the left-hand side began to fall away even as that on the right began to climb at better than a forty-five-degree angle. Violent cursing broke out as men slipped and slid and fouled the muzzles of their rifles in the mud, and he imagined there was a lot more cursing going on just out of earshot, in which his name featured prominently. Yet in spite of all this, Breese began to feel something that was not confidence exactly but the lessening of doubt. After all, the Army had spent weeks planning the push, and it had all gone to shit within minutes. Who was to say a little improvisation by an aggressive officer might not work where all the careful calculations of the staff had failed?

He kept climbing, sweating now despite the cold. The shelf-road created by all this geographical contortion began to narrow as it rose, slashing its way between the ravine on the left and the wall of moss-covered rock on the right as if trying to pry them apart. The men followed it like water through the neck of a funnel, their loose formation bunching into a mass, their backs bent almost double against the incline, mouths agape, panting, at once grateful to the snowflakes that fell against their fevered cheeks and damning them for turning the dirt to grease. The angle became shallower. It was impossible to get any real bearing because of the density of the trees ahead, but Schillinger, dripping sweat upon his map, exclaimed that this must be the exit, the

notch at the bottom of the roads on the ridge that formed the Sinner's Cross.

"We *did* it," he said, a delighted, half-astonished grin splitting his feral-looking face. "Right through the back door. Christ, we need to get on the horn to Battalion—screw that, to *Regiment*. They need to send every last man they've got in reserve before the Krauts figure out we're here. Where's that radio?"

A flash from the woods ahead answered him, and suddenly the air was full of whitish-yellow streaks. In front of Breese, a whole row of men went down, four or five of them like grain in front of a reaper, the light stabbing through them effortlessly, leaving the air full of bloody vapor and torn scraps of cloth. He hit the dirt, saw one of the streaks pass over his head with a horrible hellish taunting sound, *waaaaah*, scrambled through the muck until the grit of the trail gave way to grass, rocks, leaves, stumps. He fell into something, a fold in the earth between two huge exposed roots, scabbled for his carbine. It was covered in slime. The air around him seemed to be shimmering with phosphorescent light, incongruously gay against the drab greens and grays and browns of the landscape. Men were shouting and some were screaming, and one, who looked more like a bundle of laundry covered with chum than a human being, was crawling on his hands for cover. It was Schillinger. Nobody seemed to be shooting back.

Breese was well-educated and reasonably well-trained. He knew what he was supposed to do, but the orders had frozen in this throat, just as his body had frozen to the earth. Bullets were striking everything—turning up earth, shattering branches, thudding into trees, and sparking on rocks, the reaper gone berserk, no longer content to scythe the wheat but going after the soil as well. To emerge even for an instant made no more sense than thrusting one's hand into the path of a blade, and he didn't try. This was not at all like shelling; it was *personal*. The rounds weren't simply slammed into a breach and fired at some coordinate on a

map grid; they were aimed, with malice aforethought, at a target the gunners could see and wanted to destroy. A target like...

Me!

Now grenades went off, eight or ten of them, with flat, hollow *bangs*, here and there and everywhere. Spatters of mud struck Breese across the helmet, the cheek, the hand. The Germans must be goddamned close to throw those potato-mashers of theirs. And yet when he looked up from beneath his helmet rim, all he saw were muzzle flashes and wood chips flying and writhing, swaying underbrush. He knew he should fire at the flashes just as they'd taught him, he willed himself to do it, but his hands did not move.

There *was* movement, however—to his right. He saw Luminous cowering behind an uprooted tree, one fright-widened eye staring peeking out from beneath a bandage to stare uncomprehendingly into the maelstrom. Breese waved frantically at the boy, motioned him to come. Luminous shook his bloody head. Breese screamed, cursed, pointed his carbine. No response. Apparently, the novelty of being awarded Purple Hearts had run out for the boy. Breese wanted to weep: *Halleck* would have gotten him to move. Then, without warning, someone moved up at a crouch and seized the radioman by the scruff of the neck. It was Ryerson, thrashing out of the bushes like a belligerent drunk, his carbine stabbing flame as he dragged Luminous one-handed to the lieutenant's position.

"Bet that court-martial's looking pretty good to you right now, huh, Lieutenant?" the sergeant snapped. His unassuming face, normally as smooth as the interior of a granite pestle, was now livid with anger. Without waiting for a reply, he changed magazines and moved off, shouting at Huntley to fire at the muzzle flashes, shouting at Luckner to get the B.A.R. going, shouting at the so-called "Ski Patrol"—three tough dogfaces named Moncofsky, Habowski, and Sarzynski—to bring up grenades and ammo for the thirty caliber. He kept giving orders, orders

the lieutenant should have been giving. The Germans heard his voice and let fly every time he spoke, every time he moved. The ground around the tree was tearing itself to bits, and Ryerson didn't seem to care. Breese, abruptly remembering why he had called for Luminous in the first place, tore the radio from his white-knuckled grip and shouted for help. It was no use. The thing may as well have been a seashell. He heard himself scream—not yell, *scream*—“*Runners! Get your asses over here!*”

And miraculously enough, Private Clowery appeared, moving as nimbly as a cat between the spurts of upturned earth and the dazzling flashes of tracer fire. His sleeve was torn open, and his canteen was spurting water from a through-and-through bullet hole, but he seemed unhurt and unfazed, as if the day was unfolding no differently than expected.

“Get your ass back down that trail,” Breese shrilled, hating the sound of panic in his voice but unable to stop it. “And find those tank destroyers. Get them up here *now*.”

Clowery, breathing hard, glanced over at Luminous, then pushed up the mud-crusting rim of his helmet as if to get a better look into the lieutenant's eyes. “With what, Lieutenant, a crane? We couldn't get a *jeep* up here if Superman was pushing it, much less tanks.”

Breese could shut his sagging jaw, but he could not stop his lips from trembling; his voice came through them in a distorted whine. “Just—just go get somebody, then, goddamn it! Get *anybody!* Get us some fucking help!”

Clowery hesitated, licked his lips, then scrambled to a low crouch and was gone, moving with that same catlike swiftness.

Bang! Another grenade went off; this time it was followed by a God-awful scream of pain. Breese hugged the earth tighter, pressing his face into it, digging into it with his hands and the tips of his boots as if he were making a mud-angel, but something fell hard on his arm, and

when he forced open one eye, he saw an olive-drab body lying next to him on his back. With a hysterical curse, he shoved at the body, kicked at it, and it slithered obediently away down the slope on a smear of blood.

The firefight went on and on, the noise rippling first one way and then the other; Ryerson was still shouting orders, but he had moved far to the left, and his voice was mingled with the shouts of other sergeants, with cries of pain, with frantic pleas for corpsmen. Someone fired a bazooka, but the rocket struck a tree before it could arm, and it cartwheeled smoking into the bushes without exploding. He saw men jumping up to hurl grenades up into the German positions through swirls of bullet-driven mud, only to leap away, wide-eyed, as the grenades rebounded off trunks or low-hanging branches or were simply flung back like stones in a rock fight by the Germans above. Breese, despite a heart beating so violently that each *lub* distorted his vision, began to see just what he had helped lead his men into: lying prone on the steep-angled slope with the engineers, they were like burglars caught with their heads in a broken window. They couldn't go forward, and they couldn't go back; they had to fight as best they could where they were.

Someone fired a rifle grenade; it struck a trunk instead of a German. Breese rolled away from the wave of sound, jamming his palms to his ears and trying to steal breath out of the smoke-laden air, and when his roll came to a stop, he saw Krauts bursting out of the trees dead ahead. Half-running, half-sliding down the hill, they swarmed like fairy-tale monsters, jumping over roots, using their free hands to steer themselves with low-hanging branches, firing their submachine guns from the hip.

Breese had never seen a German soldier before. Not as a prisoner, not as a corpse. Now, they were *right here*, shooting and yelling, so close he could make out individual features. The lead Kraut was a marble-faced teenager, short and compact, like a cherub without

wings; except the cherub had escaped from hell and not heaven and was cursing, spitting, and shouting something that sounded like *Kaiser, für Kaiser!* as he took his personal war down the hill behind bursts from his automatic rifle. Breese watched the blurry rage-contorted face through a lacework of dangling branches and wondered what had driven the boy from a perfect ambush position to fight hand-to-hand. He saw spurts of flame, the muted gleam of bayonets, showers of earth and rocks and splintered wood, and then he was aware that he was scrambling backward, letting the slope of the hill move him away from the fight. A cold feeling in his hands reminded him that he was armed, and he socked the carbine up to his shoulder, desperate to shoot, to shoot at last, but then something landed sizzling between his knees, and he looked down to see a grenade. He screamed, flailed at it, slapped it to one side and rolled to another, and then it went off with a *bang* that deafened him so completely that for the next five minutes he could not even hear himself screaming.

Breese would never be able to recall what happened next with any clarity. The parts of his brain that accepted new experiences had simply shorted out, allowing most of the sights and sounds and smells and sensations of the battle to run off him, as torrents of water run off a stone. Of course, that stone had cracks, and where the cracks existed some memories did remain. He remembered a savage fight at close quarters with the Germans, who seemed not to have realized when they charged that they were charging a hundred men and who had tried to back up the slope, firing as they went and leaving dead behind them. He remembered a tremendous explosion that had drawn a curtain over the battlefield and silenced every gun for a half-minute that seemed like a week. And he had blurry memories of a running shootout that had gone on interminably as Ryerson had led a clumsy countercharge up the slope that turned into a firefight conducted at a forty-degree angle. Men were firing from behind trees, rushing through gaps with tracer-fire slashing the bed of rain-rotted leaves at their feet, being lifted on explosions that coughed dirt and smoke into the air. Breese recalled the sweating, crimson-faced Holzinger dragging wounded men back down the slope to the road by their wrists or armpits, the Red Cross on his helmet half-obiterated by mud from near-misses with stick grenades. He remembered Habowski calling desperately for more ammunition and the

startling sight of Threlkis answering the call, his teeth bared in terror, his barrel chest agleam with belts of .30 ammo draped round his neck as he braved the steel storm to bring it. And he remembered watching it all from Ryerson's elbow, present but non-participatory, as if he were a mitten pinned to the Californian's sleeve.

The firing began to die away, the volume of noise decreasing until only the feeble cries of the wounded and the occasional *crack* of a rifle shot broke the cold, dripping, smoke-enshrouded stillness. The Germans had "broken contact," which was Army-speak for having run faster than the Americans could keep up. Ryerson, cut badly over one cheek, relieved Breese of his field glasses and peered cautiously ahead through the gaps in the trunks, biting his lip as he did so. Through the trees, the lieutenant could hear a faint but distinctive sound, like well-oiled mechanical horses pulling rusty mechanical wagons: tank destroyers switching into second gear. Then, without warning, came a sound like a cheap whistle and a *pop*, and he saw a dazzle of crimson sparkles, descending through gaps in the branches.

"Son of a *buck*," Ryerson panted, flinching as Holzinger pressed a bandage to his bloody cheek.

"What's it mean?" Breese asked.

"Fourth of July's coming late?" Ryerson said, the very flatness of his tone managing to convey immense sarcasm. "Luminous, where are you?"

"Here, Sarge."

"You make contact with Battalion yet?"

Adjusting his own sodden bandage, the boy shook his head—it seemed to be his favorite gesture. "It's all these damn trees, they're fucking up the reception."

"Climb one. That's what we did in bocage country when we couldn't get a signal."

"Hey, that's good thinkin'."

“That’s why I make twenty-four dollars a week. When you raise Battalion, tell ‘em our position and strength and ask for instructions.”

Luminous licked his lips. “Uh, Sarge?”

“Yeah?”

“What *is* our position?”

“Well, last I checked, the Krauts don’t use General Motors Twin Diesels, so that—” He waved a hand in the general direction of the mechanical noises. “—must be our teedees moving east on the log road. Which puts us...” Ryerson held out his hand for the map, which Breese handed over with nerveless fingers. The sergeant looked at it carefully, red-tinged sweat spattering its surface. “See how these roads look like an upside-crucifix? We’re at the little notch at the bottom where Our Lord would rest his feet. Got it?”

Luminous stumbled off, looking oddly calm; Breese wondered if he’d been shot up with morphine. Keesey came up with a combat engineer sergeant named Dietz, and they held a council of war in the hollow of a destroyed oak. The snow had stopped, and the air was now motionless save for a few random flakes twirling silently in the air. Breese, gradually descending back into his physical senses, realized that no one was speaking to him or even looking at him; the three sergeants were talking, gesturing, drawing maps in the dirt like sandlot football players improvising a strategy on a timeout. *You aren’t even good at running away*, he thought, and he tried to summon up a feeling of shame. It would not come. Terror had exhausted him to the point of complete indifference; he simply wanted to find a place to lie down and sleep, but it was not to be—not yet, anyway. Luminous, breathless and sucking sap off his knuckles, returned and said that Battalion wanted them to dig in.

“*Here?*” Dietz cried. He’d lost his helmet in the fight, and the shoulder of his jacket was torn open, revealing the brown wool of the sweater beneath it. “We can’t stay here. The Krauts’ll clobber us!

Crissake, they're prob'ly callin' in our position to their artillery right now!"

Ryerson looked grim. "You saw the flare. We have to move forward or move back. We can't just sit here like a target."

"Didn't you tell 'em," Keesey growled, "that we could link up with the main road if we just struck northwest 'bout half a mile?" He turned his bloodshot eyes on Breese. "That's what we were *s'posed* to do in the first place!"

Luminous, more wide-eyed than ever, raised one hand plaintively, as if expecting to be struck. "Battalion says as long as we're here, we're preventing the Kraut reinforcements from moving up on them, so we have to stay. They're gonna send us what they can, but we got to hold until morning."

For a moment, it looked as if Keesey really was going to attack the radioman; he rose out of his crouch, his face darkening from scarlet to puce, the vein work in his neck and temples swelling as if about to burst. "*Fuck!*" He turned on Breese again. "This is why you don't go gallivantin' off on your own, you dumb shit! Now we're stuck up on this ridge with our backs to that cattle chute and every gun in the sector zeroing in on us!"

Ryerson put out an arresting hand. "All right, secure that stuff, Keesey."

"But this stupid sonofabitch—"

"You really want to waste time yelling about it?" Ryerson's tone was low but intense. "I figure we've got maybe half an hour before they hit us, so instead of flapping your gums, tell your men I wanna see those spades flying—understood? Both of you. Anyone not in a covered hole when the fun starts won't need my boot up his backside, 'cause he won't have a backside left to kick."

Under different circumstances, it would have been instructive and even interesting to watch the three sergeants build up a defilade

using nothing more than entrenching tools, fallen logs, rocks, and in Keeseey's case, a ceaseless torrent of threats; but the lieutenant no longer cared. It was getting harder and harder for him to stay awake, and indeed, when the first enemy shells began to whistle overhead, he ignored Ryerson's order to take cover and began to look for a place to lie down, mindful of the snowflakes but not the breath-stealing impacts that turned the gloomy gray of late morning into something more closely resembling twilight.

The shells had driven the men to ground the way a thunderstorm empties a busy street. It seemed to Breese that he was now alone in the world, except for the dead who had no need to hide. And there were plenty of them. Why there, right *there*, was a dead engineer propped against a tree, offering the world a ghastly death's-head smile from out of the raw red remnants of his face. Perhaps he was grinning over the ironic fact that his helmet was completely undamaged. Not far from him, a German had died in a curious, prayerful attitude, flopped down on his knees with his head nodding on his chest and his palms outward. Whatever he'd been asking God, chances were the answer was *No*.

The bombs fell thick and fast now. Breese had been told the Krauts were fond of mortars, and here was the proof. Christ, they were really laying it on—heavy stuff, high explosives, fragmentation bombs. There was more soil in the air than there was on the ground, and the explosions were almost continuous. Something tugged at his jacket; something else struck his helmet in the back like a rap of knuckles. He couldn't hear; he couldn't see. But somewhere in this place there had to be a nice, comfy shell hole full of warm soft earth where he could—

"Geddown!"

Dietz's voice: only a guy from the Bronx could maul his English like that. Breese was dragged down into a hollow beneath a fallen log, which was occupied by Luminous—bleeding badly out of his nose and ears – and by the medic Holzinger, whose formerly boyish face had aged

a decade in the last hour. There, the four of them cowered; rather, the three of them and Breese, who simply lay loose-limbed against the damp curve of the hollow, letting the terrible fury of the German assault pass through his body without resistance. Through his lowering eyelids, he saw the bewilderment on their faces, but it seemed to him that in his numbness and fatigue he had the better end of the deal. He had tasted the quintessence of fear; he did not want another sip. Here, he was comfortable and safe, and sleep was calling him. And he must have answered, for he dreamed that the bombardment ceased, leaving the air a choking, roiling mass of acrid smoke, and then the machine guns had started up, and suddenly the whole horror was recycling itself. The Germans were coming again, many more of them this time, their harsh, guttural voices echoing in the clouds of man-made fog, their shadows flitting here and there like ghosts through the trees.

Breese was not frightened in his dream. He had seen all this before. And so when Dietz looked at him, not so much for orders as simply to confirm that the boss had blown a fuse, Breese just winked. When Luminous pressed the radio into his hands, he took it and spoke the right words to the other squad leaders. And when the silhouettes of Germans pressed too close, he let fly with his carbine, pulling the trigger as fast as he could manage it, shots that thudded the wire stock into his shoulder in the most satisfying way imaginable. For minutes, for hours, for centuries, he fought the battle on pure instinct, all his sensations muted as if by a thick pane of glass. Then, the Germans drew off again, and again the silence came, and again it was destroyed by bombs—such a weight of bombs as the devil himself could not have conceived. It was as if the enemy were determined either to push them off the ridge or blow it to pieces. It went on and on, quarter-hour after quarter-hour, and an uneasy feeling began to taint the lieutenant's somnolent calm; a feeling that this was not a heroic dream but a horrible reality and that in reality, he was moments away from being wiped out of existence. That's

all it would take, of course. One well-placed mortar. Not even that; a single stray bullet, no larger really than the eraser on a pencil, could strike his forehead or his throat or the flesh over his heart and Luminous would call "Lieutenant!" and when he didn't answer turn to see him slumped with glassed eyes and slackened mouth, as dead as dead gets. Christ, what an obscene thought. To be effaced from existence by a horrid little piece of lead, all his hopes and dreams and plans burned away to ashes....

The Krauts set upon him once more and so did the fear, worse than ever before. He wept when he fired his carbine. He growled until spit ran from his jaws like the foam from a rabid dog. Sometimes he huddled at the bottom of the hollow, gagging with fright, when bullets thudded mindlessly into the log above him. When the runner Clowery showed up, looking dazed from a near-miss, Breese screamed that he must find Battalion HQ at once and demand orders to withdraw. Nobody seemed to notice. The fight-frenzy was upon them all in different ways, reducing the whole war to individual contests of man-versus-man, man-versus-bomb, man-versus-self....

Breese had no idea which of his men were still alive, and he didn't care. He would have sacrificed every one of them merely for the chance to save himself, but the storm of steel that whirred through the air made any thought of retreat impossible. And perhaps that was why the Germans pulled back once more. By the very fury of their assault, they had created an environment in which it was safer for their enemies to fight than it was for them to run.

A ringing silence descended, broken only by the crackle of smoldering wood and the occasional whimper of a wounded or terror-crazed man. The lieutenant, realizing his carbine was empty, tried to reload it and found he could scarcely use his hands for their trembling. He had wet himself so many times, his pants felt like sheets of ice and his bladder ached. By now, it was past noon, and the light was already

failing, the sky's opaline white yielding to a cold blue from which flurries of snow continued to fall. Clowery, covered from head to toe in mud and pine needles, combat-crawled to the hollow and flopped inside gasping. He was so exhausted from running the Badlands over and over again that his voice took on the cadence of a telegraph, and the lieutenant had to piece his words together like Morse. The message, when finally translated, was this: *Hold your position at all costs. Your attack pinning down German reinforcements and diverting artillery away from us. Scratch platoon on the way. Two companies coming at sunrise for resumption of attack.* When the lieutenant pieced this together, he erupted with laughter—shrill, hysterical laughter that dissolved into fresh tears. It was clear to him that by morning there would be no one and nothing left to attack *with*; but Clowery was already gone—he'd clambered out of the hole at the first blast of enemy machine-gun fire. The Germans were coming again.

It was a long, chaotic brawl, made all the more terrifying by the fact that the enemy seemed to be composed mainly of paratroopers, whose cut-down helmets were almost indistinguishable from American ones. The Germans advanced in squad rushes behind glittering skeins of crimson tracer fire, hurling baled charges that went off with deafening thunderclaps; one of them fired a *Kampfpistole*, a hideous weapon that looked like a flare gun but which shot high-explosive grenades. Breese saw Keeseey take one of these right in the collarbone, and when the lieutenant's eyes cleared, he was looking at a headless, one-armed corpse, which staggered grotesquely about, blood spouting in high-pressure freshets from the stump of its neck. It seemed that the end had come; the right flank was collapsing, men were down everywhere, Holzinger's helmet was rolling along in the snow-powdered dirt—and then, with a sound like a surging wave, Dietz and twenty or so of his men swarmed out of nowhere behind the glint of bayonets, and the air filled with the crack of rifle butts on jaws, entrenching tools on flesh, and the high-pitched shrieks of those impaled on K-bars. The Krauts were driven back over the parapet of timber and clumpy earth, some of them dropping their weapons in their haste to withdraw, only to be shot down like so many partridges as they tried to claw their way back up the

hill. In an instant, it was all over except for the piteous sobbing of the wounded. Breese had done nothing but watch.

Darkness—a deeper darkness than the artificial gloom created by the battle—was enveloping the hill along with the bombs the Germans sent in retaliation for this latest check on their ambitions. They brought down *minenwerfers* and rocket bombs and one-oh-five shells in such profusion that all the previous bombardments seemed like rehearsals in comparison. Germany was supposed to be a land of shortages. Apparently, they weren't short of ammunition. The old-growth trees around Breese, which had put forth their first shoots centuries before, which had climbed with glacial patience through the generations in a silent, subtle competition for the light, which had withstood drought and storm, fire and flood since perhaps the time of Augustus, were blown to pieces. A blackness beyond blackness descended; it was not merely an absence of light but of orientation. Deafened once again, the lieutenant had no sense of down or up, left or right, earth or sky. Muted flares of color, like flashes of heat lightning, indicated the core of explosions, but they provided no actual illumination. Great sheets of mud, fragmented bark, splintered wood, disinterred rock, and superheated shrapnel fell in overlapping waves, mixed with horrid slippery stuff that must have been human gore.

The bombardment lifted. Breese could scarcely breathe from the reek of spent explosives. When the smoke dissipated, he saw the dull red glare of flames and realized that despite the snow and the damp, some of the trees had caught fire. As his noise-addled brain was processing this, an indistinct shape flopped down next to him, and after recovering its breath and gulping water from a proffered canteen, shoved a piece of paper into his hand. By the light of the flames, he just managed to make out the words

hold your position

when his hand involuntarily crumpled the sheet. No, he would not, could not, must not hold his position! At any moment, the Germans would attack again. To sit here and *wait* for it, like condemned prisoners in the shadow of the scaffold, was a greater madness than any he'd yet encountered. He was still turning this fact over in his anguished mind when a flare exploded overhead, bathing the world in an eerie goblin glare. Breese froze, down to his very breath. The sizzling emerald light threw crazy shadows every which way, giving the shell-shredded trees the illusion of movement, turning the forest into a hellish panoply, a march of the destroyed. He could feel the crust of blood on his ear, feel the steel of his carbine cold as an ice cube through his filthy pant leg; feel the press of the wet, stone-hard earth against his backside; but he could not move. His paralysis seemed reasonable. If he did not move a muscle, did not answer the pleas of his eyelids to blink or the demands of his lungs for oxygen, perhaps the Germans would not come. They had dropped so much TNT on this hill. they had to assume there was no one left alive upon it. What then, was the profit in attacking? None. Breese made a deal with the God he didn't much believe in and made the same offer to the devil, in whose existence he now believed completely: *I don't move, and they don't come. Fair?*

The flare was falling, falling, forcing the shadows into a slant. Breese felt his pupils contracting in pain from the intensity of the light, but he did not let them blink. His heart was beating so hard he felt as if it must soon rupture a chamber, but he did not breathe. A deal was a deal, whoever you made it with. *I don't move, they don't come. I don't move, they don't come. I don't move...*

They came, green-lit by the sparkling embers of the flare, firing short bursts from their submachine guns, using the momentum granted to them by the downward slope of the hill to clear shell holes and the bashed-over trunks of firs as if they really were supermen. Breese's

paralysis broke; a great icy draught of air filled his lungs, and he seized his moisture-sheened carbine and fired, tried to fire, discovered it was jammed or empty or frozen solid. He squeezed at the trigger, beat his fist against the magazine housing, cursed, and spat. For the second time in twenty-four hours, he tried to throw the weapon away, and for the second time, its leather strap refused to let go. It was too much. Too much sound, too much fury, and it signified only that the Army had been mistaken here too, that he was no officer, no *leader*, merely a frightened little boy who wanted to be anywhere—anywhere on earth—but inside this war. He got up, fell, got up again, fell again, slid, found his feet, ran. He would have thrown his carbine away if it hadn't been tangled in the strap of his field glasses, and when he tripped again, on a root, and went twenty feet on his face through rotting leaves and sticks and slime, he lay there, sobbing and struggling, because the war had him and would not let him go.

It was in this position that Halleck discovered him. Breese saw a tear-blurred boot settle down before his eyes and then felt a hand fist itself at his collar. He was wrenched upward from the muck and saw the familiar square-jawed face, its muscles bunched in fury, its eyes glinting madly in the green-lit darkness. Bullets were shirring and whining all around, grenades going off almost continuously, men collapsing into the snow-powdered earth, but the sergeant took no notice. Instead, one lip curled over his teeth, he began to incant in a low, furious voice: “Goddamn fuckin’ bastards, sending us up here in this shit to get murdered. Fuckin’ numbnuts. There isn’t one goddamn general in this whole goddamn Army that’s worth a hot bucket of shit. Told us this push was gonna go smooth as silk. Told us there wouldn’t be no opposition. This is worse than Normandy. Worse!” He turned and barked orders to the men scrambling up the hill behind him, his words powerful but slightly slurred, as if he’d been dipping into the Cream of Kentucky himself. Then, without warning, the Texan’s mouth spread in a smile and he began to laugh—a harsh, wheezing sound, like the working of a large bellows. “Hell of a way to make a livin’, isn’t it, Lieutenant?”

Breese stared. He had never seen Halleck *smile*, much less laugh, and here he was doing it in the middle of a battle. The sergeant abruptly relinquished his grip, flopping the lieutenant on his face, and drew back the bolt on his German submachine gun. “Where’s Ryerson? Where’s Luminous?”

“I d-don’t know,” Breese said, wiping snot and pine needles off his mouth. “I think they might be d-d-d—”

Halleck abruptly raised the Schmeisser and fired—a long, livid burst of flame that sent spent casings jingling off Breese’s helmet and punished his reeling eardrums still further down the path to deafness. He then glanced down at his former platoon leader in a kind of half-amused wonder. “Boy, I tell you what, you don’t fuck up halfway, and that’s a fact. This is as bad a dogfight as you’re ever gonna see. Must be two companies out there at least. Fuckin’ Green Devils. I *hate* the Green Devils. Tangled with them at Falaise.” He lifted his voice to a shout that somehow overwhelmed the din of the battle. “LUMINOUS, YOU STILL GOT YOUR LEGS, YOU PUMP THEM SUCKERS OVER HERE RIGHT NOW! I NEED THAT RADIO!”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Call for artillery on these coordinates. We got to break up this party, Lieutenant, or we’re gonna get overrun.”

There was an explosion, and debris rained down over both of them for a good ten seconds. Breese cowered; Halleck didn’t even acknowledge it. With his free hand, Halleck pinned something to Breese’s jacket. The lieutenant realized with a start it was an evacuation tag.

“You want our own guys to shoot at *us*?”

“What are you worried about?” Halleck rubbed his temple beneath a cruel-looking dent in his helmet. “Ain’t no different...than gettin’ shelled...by the Krauts.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No crazier than you are for comin’ up here...in the first place...” Halleck’s voice was losing power as he spoke, like an engine that had run out of gasoline. He began to blink rapidly; his flare-lit features slackened, and his heavy shoulders slumped. He put the submachine gun down stock-first into the dirt and leaned on it like a crutch, his voice draggling like a broken foot as he tried to get the words out. “Sides...what happens to us...don’t much matter. What matters....”

“Sarge?”

“What matters is...oh hell....”

Halleck pitched forward onto his face and lay still as death. Breese looked at him in horror, mouth twisting. In the shifting light, it was impossible to tell if the sergeant was still breathing. Breese crawled forward, grabbed the sergeant, shook him, shouted his name. No response. The Texan felt as slack as dough through his jacket. Breese cried out in anguish. It seemed impossible that a man like Halleck could succumb to anything. The largest-caliber shell should have been insufficient to do more than scuff his weatherworn skin. He was indestructible.

Something snapped, snapped deep inside Breese hard enough to drive him to his feet. His carbine was jammed, but the butt of the Colt on his hip was as cold as a can of beer fetched from the bottom of a barrel of ice water, and somehow that was enough. He started forward and fired, fired, fired again. The rational part of him was aware that he had stepped out onto a raging battlefield without cover, but the part that mattered, the part that was at the wheel, didn’t care.

Angry stabs of flame spurted here, there, everywhere, betraying the presence of the hated Germans as they came on and on in unending, steel-helmeted hordes. Breese felt the frozen air on his teeth, on his tongue, and realized that he was literally snarling. Fury had suffused him to the marrow, the fury of a beast which has been tormented past the

point of endurance and now flings itself upon its attacker without thought for its own safety, without any other thought than vengeance. And this was precisely what he did. He ran *at* the Germans, *into* the Germans, firing all the while, willing the bullets to their targets instead of aiming, and when the slide locked back over an empty chamber for the final time, he dropped his Colt and threw each of his grenades, threw them without caring where they landed, not even troubling to duck when the blast waves whipped his fatigues around him, and when he could find no more, he unbuckled his helmet and threw that too. Bullets skipped all around him; a German fired a pistol at his head from fifteen feet away, the muzzle flash illuminating the Kraut's rage-distorted face, and silence enclosed one side of the lieutenant's head like a cotton bandage, but he didn't give a damn about that, either. His gunpowder-singed fingers found his K-bar, and he drew it and had just enough time to admire the green glint of the flare light on its blade when a bullet struck it out of his hand and knocked him down.

The fight swirled around him, a storm on night-blackened seas. Boots scuffled on dirt, rounds struck steel or flesh or fat or bone, explosives thumped, hot pebbles struck him in the face and neck, men cursed viciously in German or English. Breese did not curse; he had no more rage left. He simply stay where he lay, panting, sometimes laughing out loud, a spectator who could see nothing. The sheer insanity of it oppressed him, and he decided to lay down; his elbow slipped over the rim of a shell hole, and after a moment, his body followed it. Why not? Having failed at both endeavors, he had no more desire to fight and no more desire to run.

The interior of the hole was delightfully hot; the air steamed around it like a private sauna. Who said shell fire served no good purpose? He was snug as a bug in a rug; all that was missing was a cigarette. The lieutenant patted himself down. No soap. He'd smoked them all, even the emergency stick he kept tucked in the flap of his

breast pocket. *That* was annoying. This whole area was thick with dead men, and some of them had to be carrying smokes. He was half-tempted to crawl around on his hands and knees and grub among the corpses until he found a pack. It was unseemly, he had to admit; and an officer really should be conscious of his decorum, but then he became reacquainted with the unpleasant wetness in his trousers and decided decorum could go take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut. He wanted a *smoke*. But first he'd have to fix this carbine situation. The thing was twisted uncomfortably around his side by its strap, and the magazine was jutting into his hip. He worked it free, and as he did so, realized that the safety catch was in place. No *wonder* he'd been unable to fire. He flipped the catch off and was just rising out of the hole when he heard the first shell shrilling overhead. He recognized the pitch as American. But who had called it in? Could Luminous have found Halleck and revived him? Breese was still wondering over this when the shell exploded and the pressure wave hit him like the grille of the family Nash, and he was down and down hard, blind from the flash and gasping, and another shell hit and lifted him clean into the air and slammed him back down again on his shoulders. He wasn't knocked out, not precisely, but everything faded to a formless, soundless gray. When the grayness receded, the world was smashing itself to pieces all around him; burning hot fragments of wood were striking the dirt to his left and right, and the night sky seemed not only to be falling but to be made of fire. He rolled into a ball, crushed his knees to his chest, and tucked his chin between his knees and wished for his helmet, prayed for his helmet, couldn't believe he'd been stupid enough to throw the damned thing away.

The march of destruction passed all around, God's blind boots a-trampling, and someone landed heavily beside him, another refugee from the madness. The shells were falling further away now, up the hill where the Krauts had come from, and Breese blinked the tears out of his

eyes and rolled onto his hands and knees and then into a trembling crouch, his carbine cradled to his belly, and glanced to his left. A German soldier crouched not three feet away, a strangely expectant look on his face. The din of battle seemed to fade, and Breese suddenly felt as if he were onstage with another actor in a single cone of limelight, knowing the audience was there but unable to see it.

They stared at each other. He could see the German clearly in the flaring light—a compact, purposeful-looking man with tired eyes and a sensual-looking mouth tightened by bitterness and irony. He was breathing hard but otherwise composed, a distance runner who sees the finish line. Breese couldn't move except for his trembling; he had no thoughts save for a vague gratitude that his bladder had nothing more to give. Then, the German said something. Perhaps it was a plea for mercy; perhaps it was a curse. Breese never knew; his paralysis broke, and he jammed the muzzle of his carbine into the man's ribs and pulled the trigger. *Bang*. The German fell forward, in that oddly urgent way a man does when he's heart-shot, as if he were trying to outrace the pull of gravity, and Breese had just enough time to see that the Kraut had been unarmed, had probably lost his rifle out there in the inferno, when another shell struck close by and smashed all of his joints into soup. He lay helplessly against the edge of the hole with the Kraut on top of him like an exhausted lover, and it was in that position that he experienced his first mercy since coming to this forest and passed out.

Breese never knew how long he was unconscious. It might have been thirty seconds or three hours. All he remembered was realizing, very gradually, that he was beneath a warm solid shape that smelled heavily of sweat and rifle oil and burnt gunpowder and which seemed to be studded here and there with metal that stuck unpleasantly into his flesh. Tentatively, his eyes still half shut and seeing nothing, he began to examine what was on top of him. His fingers found a strange synthetic cloth, what felt like leather ammunition pouches, bristling stubble on yielding facial flesh, and a helmet rim. The rim was ice cold, slightly skirted with a rolled edge. German. He was lying beneath a fucking German.

Breese was too foggy-headed from the blast to panic. A feeling of confusion was the most he could muster. His brain was reassembling its higher functions slowly and in no particular order. At various times, he remembered or observed that it was now deathly silent, that the ground shone faintly with frost, that his ears were burning horribly with the cold, that his helmet was missing, that he wanted a cigarette, and that he had killed the man who was atop him. But he could see nothing. The darkness held absolute dominion. When a magnesium flare popped somewhere overhead, bathing everything in a hissing, silvery luminescence, Breese, with some difficulty, pushed the body off him, so

that it lay face-up at the bottom of the hole, knees bent and thrown over to one side, eyes sightlessly reflecting the glaring light. It was not carrying a weapon, and Breese wondered if this detail were going to nag at him.

The flare descended on its parachute, sputtering as it died. No shots rang out. No voices sounded. Nothing moved. The sounds of battle were like fireworks a county away, coming mainly as basso thumps he felt as much as heard. Had *everyone* here been killed? Breese tried to look at his watch and found he had forgotten to cover one eye at the sight of the flare, as the manual instructed, and had thus gone night-blind. His shoulders shook with silent, hysteric laughter, and a few tears spilled warmly over his cheeks before freezing there. What a shitty soldier he had proven to be! A man might fail at courage with little shame, but he, Breese, had failed equally at cowardice. He was as much a mediocrity as his father had always believed him to be.

He began to shiver. It was so damned cold. Those goddamn canteen commandos, those scum-sucking, rear-echelon stallions, those syphilitic supply-sergeant Führers had withheld the winter clothing. Why? Because winter was still technically some weeks away. Never mind what the thermometer read; it was the calendar that called the shots. That was the Army for you. That was the war for you.

Breese looked at the dead man again and suddenly remembered his idea of rifling through the corpses' pockets until he found some smokes. He began to pat-search the German's body. After a minute or two, he turned up a half-empty pack of shoddily-made cigarettes in a flat, square package. He knew striking a light might get him killed, but it seemed as if his fear glands had squeezed themselves dry during the night—that, or they had simply frozen.

He smoked, keeping his hands cupped around the flame and the lighted tip well below the rim of the hole. The cigarette was as harsh as the smoke from a rubbish fire, and the struggle not to cough his guts out

woke him up completely. The stupid, disconnected, half-indifferent feeling that had settled over him was dispelled, and he was once more plugged back into the seriousness of his situation. The Germans had rushed his position, and he had jumped headlong into their charge. He could be anywhere—within his own line, among the Krauts', or stuck between. He had no way of knowing and no way to find out. Luminous had the only radio, and to call out for help was to invite a hand grenade right in his lap. About one thing he was sure, however; if a Kraut patrol found him with the body of the man he'd killed, the chances were pretty good they'd put a bullet in each of his kneecaps and then rig him with enough explosive to take out the side of a building.

Breese made a brief inventory of his weapons. He had nothing but his carbine, and that was down to his last magazine. The German had only ammunition for a missing submachine gun, a pair of field glasses in a hard leather case, a paratrooper's gravity knife, and an empty pistol holster. Nothing good. He did find a sturdy waterproof cape rolled into the dead man's gas mask container and draped it around himself like a shawl.

This proved to be a good idea because, at some point not long, it began to snow, powdering the living and the dead with equal thoroughness. The shelter half kept him dry but did little to alleviate the cold. Every square inch of the lieutenant's exposed flesh soon stung with agonizing pain, then went briefly and blissfully numb, and finally settled in a dull, throbbing ache that was actually *worse* than pain. He shivered and shook, and even a momentary relaxation of his jaw muscles caused his teeth to chatter hard enough to chip. When he reached for the bottle of bourbon tucked in his map case, his fingers met broken shards of glass. He tried to smoke again and found he could not make his fingers manipulate the flint wheel on his lighter. Despair overtook him, and he began to sob. The sound of his own misery only exacerbated it, and soon he was calling for his mommy, repeating that word over and

over again into the crook of his arm, the tears briefly and blissfully hot on his frozen cheeks. Mommy, mommy, please, mommy. When the storm had exhausted itself, he lifted his head and, with the terrible shock of the obvious, realized that this German had a mother too. The brown muffler wrapped tight around the Kraut's neck was certainly not Wehrmacht issue. She'd undoubtedly sewn it for her son, and in that moment, it seemed the lieutenant could see her careworn fingers moving gracefully in the light of a fire, knit one, purl two, knit one, purl two, just as the lieutenant's own mother had done on so many winter nights when he was a boy.

Breese lifted his head and looked down through tear-blurred vision at his companion. The German soldier's face was crusted with snow; it glittered on his open eyes and in his open mouth and in the folds of his muffler and in the grooves in his ammunition pouches. In a few minutes, it would cover him like a shroud. Breese stared at him for a long time. Then, he leaned forward and gently closed the man's eyes.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

14

The voice, clear and powerful, seemed to echo against the hills and the remains of the trees. It carried on the frozen morning air, incongruously cheerful amid the destruction, seemed to glitter along with the snow that covered everything:

The Camptown Races sing this song

Do-dah, do-dah!

The Camptown Racetrack five miles long

Oh, de do-dah day....

It was accompanied by the strum and jangle of a guitar. Closer to hand, the sounds of exertion were heard: grunts, gasps, the squeak of boots on frozen grass. In the distance, filtered by the trees, truck engines coughed and growled.

Breese heard all this without being truly conscious of it. For a long time after his eyes had opened, he was not conscious of anything, except that daylight had come at last, a pale watery glare that filled the sky where the bare branches and bark-less trunks did not. He stared into this glare for some time before an actual thought formed behind his eyes. It came in the form of a question:

I'm alive?

This didn't seem possible because he had quite a distinct impression that he had frozen to death sometime in the night. He *felt* frozen. The muscles in his face were as stiff as marble, and the hair in his nostrils was iced over. Some part of him wondered briefly if this was how garden statues felt in the wintertime, standing out naked in the elements. After a few moments, he noticed the voice again:

*Going to run all night
Going to run all day
I bet my money on the bobtailed nag
Somebody bet on the gray.*

He gave his head an experimental turn from side to side; it moved, but grudgingly, like a rusty door. A scrim of ice that had formed on his camouflage cape broke apart and slid down its folds. The effort left him momentarily breathless, and his temples throbbed. Steam from his exhalation spumed briefly from his mouth, was lost on the air. There was no longer any doubt. He had survived.

The guitar jangled again, and someone laughed. Breese found this even more startling. Laughter...in this forest. You were more likely to hear the damned laughing in hell. He decided to get up, but this proved something of a challenge. His body felt as if it had been carved out of a single block of the same marble that composed his face.

"Gimme a hand, Sarge," a nearby voice called out. "This boy be *heavy*."

"*Hell* naw," replied an older-sounding man. "He covered in blood."

"But it's all frozen solid, Sarge. See? It ain't comin' off. It ain't messy."

“Boy, God didn’t make me no sergeant so I could put my hands in that shit, move him yo *damn* self. Ezra, nobody told you to stop playin’.”

With an audible sigh, the song resumed:

*I come down there with my hat caved in
Doo-dah! doo-dah!
I go back home with a pocket full of tin
Oh! de doo-dah day!*

Breese was now desperate to get up, but his movements were slow, arthritic, and as the blood began to circulate into his benumbed limbs, full of pain. The cut on his ear burned like a grease fire, and for that matter, so did his uncut ear, nose, fingers, and toes. Oh Christ, it hurt. After a few moments, he managed to loosen the shelter half around him; more ice crackled, and he felt some of his pent-up body heat escape. Some part of him wanted to reflect on the irony that robbing the corpse of the man he’d killed had allowed him to survive; the rest of him didn’t give a shit.

*Then fly along like a rail-road car
Doo-dah! doo-dah!
Runnin’ a race with a shootin’ star
Oh! de doo-dah day!*

He heard someone fall heavily and curse in an out-of-breath sort of way. He wondered what was happening, but when he looked up, all he could see was the rim of the shell hole and some trees, ascending into the dull silvery-white glow of the sky.

“Don’t be givin’ me them looks, boy.” The older voice intoned. “You think *this* is hard? Try pullin’ a dead man out of a tank. It’s like

shellin' a crab when you got butterfingers. They just don't wanna come out, on account of the fact they melted to the fuckin' seats. Sometimes you got to use *hooks*. Shit, once—in bocage country?—we found these Shermans that got shot up a week befo' and was just layin' out in that sun that whole time with the crews still inside, like a row of damn ovens. We had to put on *gas masks* for that job, and even then the boys was pukin' they fuckin' guts up. Every time we gave a tug, somethin' would just *come off*. Head...arm...brains...whatever. Just like a rotten ole doll, except a doll don't stink. You just be grateful it's *cold*."

Breese thought that if he heard any more of this, he would go mad. He regained his feet in a single jerking motion, his heart a-throb, his vision blurring and focusing, blurring and focusing, with each manic beat. Some few yards away, he saw a dirt-cruste'd jeep had parked on a stretch of flattish snow-covered ground; sitting on the back was the guitar-player, a slat-thin Negro soldier wearing a wool forage cap, strumming away with long, bony fingers. Standing next to him was a big, beer-bellied Negro staff sergeant, whose thumbs were hooked imperiously into his gun belt; a wad of chewing tobacco distorted one of his cheeks, and he was preparing to spit when he noticed the lieutenant rising as if from the grave and froze solid, dark juice dribbling down his chin.

No one spoke. Breese could not, and the Negroes were too surprised. He climbed carefully out of the hole, the cape falling away from his shoulders as he did so, and then promptly fell to his hands and knees in five inches of snow. The sergeant spit a great torrent of tobacco juice onto the ground, walked over, and extended a hand to help him, but half-warily, as if he were not sure the mystery lieutenant was entirely of this earth. Breese felt the man's grasp, warm and solid and strong, through his iced-over glove, was faintly glad for it.

Standing, Breese ventured a look. Around him stretched a mutilated fairyscape—every tree, every branch, every stump, every

exposed root-system, every boulder, and shell hole and patch of undestroyed ground was cloaked in fresh snow. And so were the corpses that lay everywhere—some helmetless, some headless, some faceless, some limbless, some simply scattered heaps of flesh and intestine mixed up with canvas gun belts or lace-up boots. A thin morning mist hung in the air like steam, and through that steam he saw two-man details of Negro troops struggling down the trail into the Badlands, carrying dead men by ankles and armpits.

“Damn, son, we thought you was *dead*,” the guitar-player said, blowing on his strumming hand. “Hell you doin’ down there all mornin’? Catchin’ up on y’beauty rest?”

The soldier laughed at his own joke and played another chord—*twang!* Breese tried to get his bearings, but it was difficult. The pale morning light, the mist, the shell-torn ground, all conspired to rob him of his landmarks. He turned and stumbled down the hill. Some of the Negro troops stopped to stare; the sergeant called out after him. He did not answer. He was having trouble using his legs, and it was hard to navigate through the litter of battle. The ground was scattered with bullet-canted helmets, the broken stocks or twisted barrels of rifles, blood-bright scraps of cloth, curls of jagged metal, burst-open field packs, and abandoned entrenching tools, and he had to look down to avoid tripping. But it didn’t pay to look down very long. Because mixed up with the remains of the fight were the remains of the fighters. Here was a hand, sliced away clean at the wrist and lying in the dirt like a dead crab. There was a German soldier, wearing an agony-contorted face, whose upper and lower body were fifteen feet apart but joined by jumbles of frost-covered intestine. Here was a bareheaded American, who had fallen into the fork of a sapling and frozen there like a drunk in mid-tumble; he stared out at the world with the two eyes God had given him and a third thrown in *gratis* by a bullet, punched neatly into his

frost-blackened forehead. And over there was something that resembled a charred monkey in the fetal position.

The dead. My God. My *God*. There were so many of them. It looked as if someone had blown up a slaughterhouse. Breese saw glassed eyes and ivory teeth and pink tongues set in faces that were often as black as jet. One fair-haired German boy, stiff as cordwood between his two handlers, spilled a slime of blood and bile over his cheek with every movement, as if he were trying to leave a trail by which his soul might one day find his body. Another, an American with the stripes of a master sergeant on his torn sleeve, had frozen so solid he looked like a mannequin being loaded into a department-store window. He wore puttees and had a stick of dynamite jutting from one pocket; it had to be Dietz. The lieutenant could endure no more; he squeezed his eyes shut, but the mocking voice of the guitar-player followed him.

*See them flyin' on a ten-mile heat
Doo-dah! Doo-dah!
Round the race track, then repeat
Oh! doo-dah day!*

Breese staggered on. He saw a white face—white by race, that is. The man's pallor was actually gray where the burnt gunpowder didn't cover, the features embittered and exhausted, like a corpse disinterred from his own grave and told to go find another. It was Duffy. He stood at the head of a long column of red-faced riflemen, who, bent at forty-degree angles by the weight of their packs and machine-gun ammunition, looked like native bearers following a hunter out of the bush.

“Son of a bitch,” the captain said, in a hard, flat, pavement voice. “They told me you'd bought the farm. Where the hell you been?”

Breese tried to form words, but his mouth felt as if it had been shot with novocaine. He simply pointed at the hole from which he had emerged, around which the carnage was strewn so thickly that Duffy's lip twitched in disgust. "This must have been one helluva fight. Not that we were playing pinochle down there...but *Christ*. I haven't seen anything this bad since...." He fished out a cigarette from his coat pocket with a bandaged hand and fitted it into his mouth. "Your outfit's pretty much wiped out, of course, but you stopped the Krauts. They pulled back sometime before dawn. We've been moving men up ever since. Skinny is they may be abandoning Schmidt. When they couldn't knock you off this ridge I guess they figured they had no choice." Duffy shook his head. "I'm putting Halleck in for a DSC, but I guess you're a cinch for a Medal of Honor." A bitter little laugh escaped him as he struck a match. "Maybe when it quiets down here, you can tell me what it feels like to be a hero."

Sinner's Cross

PART III: A BLACK MATTER FOR THE KING

Courage ought to have eyes as well as arms.

Sinner's Cross

1

The best thing you could say about the bunker was that it kept the rain off your head. In all other respects, it reminded Zengy of a primitive tomb, or rather how he imagined a primitive tomb would look. It was clammy and cramped and low-ceilinged, and the battery lamps on the floor suffused the dank air with an eerie amber light that seemed to accentuate the shadows rather than illuminate the room.

Buried again, Zengy thought.

No one reacted to his arrival—not Quast, the pallid little radioman (*Radio-boy, more like, Zengy thought, he looks like he's twelve years old*), nor Mutti Shulz, the broad-backed sergeant major, who was tucking his leather-bound reporting pouch into the blue-gray folds of his tunic. The executive officer, Obus, known as El Greco because of his hooded eyes, heavy cheekbones, and pointed black beard, was too busy oiling the rotating bolt of his FG 42 to look up. Even his annoyingly eager aide-de-camp, the former war correspondent Fox'l, had his nose buried in the latest edition of *Signal*.

None of this displeased Zengy in the least, for he had trained his men to be indifferent. Indifferent to pain, indifferent to fear, indifferent to heat and cold and thirst and deafening noise. Indifferent, too, to *all*

that shit—all that heel-clicking, Heil-Hitlering, toy-soldiering rubbish the rear-echelon stallions thought was so important. To Zengy, either a man could fight or he couldn't. If he could, *all that shit* didn't matter. And if he couldn't, well, *all that shit* couldn't save him. The Nazis were Social Darwinists, and after six years of war, so was Zengy. Existence was a coin toss. Up or down. Left or right. Black or white. Life...or death. It was a harsh philosophy, and it had served him well: at Narvik and on the Rzhev-Staritz Motorway, on Crete and in Sicily, at Monte Cassino and Carentan. Everywhere he had fought.

Everywhere, in fact, but here.

He took off his helmet and turned it over in his hands. There were uncountable millions of helmets in the German Army but only a few tens of thousands bore the distinctive cut-down rim of the *Grüner Teufel*, the Green Devils, the paratroopers, and Zengy was proud that this one had seen the roughest duty imaginable. Every dent, scrape, and scuff mark told its own story, and every story had helped build his own, personal legend. It was too bad that neither pride nor reputation nor eighteen-gauge steel could protect him from what was going on within his own mind.

He set the helmet on the wooden box of hand grenades he used as a nightstand and lay face-up on his cot, composing his features into their usual expressionless mask. For all intents and purposes, he was merely deep in thought, but Zengy was not really thinking; he was fighting, engaged deep within himself in a fierce silent struggle with his own newfound weakness.

And losing.

He was in an agony of despair, suffering from it as from a disease. In the chronic phase of this disease, the state he lived in from minute to minute and from day to day, he was listless, apathetic, depressed, prone to fugue-like states, which would come over him without warning and from which he emerged as if from

unconsciousness, confused, and disoriented. He functioned poorly in the chronic phase, but he functioned.

He was not in the chronic phase now.

He screwed his eyes shut, until the glow of the lamps was no longer visible through his eyelids, and tried very hard to remember pleasant things. The taste of a cold Löwenbrau on a hot summer day. The vinegary smell of his mother's *Saurbraten* on a winter afternoon. Lale Anderson's voice when she sang "This Too Shall Pass." It was useless. When he felt like this, in the claw of despair, he simply had to endure it.

And it was by nature unendurable.

Zengy had fought in fjords and deserts, mountains and hedgerows, amongst Mediterranean lemon groves and in the ruins of shell-smashed African fortresses. He had jumped from burning aircraft into air so full of flak it looked as if God himself were flicking His dirty paintbrush against the canvas of the sky. During Operation Mercury, he had made a wall out of dead men and fought from behind it, the blood of the bullet-hacked bodies spattering over his own as he held off an entire company of New Zealanders single-handedly. Fastened to his tunic beneath his camouflage smock was every medal for bravery the Wehrmacht offered, as well as a gold-plated Wound Badge. He thought he had seen everything, experienced everything.

Then, he had come here and found something new.

For some days past, he had thought it was the forest itself that had unnerved him, for truly it was a terrible place. But he had realized this was wrong. It wasn't the forest itself. It was what the forest had *done* to him that was the source of his dismay. What it was making him feel. *That* it was making him feel. It had been so long since he had felt anything. In that sense, he had always been the ideal paratrooper—keen as a greyhound, tough as leather, hard as Krupp steel. Nothing touched

him, neither joy nor sorrow, love nor hatred. The Ten Commandments of the *fallschirmjäger* were as close to a religion as he had ever needed.

And now he was losing his faith.

Zengy had seen a lot of men lose their faith. He had seen devout Catholics throw Bibles into pools of bloody water, Lutheran seminarians become disciples of Nietzsche, men who wore the Blood Order of the Nazi Party cursing Hitler's name. But always it had been a gradual process, a steady chipping away of the belief from its outer edges. *He* had been struck through the center, pulverized from within, so that all his experience, all his discipline, all his pride and all his strength were as so much sand—sand that even now was slipping through his fingers.

And what had brought him to this nadir? An incident so trivial that compared to the parade of horror he had witnessed since the war had begun it was almost meaningless.

Almost laughable.

It had happened a month before. His outfit had arrived in Schmidt in the middle of a big American attack west of the town. Though the sun had theoretically been up for two hours, Zengy had barely been able to see his hand in front of his face for the gusts of sleet and rain blowing into his eyes. The town itself was scarcely more than a vague suggestion of gabled roofs and exposed brick, through which figures flitted here and there in a swirling mist. The clatter of hooves, the shouts of sergeants, the sound of hobnailed boots slipping and scraping on mud-slimed cobblestones had filtered through that mist into Zengy's ears as distantly as the rumble of the enemy's artillery. And yet some of that artillery must have been falling close, for among the other noises came a quite unmistakable cry of pain—a high, piercing, drawn-out shriek that went on and on, unrelieved.

Zengy had heard plenty of screams in his day, and they had no more affected his nerves than dust affected a sculptor. He had also known that the unit holding this sector was one of the new

Volksgrenadier divisions, composed mainly of gangling Hitler Youths, middle-aged men with flat feet, and ex-sailors whose ships had long since been sunk; he had fully expected sloppiness and unprofessionalism. Nevertheless, the thought of a wounded man lying untended infuriated him. No German paratrooper *ever* left a man behind. At Anzio, during some heavy shelling, he had seen two stretcher-bearers casually fling a wounded comrade into a ditch simply to spare themselves the work of carrying him up a hill. Zengy had forced them at gunpoint to retrieve the injured fellow, and after arriving at the aid station, he gave an order to have the two shirking swine sent immediately to a mine-clearing battalion.

He'd glanced about. El Greco had been leaning in close to Mutti Schulz, whose camouflage cape billowed theatrically in the wind; they were talking to a sodden red-faced officer in an Army helmet who gestured to some point down the street, probably an assembly area. He decided he'd leave them to their work and investigate himself. He hadn't walked a hundred paces before he came upon a part of town that had been hit hard by high-explosive shells. Great mounds of rubble, reminiscent of the slag heaps he'd seen in the Rhur, marked the places where buildings had once been; the rain sizzled on the smoldering remains like grease on a hot plate. He saw motionless bodies in torn greatcoats, an overturned field kitchen, a medic with a Red Cross armband tending to a gray-headed man in an ill-fitting uniform, whose right arm was red with blood. But this was not the source of the wailing. It lay some yards beyond, in the courtyard of what appeared to be a small brewery.

There, he found a soldier kneeling by a dead horse. The horse was still in its traces, and the supply wagon behind it listed forward like a stricken ship, its rear wheels having been blown off by the force of the explosion. A steady gush of broth, noodles, and pieces of desiccated vegetables flowed from ruptured soup tureens like blood. For some

yards in every direction were scattered loaves of black bread, torn scraps of horseflesh and canvas, splinters of wood. The soldier had the horse's great head cradled in his arms like an enormous baby, and his smooth pale face was contorted with such an expression of grief that Zengy stopped as if by the force of an invisible hand. He looked at the dead animal, with its staring eyes and huge teeth and ripped-open guts, from which protruded coils of steaming purple intestine, and then up again at the soldier, who looked to be all of sixteen. The accouterments of war with which the boy was laden—steel helmet, heavy greatcoat, double row of leather ammunition pouches, assault rifle, sheathed bayonet, canteen, bread bag, gas mask canister—should have made him formidable. Instead, he looked like a child who had dressed up in his father's uniform.

"You," Zengy said, and then stopped. His voice sounded weak in his own ears; he had to force it into its normal harsh timbre. "You. Soldier. Are you injured?"

The boy paid him no notice. He rocked the horse's head, back and forth, back and forth, his upper lip glistening with snot, his mouth twisted as if in agony, sobbing with such force that each word was ejected from his throat like a piece of gristle. "*Caesar! Caesar! No! Please God, no! Please! Not Caesar! Don't be dead! God in Heaven, no! Don't take Caesar! God, please! Not my baby! NOT MY BABY! PLEASE, GOD IN HEAVEN, NOT CAESAR!*"

"Stop that!" Zengy said, more alarmed than angry. "Stop that at once! Get hold of yourself!"

"*Take me instead!*" The boy shrieked, turning up his face to the rain, the cords on his neck standing out in bas-relief. His German had the accent of Alsace, a French accent, and somehow that made him only more pitiful. "*Take me! Take anyone else! Just don't let Caesar be dead!*"

“Stop it,” Zengy repeated. But his voice had faltered even as the boy’s grew louder. He had never seen such raw, naked anguish. The power of it struck outward like shrapnel, and like shrapnel it pierced him. Zengy’s head swam momentarily with confusion and then with dismay. He knew his heart was as hard as the pharaoh’s. He had killed more men than he could count, and he had ordered many more still to their deaths, close friends among them, and he had done it without pity and without remorse, as a paratrooper should. The Commandments said that battle was fulfillment, that victory or death must be a point of honor, that to steel oneself through to the center of the marrow was to become the German warrior incarnate. It was absurd, ridiculous, farcical, to sit here and listen to this child keen over an old milk-wagon nag when human lives were being blown out like candles all around them. He knew he must seize the boy by the shoulders, shake him, slap him across the face, send him back to his own sergeant with a boot on the backside if necessary.

But he found he could not do this. Shockingly, he did not *want* to do it. Something in the softness of the boy’s face, some quality that was like the quality of a Renaissance cherub weeping over the death of Christ, made it impossible, even blasphemous. To add to the misery of this poor wretch—*no!* Zengy’s heart gave a hard, almost painful thump, as if it were beating for the first time. In his mind’s eye, he saw himself coming to life, the blood pumping through the expanding veins, the organs inflating with vital juices, the nerves tingling with newfound sensation. The feeling he’d possessed for years, since long before the conflict began, that he was nothing but an automaton, a machine constructed from steel plate and leather and armature, a device of canvas and wire and jointed metal, designed solely for the purpose of killing and conquest, fell away. Everything rushed in at once: the rain and the sleet beating against his face, the intermingled smells of spent explosive and scorched earth and noodle soup and entrails, the dull thunder of the

guns, all of this came to him with a freshness and intensity that was new. And in a sense it was. Things that had flowed over him like water over armor since he was a child himself were now rushing inside, filling him up, choking him.

“Stop it,” Zengy said, but he was no longer giving orders; his voice had cracked, become a plea. He sank down beside the boy, so that their shoulders were touching, so that the bedraggled icy mane of the horse spilled over his knees. The soldier continued to rock the head, pressing his face against the side of Caesar’s muzzle and clenching his teeth, as if he could resurrect the beast by sheer effort. Zengy put his hand on the boy’s arm. “You must stop it. He’s dead. He’s gone.”

“Why?” The soldier cried, his voice becoming savage. “Why? What did he do? He was just an old horse! He was good! He never hurt anyone! He brought food! *WHY DID THEY HAVE TO KILL HIM?*”

Zengy’s reply faded into a sigh that plumed briefly in the icy air and then trickled away into the wind. Was there any sense in saying that there was no sense in *any* of it? That Caesar, with his tousled ungroomed mane and his stumpy yellow teeth and his worn-out shoes, who had doubtless eaten apples or sugar or carrots out of this boy’s hand, had traveled with him, pulled for him, whickered for him, nuzzled his chest, served as his best friend—that Caesar had been killed for no reason at all? What did the whole opaque tangle of politics and intrigue that had led up to the war matter to this heartbroken child? What did *all that shit* matter to any mother or father who opened the door to see some pig-eyed, double-chinned Party official standing there with arm out-thrust and heels together, barking that their son had died for Führer and fatherland?

Zengy’s eyes were stinging, but not from the rain, and there was a hard lump in his throat where some ready-made line about doing one’s duty had been trying to form. Part of him was in a panic such as no bullet wound had ever provoked. The effect was more like stepping on a

mine—what he imagined stepping on a mine to be. That same sense of shock and unbelief that the whole world had exploded. Only it wasn't happening without; it was happening within, and it wasn't happening to someone else, it was happening to *him*.

“Why?” the boy said, turning his overflowing eyes to Zengy. “Why? For God’s sake, why?”

Zengy raised his hand to the boy’s cheek. Cold rain and hot tears. He really was a child. Nothing but a child. Robbed from his home by the war, robbed of his freedom by the Army, robbed of his best friend by the enemy, and doubtless soon to be robbed of his life by the war. Because hard men had sent him into battle and harder men would lead him into battle, men who were keen as greyhounds, tough as leather, hard as Krupp steel. Men who cared only for the mission. Men who believed that victory or death was a point of honor.

Men like me, Zengy thought.

His hand fell away, and he looked at it as if it had betrayed him. He was not, he realized dully, offering comfort.

He was seeking it.

2

Zengy opened his eyes. The image of the boy faded, replaced by the balks of timber that formed the roof of the bunker. He heard the gentle patter of the rain outside, took in a deep breath through his nose, smelled cigars, rifle oil, mildew, stale sweat. Felt the itch of his dirty underclothes against his skin. *This is the present*, he thought. *This is reality. This is what matters.* It was no use. His mind kept returning to the point where the war machine known officially as Major Martin Zenger had come undone, as if by doing so he could prevent it from happening. Already the incident had taken on a kind of soft focus, as if it had happened in his early childhood instead of just a month in the past—a month in which he had aged thirty years. In that month, he'd lost almost half his men, and every death and injury had diminished his will to continue, his will to *command*. He had never asked the question "Why?" since this whole world holocaust had ignited itself like a torch hurled into a roomful of gunpowder. Now, asking it, he found he had no answer. The men were fighting now because they were trained to fight, because they were ordered to fight, because the rope waited for those who would not fight, and because they were on their home soil now, the mystic dirt of Germany, and only a coward refused to defend his home. That had been more than enough for Zengy before.

It was not enough now.

He looked at his hands. On the third finger of his right was his paratrooper's jump ring, the only piece of jewelry he had ever owned or wanted to own. Odd how little he noticed it anymore. It had become like his pistol—not a foreign object but an extension of himself, just as he was an extension of the paratrooper's ethos. And what was that ethos? You didn't have to go much further than the Sixth Commandment to answer that one. *For you, victory or death shall be a point of honor.* But where there was no hope of victory, all one had to look forward to was death, and where was the honor in that?

Zengy let his hands fall back to his chest. His battalion had been so deeply harrowed by losses that Division had assigned him several companies of *Volksgrenadiers* as replacements. This mixed force, composed half of hardened professionals and half of knock-kneed amateurs, had fought in so many pitched battles that they had become indistinguishable from each other in his mind—a nightmarish jumble that rattled in his head like the pieces of a puzzle. This one was for control of the heights, that one was for control of the road, the other for control of the town. It did not matter; every yard of this accursed forest was smeared with the blood of his men.

Oh, he knew the living did not blame him. On the contrary! They called him *Papa* in the old German tradition, and he could see their chins raise and their shoulders square when he approached—not out of any mechanical obedience but genuine awe. Papa wasn't afraid of death or the devil. When the shit started flying Papa's only question was, "Which way to the enemy?" and when he had his answer, off he was, blasting away with his Danuvia submachine gun as if he could win the whole war on his own.

A bitter sound escaped Zengy's throat, as if he were trying to cough up some foul-tasting thing, which in a sense he was, for all his successes were like ashes in his mouth, as they served to delude his men regarding their ultimate fate. And he *had* deluded them, all of them—the

old veteran paratroopers and the *Volksgrenadiers* alike. They might not believe in Final Victory or Hitler or National Socialism anymore...but they believed in him.

Sweat broke out on his forehead despite the chill. In thirty-six hours, the Americans would attack again. In thirty-six hours, he would lead his outfit back into battle once more. Four hundred and seventy-eight men whose wives and mothers and sweethearts were counting on him, sight unseen, to bring their boys through it alive. They did not know he regarded it as hopeless. They did not know he was in despair.

But he did.

3

What a miserable night, Zengy thought.

It was 0300 hours, traditionally the worst moment for any soldier on watch. It didn't matter how well-acclimated you were to lack of sleep: three in the morning was, as El Greco always liked to say, three in the fucking morning, and the natural inclination of the human eyelid at that hour was to shut itself. It was for this reason Zengy always chose this exact time to inspect the lines. Contrary to what the Party said, biology was the same for everybody. A German was just as liable to nod off on sentry duty as anyone else, and the Americans knew this. They weren't above sending out small patrols to see if they could catch Fritz napping.

He snapped the case on his watch shut and let it slip back into his pocket. His eyes stung with weariness, there was a thick, foul taste in his mouth, and all his joints ached. He'd taken a mouthful of schnapps to buck himself up, but the stuff had tasted like gasoline and done nothing to dispel his lethargy. Part of him, that part he referred to as *The Inner Schweinhund*, had pleaded that he remain on the cot and send someone else to do this instead. The weather was horrible—temperatures near freezing, rain and sleet falling hard, visibility shit-all. In any case, it wasn't his job, and the chances that he might get shot accidentally by a trigger-happy sentry, or step on a booby trap, or get lost and wander into

the enemy lines by mistake, were actually very good. It was mainly in spite of the Inner *Schweinhund* that he had insisted on going himself.

Mainly.

“And I thought Russia was a shitty place,” Fox’l said, tugging at his balaclava so that only his crystal-blue eyes shone between the lines of helmet and mask. “If I’d known I could be this miserable in Germany, I would never have left the country.”

“Be quiet,” Zengy replied. “And keep your weapon handy. This isn’t a pleasure stroll.”

They made their way up the path, treading carefully through a slush of dead leaves and sleet. The darkness was nearly absolute, and it took a long time for Zengy’s eyes to adjust well enough so that he could take a step without fear of landing on his face. Of course he knew the ground very well, now—as well as anyone could know this hellish garden maze. The position of each of his companies, each of his individual platoons, of his mortar pits and two-man bunkers and anti-tank guns, indeed, of the whole defensive network he’d clawed into the earth since arriving here, stood out as clearly in his mind as it did on the map rolled up neatly in the case on his hip. The trouble was the map bore about as much relationship to reality as a Steamboat Willy cartoon bore to the behavior of an actual mouse. It was said only God knew how to navigate this huge tangle of trees, hills, rotten boughs, overflowing streams, shell holes, firebreaks, game trails, and abandoned hamlets... but Zengy was fairly certain the one who had designed this place lived as far from heaven as it was possible to be.

They moved quickly through the heart of the command area, past the communication’s dugout with its huge spools of cable sitting by the steps; past the armorer’s van, from which a radio murmured softly amid a tantalizing smell of pipe smoke; past the aid station, mercifully silent in the temporary absence of fighting; past the field kitchen and the impromptu stalls where the horses were stabled; past the security cordon

that surrounded his headquarters; until at last they were clear and moving up toward the main battle line.

The two of them climbed over fallen logs, slid down embankments, splashed through icy streams and mounted slippery hillocks strewn with roots and boulders. After ten panting minutes, they passed a burned-out Opel truck that had been shoved into a ditch by the road. Zengy knew he was coming up directly behind one of his strongpoints, a hill riddled with machine-gun nests, mortar pits, cast-steel bunkers, and infantry guns, but he could see nothing, hear nothing. At last, he heard the slide of a submachine gun lock back, and a gruff voice addressed him from the darkness.

“Who goes there?”

“Papa Zengy.”

“Password?”

“Siberia.”

“Come forward.”

Zengy came forward. He heard rustling on one side of the road and a moment later a paratrooper appeared, aiming the muzzle of his Schmeisser directly at Zengy's chest. After a moment, the muzzle dipped and the paratrooper clicked to attention.

“Is that you, Haimüller?”

“*Jawohl!*”

“Go back to sleep.”

Zengy could almost hear the man's grin. A click of heels, a rustle of bushes, and Haimüller vanished like a forest spirit; it was as if he'd never been there. From the opposite side of the road, Zengy heard a voice muttering briefly; someone from within a covered position was radioing ahead, warning the others that the commander was coming. The men weren't worried about being caught napping in their foxholes; they were worried about shooting their CO by mistake.

Zengy moved on, nearly walking into a small signpost nailed to the trunk of a sapling, and followed the designated path up a slope and into a large, bowl-shaped hollow in the earth. The rain stopped, for camouflage ground sheets in various colors and patterns—oak-leaf, splinter, geometric—had been laid over tightly-stretched netting to form the roof that kept this howitzer pit dry. The smell of dirt here, a heavy, rich scent, reminiscent of a freshly plowed field, was powerful, but traces of tobacco smoke and the aroma of coffee were also detectable. There was light—the feeble, almost grudging light of Hindenburg candles and cigarette ends, which to Zengy's night-accustomed eyes looked as bright as flames.

A row of paratroopers were lying with their backs to the wall of the pit, eating. All but one of them had removed their nutshell helmets, revealing thick, matted hair and dirty, pale faces that sported days of stubble. Most wore “bone sacks,” the heavy one-piece coveralls of green cotton duck with padded knees and elbows, which were designed for jumping out of aircraft but very handy in foul weather. Their weapons looked carelessly lain—resting on shins or thighs or propped up against sandbags or ammunition crates—but Zengy knew that within seconds of the first alarm—a flare, a rifle shot, the *crump* of a land mine—every one of those weapons would be in hand, locked, loaded, and ready to fire.

The men started to rise as soon as Zengy pulled down his cloth mask; he waved them back down with a careless hand, then squatted beside them. He saw tin mugs, a pint bottle of beer, canned fish, sausage, slices of crumbly white bread, and “cow's toothpaste”—the pungent yellow Army cheese squeezed out of long flat tubes. *Ohne Kampf, keine Kampf!* ran the paratrooper's mantra: No food, no fight.

“Don't let me interrupt your feast, kids.”

“Will you join us, Papa?” This from Dorian, a blond, blue-eyed, bull-necked little sergeant who had been training for the 1940 Olympic

wrestling team when the war broke out. Even in the low light, his eyes bore the dull glaze of the amphetamines the Wehrmacht issued to combat exhaustion.

“Coffee would be welcome.”

A mug was thrust instantly into his hand. He took a sip and tasted burnt acorns. “Delightful. Which one of you organized the salmon?”

There was a moment of silence. Then lamplight glinted on a mischievous grin—it was Hanno, known throughout the unit as Hanno the Ferret for his ability to nose out liquor, chocolate, smutty postcards, and anything else that was otherwise impossible to come by. He raised his hand like a schoolboy.

“And precisely how did you organize it?”

“I went fishing, Major.”

“And caught a can?”

“I’m a very good fisherman, Major.”

The men laughed. Zengy drank more of the coffee, despite its abominable taste, and watched them resume their meal. It was so strange to look upon the familiar faces and see them as if for the first time—Big Schulz with his blunt features and heavy machine-gunner’s shoulders; red-headed Racke, the cynical card player, known as The Sweeper for the efficiency with which he swept women into his bed, who often boasted that if they gave out Iron Crosses for screwing, he’d have more medals than Goering; Cajus, whose nervous cigarette gestures and round, watchful eyes reminded Zengy of a young wolf; Kubala, the deep-voiced veteran of Spain with the scarred cheek and the resonant baritone. Until a few weeks ago, he had seen these men as mere instruments, as units of fighting power. Now, he was aware of them in a way he had never been previously—aware of the uniqueness of their features, their body heat, their peculiar odor of sweat and dirt and *ersatz* coffee. Racke’s hair was the exact color of copper wire—had he noticed

that before? And what about that quirky little gap between Hanno's front teeth? Or the way Dorian's mouth curved like Cupid's bow? Or the bovine way Big Schulz's lower jaws worked side to side when he chewed?

Zengy closed his eyes, pretending to savor the coffee. He wondered how many men had died under his command—the precise figure. Enough to fill out a company? Certainly. Enough to fill out a *battalion*? It wasn't impossible. And every one of them as unique as this lot here, the apple of some mother's eye, holding the place of honor on some faraway mantelpiece. Yet when he looked back, it seemed as if he could not recall what any of them looked like. A name, an accent, a distinctive gesture, a favorite brand of tobacco? Yes. But not their faces. At this very moment, how many of the troops in his *abteilung* could he call by name, or even recognize? Among the paratroopers, perhaps as many as fifty. How about the grenadiers? There were more than two hundred of them in the unit, and with the exception of a few officers and a sergeant or two, they summoned up nothing in Zengy's mind except scuffed steel helmets, crumpled uniforms, and ill-fitting greatcoats. Just so many faceless toy soldiers.

Well, well, he thought. Perhaps there's a reason you never took off your armor before...turns out what's underneath is not much to look at.

He slugged down the rest of the coffee, for its warming properties rather than its taste, and stood up, driven by a spasm of anger. It had been like this since the incident with the boy—any time he relaxed, even for a moment, these unwanted thoughts flooded in at once, swamping him, weakening his resolve. What did all this sentimental whimpering accomplish, anyway? So he couldn't recall the faces of the dead. So most of his men had no faces for him. Would remembering bring them back to life or prevent the ones now living from dying tomorrow?

A vague idea was forming in his brain, and he wanted to act on it before it took shape and revealed itself for an absurdity. Moving at a pace that made Fox'l mutter under his breath, he worked his way back out of the strongpoint, the other way down the rutted road, then scaled a small hill—small in this forest meaning something less than five stories. Several large-caliber shells had knocked down most of the trees at its crest, and the downpour came almost unobstructed, so that the shell holes brimmed like miniature fishing ponds. Zengy felt something hard and slick beneath his boot and looked down. The grinning face of a half-buried skull looked back at him. Here and there, whitish bone showed through the mud—a rib, the ball of one hip, what appeared to be a knee. Skeletal fingers clutched at a rusting carbine.

Somebody's son, Zengy thought. He almost pointed out the skull, then refrained. Fox'l would only make some callous remark, and Zengy was not in the mood for callousness. It would only serve to remind him that all his callouses were gone. The path wound down to a wide road that had been laid along the lowest point in the forest, so deeply beneath the overhanging trees that it would be completely invisible even to low-flying aircraft and partially shielded from the rain. Stepping onto it was like pushing through a curtain to face a packed house. The road was full of soldiers in army helmets. Some were unloading bales of straw from the backs of wagons, while others were laying it down in a thick carpet over the mud. Under the glowering eyes of their sergeants, they worked in almost complete silence; the occasional clink of equipment, muttered command, or whicker of a horse was all that ruffled the quiet. Zengy and Fox'l sighed with relief and tugged down their face masks as if on cue.

A paratrooper approached them in dim silhouette. By the particular stiffness of the man's gait, Zengy knew it was Oberleutnant Eisenberg, whose chute had malfunctioned during the operation to reinforce Schmaltz's battle group in Sicily.

"How's everything going here, Harald?" Zengy asked.

Eisenberg didn't have to come to attention; his surgically fused spine didn't know any other posture. "Slower than I'd like, Herr Major. Only about half the grenadiers are really fit for labor, and we can't spare our own men for this kind of work—we need them in the line."

Zengy fought an urge to curse. He already knew the wretched condition of these men, most of whom had been previously exempt from conscription by virtue of physical infirmity or age. They had been gathered up over the summer by the tens of thousands from all over Germany, given eight weeks of hasty military training, and then sent to the front to fill the enormous gaps torn out by the previous year's fighting. Until recently, he'd thought of them in just that way—fodder. But now, in this sleet-swept darkness, amid the grunts of exertion and the faint rustle of the hay, when it was impossible to make out more than the merest outline of a face, it seemed that he was aware of them as human beings in a way he had never been aware of before. He wondered how they felt, these scrawny teenagers and middle-aged family men with bad backs and blurry vision, to have been dragged from their homes to be chased around barracks-squares in joyless places like Spandau and Graffenwöhr, then herded into boxcars and shunted off to the front like so many head of cattle. They probably understood nothing. The slaves who had built the pyramids, who had marched into the Roman arenas to be torn apart by wild beasts or slashed open with swords or simply burned alive, the American Negroes who toiled in the cotton fields until they shit themselves inside-out from typhus, had any of them grasped the purpose behind their agony? And if they had, would it matter?

I want to look them in the face, Zengy realized. I want to acknowledge them as fellow human beings before I send them into battle. Because, God help me, I've never once done that before.

With a deep breath, as a man might take before making some irrevocable decision, Zengy stepped forward and caught one panting

fellow by his glistening sleeve. The soldier looked up, startled; and then, seeming to realize he was being addressed by his commander, he threw himself to attention so violently that had his helmet not been securely fastened around his chin, it might have flown off.

“You—what is your name, soldier?”

“Private Litzwack, sir.”

“Where are you from?”

“Püggen, sir—in Pomerania.”

“So you’re a farmer, then.”

“My father is.”

“Well, what are you, Litzwack?”

“I am a *soldier*, sir.”

“How old are you, soldier?”

“I’ll be seventeen in two days.”

Christ the Redeemer, Zengy thought. “Carry on, Litzwack.” He came upon another man, who was leaning against a pitchfork and gasping for air as if through a straw. “Name and rank.”

“Private Gadermann, sir.”

“Where are you from?”

“Mecklenberg.”

“How old?”

“Forty-four.”

“Did you fight in the last war?”

“No, I was born blind in one eye.”

“How long have you been in the Army?”

“Three months.”

“What were you in civilian life?”

“A florist.”

“Carry on.”

He moved down the road, his boots rustling on the muddy straw. He found a man carrying a covered lantern that revealed only a pale ring

of yellow light, just enough to illuminate the skirts of his greatcoat and mud-crusting boots. "And you?"

"Lance-Corporal Korroscheck."

"From?"

"Braunschweig."

"Age?"

"Thirty-one."

"When were you called up?"

"July."

"Why not before?"

"I have nyctalopia."

"What is that?"

"I can't see in the dark."

"Is that why they have you carry the lantern?"

"Yes."

"What's your occupation, Korroscheck?"

"I worked in a bicycle shop."

"All right. Carry on."

Zengy kept going. He stopped every third or fourth soldier he encountered. The sergeants were staring at him, baffled and annoyed at this interruption of the work, but they dared not say a word. He encountered a bank teller from Dresden with a bleeding ulcer, a fifty-year-old locksmith from Bad Oeyenhausen, and a schoolteacher from Zwickau who suffered from asthma. He met a fifteen-year-old boy from Weimar who had to push his helmet up to see, and a former mechanic from the Luftwaffe from Upper Silesia who'd been pressed into the Army because he was young and strong, and who needed mechanics for planes that had no gasoline?

"What's your name?"

"*Private* Weichold."

"Age?"

"Forty-eight."

"Where are you from?"

"Breslau."

"How long have you been in the Army?"

"Since before you were born."

"Why are you still a private?"

"I was denounced a year ago for remarks I made about the Party. I forfeited my rank, pension, and the right to wear my medals."

"What was your rank?"

"Lieutenant-colonel."

"What are your duties now?"

"I carry mortar bombs."

He heard the lisp of the Swabian and the yap of the Berliner, encountered the gloomy severity of the North German Protestant and the cheek of the Catholic Rhinelander. He met bitterness and resolve, fanatical faith in the Führer and fatalistic indifference, naked terror, and a grim determination to defend the homeland.

"Name?"

"Private Aumeyer."

"Age?"

"Thirty."

"Home town?"

"Erlangen. In Franconia."

"Length of service?"

"Two months—a little more."

"Why weren't you called up before?"

"Exempted. My right leg is an inch shorter than my left."

"Occupation?"

"Musician. I also hold rank in the Storm Troopers."

This one had been a seaman aboard the cruiser *Gniesenau*, that one the floor manager of a department store in Frankfurt on the Oder.

Here was a seminarian with thick glasses and a double chin, there a child who wore a Hitler Youth pin on his coat. One man had been invalidated out of the service back in 1940 after suffering third-degree burns when his tank had run over a mine, another had to carry a special permit allowing him not to wear the regulation belt because his stomach had never completely healed from being torn open by a bomb during an air-raid on Hamburg.

“Name?”

“Bastaby.”

“Age?”

“Sixteen.”

“Home town?”

“Eschau.”

The boy's German had a distinctly French accent. “Is that in Moselle?”

“Alsace.”

That's behind enemy lines. “Length of—”

Zengy stopped. He knew this voice, but the glow of Korroscheck's lantern was perhaps a third as powerful as a candle and served only to hint at the outline of a face. Could it be possible—?

“Weren't you a groom?”

“I *was*.” The bitterness in the boy's voice was palpable; it seemed to run from his mouth like the foam from a suicide pill.

Zengy felt a moment of disorientation so powerful he nearly swooned. The incident with the dead horse, though he had relived it a thousand times in his mind, had taken on the quality of a nightmare rather than a memory, and hearing this boy's voice emanate from the shadow before him was like having a phantom from that nightmare follow you into your waking life.

“And now you're a rifleman?”

“Well, I have no horse to groom, do I?”

The screams sounded afresh in Zengy's ears: *Caesar! Please God, no! Not my baby! Not Caesar! Take me instead!* "Do you even know how to shoot?"

"I'll live long enough to learn, *Herr Major*. I promise you that."

"But you don't belong here," Zengy said, speaking to the child as if they were old friends, or brothers. "You belong...."

The boy waited, but Zengy could think of nothing to say. Staring into the empty eye sockets of the skull had been less unnerving than talking to this lantern-lit shadow, whose voice quivered with hatred and bloodlust. At some length, he simply stammered, "Carry on," and turned away. The failure of his experiment had left him feeling numb and slightly sick. He wanted to do something decisive—to bark at Eisenberg, demand to know if the roads would be covered by the appointed time so that the ammunition wagons could move up in silence. Pointless and insulting. Eisenberg knew his job. *All* his men knew, even the grenadiers, because he'd given them the simplest roles imaginable and assigned his toughest sergeants to make sure those roles were fulfilled. Preparation wasn't the problem, because for the first time in his life, he didn't care if an attack succeeded or failed. What he wanted was for his men to survive, and it struck him with dreadful certainty, the certainty of a tolling bell, that no matter what he said or what he did, whether he gave the right orders or the wrong ones, most of these men were going to die.

Zengy trod wearily down the bunker steps, hung his Danuvia by its leather strap on a nail driven into the wall over his cot, and shrugged out of his streaming cape. For once, the place did not seem like a antediluvian burial chamber; on the contrary, after stumbling about in the icy black night, the glow of the battery lamps, the faint haze of old cigarette smoke, and the plaintive scratch of the gramophone in the corner were weirdly redolent of home.

Home, Zengy thought. The home he'd been raised in was in East Prussia, near the old Polish border; the last he'd heard, the Red Army had been only forty or fifty kilometers away, and that had been weeks ago. I suppose the Russians have burned it by now. Nothing left but cold ashes and snow. Nothing for me to go back to—even if I could go.

El Greco looked up from the map spread over his thighs, took one dark-eyed look at Zengy, and said, "You look like shit, Papa."

Zengy gave him a cold look that said, *Don't talk to me that way in front of the men.*

"They're all gone," El Greco said, reading the look. "They got invited to a 'fancy dress ball' with those SS Panzer troops that showed up tonight. Except for Quast, over there, and he's dead asleep."

"In that case, I could use a drink."

"You had one before you left."

“Are you my mother? Pour me a fucking drink.”

Obus gave him a curious look and reached for the bottle. “Any more language like that, Herr Major, and my ears will bleed.”

“You want to spare your ass, not your ears. Pour!”

El Greco obediently tipped schnapps into a tin mug. “I’m all for a snort to clear the sinuses, Zengy, but you’ve been hitting this stuff pretty hard lately for one who normally eschews the grape. Should I be worried?”

“Only if you’re afraid of dying.”

“Ach, well, I’m off the hook then. I died in thirty-four, when the Comedian Harmonists broke up.”

“They didn’t break up.” Zengy took off his helmet and unbuckled his ammunition belt. “The Reich Chamber of Music banned them from performing because Frommermann and Cycowski and Collin were Jews, and Bootz married a Jew.”

“What do I care if they were Jews? They could *sing*, goddamn it. Especially Cycowski.”

“He sounded like a foghorn.”

“He was a baritone, that’s how they’re supposed to sound. I suppose *you* like Lale Anderson.”

“I do like Lale Anderson. You’d like Lale Anderson too if your blood was truly German and not polluted with that Spanish filth.”

“It’s Greek filth,” Obus said. “But, yes, racially I’m in Category Three. ‘Harmonious Bastard with Slight Alpine Dinaric or Mediterranean Characteristics.’ Probably explains my degenerate taste in music too.”

Zengy drained the schnapps, thrust out his mug for more. “‘*Slight Mediterranean characteristics.*’ I’ve seen olives with less color than you.”

“And I’ve seen snow with more color than you. You pureblood-Aryan types look like you could do with some sun and a blood transfusion.”

“I’m not pureblood. Plenty of Polish piss in my stream, I’m sure, and Russian too.”

“Sure, but they were probably nobles. It’s okay to screw a Polack or a Popov if they’ve got royal blood in their veins. There’s a special dispensation for it. Didn’t they tell you that when you were at Baron’s School?”

Zengy took another drink. As always, the stuff was going straight to his head with no interruption. “You really are a bastard, Obus. I don’t know so much about the harmonious part.”

“I’m a harmonious comedian bastard.”

“And I’m the result of my father screwing the maid. One last roll in the hay with the help before he went back to the front in nineteen-seventeen. I guess you can’t blame him. His wife was as ugly as the ass-end of a milk-wagon nag.”

“Why’d he marry her, then?”

“He had the title but no money. She had the money but no title. They needed each other. And they were already acquainted—first cousins. That’s how the German aristocracy keeps going, you know—cousins screwing cousins screwing cousins.”

“I screwed one of *my* cousins when I was seventeen,” El Greco said with a sigh. “Maria. She could have shoved a piece of chalk in her cunt and written Goethe’s *Tasso* in Gothic script without breaking a sweat.”

“I don’t want to hear about your conquests. I want a cigarette.”

“There’s a cigarette in your *mouth*, Zengy.”

“So there is. What is it? Trommler?”

“Africaine.”

“I smoke Trommlers when I smoke. What am I doing with this?”

"I gave you a pack earlier today. Don't you remember?"

"No."

They drank for a while in silence. The singer on the gramophone declared that all he wanted was music, music, music. Obus stared at Zengy with eyes as bright and black as a crow's. After some time, the lieutenant said, "Are you going to tell me what's troubling you, or not?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You've been acting strange for weeks. You think I don't notice? I've known you since fucking Narvik. You're always steady. But lately...."

"Lately, what?"

"You've been hitting the bottle. Smoking like a chimney. Forgetting things."

"Maybe this place is getting on my nerves."

"There's more to it than that. You've gotten careless. I saw you walk through some open ground the other day like you were on a country stroll. If there'd been a sniper nearby you'd be dead now." Obus shook his head. "I'm all for letting your hair down, Zengy, but you've been acting like we're still class-two privates at a peep show. That's not like you. Even when you *were* a class-two private, you weren't like this."

"No? Tell me what I'm like. You ought to know. You've known me since fucking Narvik. What am I like, Kurt?"

A heavy silence descended, unrelieved by the sound of the Otto Stenzel Dance Orchestra. "Forget I brought it up," El Greco said. "You want to take a drink, take a fucking drink. Take the bottle. Who am I to tell you what to do?"

"Tell me what I'm like."

"Let's just drop it."

"No. Tell me."

El Greco's lip twitched. He slugged down some schnapps of his own, and a belligerent gleam came into his stare. "Marble."

"How is that, exactly?"

"Smooth and cold and black at heart."

Zengy looked at the bottom of his tin mug. Empty. The schnapps burned in his mouth and in his belly and spread the same sort of numbness through his brain that the cold had seeped into his face and hands and feet. The façade of the commander was slipping, had slipped, but what did it matter since there was nothing beneath it?

"If only that were so," he said.

"It always has been so," El Greco replied. "You're the hardest man I've ever met. Nothing ever gets to you. You kept your cool at Narvik when everybody else lost their head, including me. Even on Crete you didn't rattle. Monte Cassino neither and that was the worst fighting I've ever seen. What's changed?"

Zengy closed his eyes. He could smell the forest on himself—water, mud, sap, pine needles—and beneath it the thicker scent of his own sweat. Disgusting how one could smell each part of oneself, the odors of feet and crotch and asshole and armpits equally distinct and terrible. There was of course no way to bathe properly here. You cracked the scrim of ice on the rain barrel with the butt of your weapon, and splashed as much of your flesh as you dared expose to the cold, sleet-filled air, and then you shucked back into mud-crusting, sweat-stiffened, lice-infested clothes, shivering and cursing, no cleaner than when you had started.

"What's changed is that in a few hours, the Americans hit us again, and instead of doing what we should have done weeks ago, which is withdraw, we're going to pull off some half-baked counterattack shoved down our throats by Headquarters."

El Greco waited; but Zengy said nothing more. Gaze steady, Obus lit a match and touched it to the tip of a short black cigar, whose

fumes smelled like brimstone. "I am actually aware of all that, you know, on account of being your executive officer."

"Are you aware that half our men are middle-agers with tin ears and flat feet, and the other half kids not much taller than their rifles?"

"Our old men and kids are fighting to keep these American gangsters off our soil. You do remember that this ground here—" Obus dug the heel of his boot into the dirt floor of the bunker. "—is German ground, *ja*?"

"It's German mud, certainly."

Obus glared. Zengy took a deep breath and forced the facetiousness from his tone. "They're all going to cop it, Kurt. Every last one of them."

"So what? There are worse ways to cop it than fighting for your home."

"Tell that to their families."

"Their families are who they are fighting *for*. You don't owe them anything."

"I'm the man sending them to their deaths."

"That's your *job*. Christ on His Cross, Zengy, you're the one always quoting that damned Shakespeare, instead of Goethe or Schiller like a German should. Well, '*The king is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers.*'"

"Those are just words."

"The Bible is just words." El Greco's cigar flared angrily. "The loyalty oath we took to the Führer is just words. The Ten Commandments of the paratrooper are just words. Words are what we live by."

"And what we die by?"

"If necessary, yes." Obus leaned forward, shoved the burning tip of the cigar at Zengy like an accusatory finger. "*For we know enough if*

we know we are the king's subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the king wipes the crime of it out of us."

Zengy closed his eyes. He knew it would be impossible to get Obus to understand; the man was a warrior down to his marrow. El Greco never thought further than the next fight, never looked up from the foresight of his machine gun long enough to see the futility of fighting. Finally, Zengy said: "*But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, 'We died at such a place.' Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it.*" He shook his head. "I'm the king, Kurt."

Obus leaned back slowly. He replaced the cigar between his teeth and took several bewildered, resentful puffs. "I think the sleet has frozen your brain."

"*I wish* I were frozen," Zengy said mournfully. "I used to be frozen. Now, I've thawed. And melting isn't all it's cracked up to be."

5

Dawn found Zengy wearily climbing the steps of General Ketterling's advance headquarters, a bomb-damaged brewery in the woods east of Schmidt, a gloomy brick-walled fortress that looked to have been built sometime in the seventeenth century. After a night's hard drinking, the heavy, beery scent of the place twisted his stomach a little more with each inhalation, but nausea was the least of his worries. He was still angry with himself for vocalizing his doubts to Obus. A stupid move, and more than that, a sign of his growing carelessness, his growing weakness. A month ago, he would have cut off his right hand before doing such a thing.

Ah, yes, he thought, returning the military policeman's salute with a casual wave. But a month ago you were a different man, weren't you?

Inside was the usual controlled chaos of a Divisional command post; teletypes chattered, phones went off with a harsh double-buzz, harassed-looking young radiomen slumped over gigantic sets or stepped over bunches of multi-colored cable strewn higgledy-piggledy over the floor. The air was foul with body odor, warmed-over coffee, and cigarette smoke, but at the moment Zengy found this effluvium preferable to hops. He took off his helmet and cocked it under one arm, his gaze falling unwillingly on the blood-red banner that ran lengthwise

across the wall. Emblazoned on its crimson surface in white Gothic lettering were three words:

BELIEVE. FIGHT. WIN.

A very handsome, somewhat cynical-looking, staff officer named Cramm, who wore an eyepatch and whose half-empty left sleeve was pinned to his upper arm, appeared and led Zengy through the confusion. They did not go to the brewery director's office, as on past visits, but down a long flight of steps into the brewhouse itself. They passed enormous boil kettles of solid copper, brick ovens, fermentation vats, stacks of barrels. It was very dark, and the bare bulbs strung against the walls, powered by some unseen but not unheard Army generator, did little more than glare impotently within the shadows. They came upon the storage vats, each of which looked to be two stories high. In the midst of these gargantuan structures, someone had placed some of the brewery director's furniture: a huge desk of polished oak and a long conference table set with numerous chairs.

He found General Ketterling sitting behind the desk, smoking a cigarette that was attached to his artificial right hand by a brass ring. Before him stood five grim-faced colonels—the four regimental commanders and the divisional Chief of Staff, the latter suffering from a serious liver ailment contracted in North Africa that he treated, at his doctor's instruction, by drinking a quart of vodka every day. Off to one side, standing with arms folded, was a balding, bull-necked, blunt-faced SS officer wearing the distinctive black coveralls of the Panzer troops. The bridge of his nose had been shot away, along with much of the right side of his face; it was a twisted mass of pinkish scar tissue that dragged the lipless corner of his mouth into a death's-head grin.

Together they almost make a whole person, Zengy thought, looking around. As he clicked to attention, he felt half-ashamed that he

retained all his limbs and bore no disfiguring scar. "Reporting as ordered, *Mein General*."

Ketterling waved Zengy to ease with his fake hand, leaving a crescent of smoke on the air. He was cadaverously thin, with close-cropped silver hair, sunken gray eyes, caved-in cheeks, and a voice gone feeble with age and hoarse with weariness. Zengy noted, not for the first time, that the faded ribbons over this general's breast pocket were all from the First World War.

"Major, you'll forgive my new accommodations; I had to move after the last air raid. You know my officers, of course, but may I present Hauptsturmführer Schlabredorf, commander of the SS Heavy Tank Company, and Major Nickolaus, the National Socialist Leadership Officer for my headquarters."

Zengy hadn't noticed this last officer until he stepped from the shadow of a storage vat and brought his heels together with a crash that would have impressed a drill sergeant, at the same time thrusting out his right arm in the *Deutscher Grüss*, the salute of the Nazi Party. "*Heil Hitler!*"

Zengy hesitated. The addition of Leadership Officers to every large unit was a recent and unwelcome development in the Wehrmacht—unwelcome, at any rate, to Zengy, who thought the concept an unnatural hybrid of chaplain and commissar. He clicked his heels and made a small, curt bow. There was a flash of resentment in the other man's eyes, but it faded quickly, as if he had not really expected anything else. Nickolaus fell back to parade rest, one thumb tucked aside the buckle of his belt. He seemed to be waiting for something.

Ketterling cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, as you are aware, our Wireless Intercept Service has decoded a number of enemy transmissions that indicate another attack on our position is imminent. As a result, we have an unusually precise picture of just where, when, and in what strength the enemy will attack. Army Headquarters has

made it clear that they expect this information exploited to the fullest, but as our forces are badly understrength, we are not in a position to do so with our own resources.” The general paused and put on a smile. It was probably meant to be friendly and reassuring, but the effect on his sagging, exhausted features was ghastly—he looked, Zengy thought, like a skull placed within the decayed remains of a pumpkin. “I am therefore pleased to report that the tanks we’ve been promised by Headquarters have finally arrived—are arriving, at any rate, under cover of darkness this evening, and Hauptsturmführer Schlabredorf assures me he will have them in position by the time the enemy assault begins tomorrow morning. It will therefore be possible for us to execute the plans for counterattack that have been thrust upon us by Headquarters.”

“My boys will be where they’re supposed to be when the balloon goes up, provided your intelligence officer has gotten the time right,” Schlabredorf said. He had a glowering sort of stare and a deep, wet, rough-edged voice, the voice of a beer-hall orator. “Beyond that, I promise nothing. Personally, I think a mental defective could shit into a diaper and it would look better than this operations plan. I have only five tanks to carry it out.”

Ketterling massaged the hollow of his temple with his good fingers. He seemed both weary and annoyed, like a man being told to prevent something that had already happened. “You know very well that I’ve not the authority to alter the plan, Captain. To be perfectly frank, I don’t have the authority to move the sentries outside the front door of this brewery. Everything I do in this sector, down to the individual movements of platoons, has to be approved by Army HQ beforehand—and what they do by Army Group HQ and what *they* do by C-in-C West and what *he* does by Supreme Headquarters. We are faced with an entirely new paradigm, one which runs contrary to all our training and experience. And that brings us to the real purpose of this meeting. Major?”

Nickolaus stepped forward. He was an ordinary-looking young man with thick dark hair plastered close to his scalp and a pale, dark-eyed, well-fleshed face. His doeskin uniform fit as neatly as an envelope, and his old-style jackboots gleamed as if they had never seen mud. "It seems Hauptsturmführer Schlabredorf is not alone in his feelings." He turned to Zengy and lifted a red folder from the edge of Ketterling's desk. "General Ketterling has shown me a report, signed by you, in which you requested to have forwarded to Army Headquarters. You are familiar with it?"

Zengy felt a muscle in his cheek twitch. He had forgotten the report, which he'd clattered out on a field typewriter, which blurred its *e*'s and dropped its *r*'s, a week after arriving in the forest—a week in which he'd gone almost entirely without sleep. Just looking at it summoned up a stuttering flash of images and sounds and smells—shells exploding in the treetops, wounded men shrieking for their mothers, the stink of burning human flesh—but most of all, the memory of that damned horse and its pathetic child groom. All throughout the terrible fighting, he'd been unable to escape it. And with every staring corpse he stepped over, every spatter of blood his clothing had absorbed, every inhalation of gunpowder-fouled air, its resonance had shook him further and further until it achieved expression on a sheaf of onionskin paper. What had he written? He didn't even remember. All he had was a vague impression of having committed heresy. Necessary heresy, principled heresy, honorable heresy...but heresy nonetheless.

"Of course," Zengy said. "I wrote it myself."

"Then you would have no objection to reading it aloud?"

"What, all of it?"

"No. Just your conclusions at the end. If you please, Major."

Zengy took the report and flipped through the crinkling pages until he came to the last one. The final paragraph had been circled in thick, somehow angry-looking strokes of red grease pencil. Feeling

foolish, he cleared his throat and began to recite. *“Based on what I have seen since I arrived here, on the balance of forces that now exists between ourselves and the enemy, and our present casualty rate versus the totally inadequate rate of reinforcement, I predict the total destruction of all German forces in the Hürtgenwald within thirty to forty-five days, and the resulting loss of all territory west of the Rur River within the same timeframe. It hardly needs pointing out that if this command is destroyed, all territory east of the river will soon be lost as well, since there will be no one left alive to defend it. If, on the other hand, we were to withdraw over the river now—”*

“Thank you, Major, that is enough.” Nickolaus turned to Ketterling. “Herr General, may I ask if you agree with Major Zenger’s recommendations?”

The general was removing the burnt-out cigarette from its ring. He placed it in a cut-glass ashtray, fitted a fresh one, and waited patiently while the auburn-haired Cramm lighted it. Not looking up, he muttered, “I do.”

“And you, Major Cramm, do you also agree?”

Cramm’s voice was droll, his accent polished, his attitude slightly amused. “Frankly, I don’t believe ‘yes’ is a strong enough word.”

“Hauptsturmführer? Your opinion?”

“I’ve only just arrived here,” Schlabredorf growled. “I don’t know anything of the tactical situation except what I can see from looking at that map. I can’t speak to his recommendation.”

“As it happens, I can,” Nickolaus put his fists on his hips and took a deep breath that swelled the fabric of his tunic so that his Iron Cross caught the light in hard, glittery points. “It has become evident in the last few months that an increasing number of our military leaders are losing their will to fight. I could take this a step further and say they seem to feel that the fight itself has become pointless, since victory is

supposedly impossible. This report—which, by the way, I made sure did *not* reach Headquarters—is indicative to me of this problem. It is in fact part of the reason why I am here.”

Zengy tossed the report onto Ketterling’s desk. “Is there something in what I wrote you find unsound from the military point of view?”

“It’s not the military point of view that I am here to address,” Nickolaus replied. “I’m not here to argue tactics. It’s my task as National Socialist Leadership Officer to remind all with whom I serve of why we are fighting and by what means this war may still be brought to a victorious conclusion.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t see what that has to do with what I wrote.”

Nickolaus smiled thinly. “No? Then let me explain. Your report advocates a withdrawal behind the Rur because you feel we can’t stop the Americans in front of it. Do you believe we can stop them *behind* it?”

“I believe we can delay them for some time. Possibly into the spring.”

“But inevitably they will cross it. Force us back. That is your belief, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Further and further, I expect. Over the Lower Rhine, into the German heartland.”

“Yes.”

“Until we run out of room. Until there is no more Germany left. Until we are defeated.” Nickolaus cocked his head. “Do you believe German defeat is inevitable, Major?”

Zengy said nothing. Nickolaus’ smile deepened.

“Now perhaps you see what I am driving at. You look at the problem from a purely tactical angle. You seek a purely tactical solution.

If we retreat, things will be easier for us—for a few days. But contained within your solution is another problem—a much larger problem, which is the fact that your ideas amount merely to prolonging the inevitable. In your heart, you no longer believe we can win the war. The Führer is well aware that this belief is widespread, even among men such as yourself—proven front-line soldiers. It is therefore his wish that the following order become the common property of every soldier in the Wehrmacht.”

Nickolaus retrieved a leather briefcase from a nearby chair, opened it, and withdrew a sheet of sturdy-looking paper embossed with a gold eagle clutching a wreathed swastika. Holding it before him in two hands, he began to read, in the powerful, sonorous voice of a news broadcaster.

“The war will decide whether the German people shall continue to exist or perish. It demands selfless exertion from every individual. Situations which have seemed hopeless have been redeemed by the courage of soldiers contemptuous of death, by the steadfast perseverance of all ranks, and by inflexible, exalted leadership.

“A commander is only fit to lead German troops if he daily shares, with all the powers of his mind, body, and soul, the demands which he must make upon his men. Energy, willingness to take decisions, firmness of character, unshakable faith, and hard, unconditional readiness for service, are the indispensable requirements for the struggle. He who does not possess them, or who no longer possesses them, cannot be a leader, and he must withdraw.

“Therefore I order:

“Should a commander, left to his own resources, think that he must give up the struggle, he will first ask his officers, then his noncommissioned officers, and finally his troops, if one of them is ready to carry on the task and continue the fight. If one of them will, he will hand over command to that man—regardless of his rank—and himself fall in. The new leader will then assume the command, with all its rights and duties. Signed, Adolf Hitler.”

Nickolaus lowered the proclamation and thrust it at Ketterling, who, somewhat surprised, laid it on the desk with vague, uncomprehending reverence. "Ah, thank you, Major. Yes. I'm sure we're all very inspired by the Führer's words. As always."

"I consider them of particular importance," Nickolaus said severely. "Given the nature of the coming battle. If a man does not believe in victory, he cannot *achieve* victory."

"Major," Zengy said, trying to keep the rage out of his voice. "What a man believes or does not believe is irrelevant if a fucking artillery shell lands on his head. *Belief* can't hold back the tide. And that's precisely what's coming tomorrow—a tide that will wash this whole Army away." He pointed at the conference table, papered from end to end in maps. "Don't you understand? Even if we're successful tomorrow, it changes nothing in the long run. This isn't a question of ideology but of mathematics. When we kill an American, they simply replace him. But every man we lose—" *Is one wrecked home*, Zengy thought bitterly. *But you can't say that here, or they'll say you've gone soft.* "—is a permanent subtraction of our total fighting power. Counterattacking them might achieve temporary results, but only at the expense of accelerating our overall disintegration."

"The counterattack," Nickolaus said, "has been ordered by Headquarters. There is no point in debating its merits. The question is merely one of execution."

"Execution is precisely what is going to take place," Zengy said. "Take it from a man who jumped into Crete."

"We were victorious on Crete, Major."

Zengy remembered, suddenly and completely, the sight of the olive grove near Rethymnon. A whole battalion of paratroops had jumped right into the muzzles of the enemy guns. For three kilometers, all you saw was still, silent forms with shocked staring eyes lying

beneath the wind-billowed yellow silk of their parachutes. "Yes, but at what cost?"

"Cost is irrelevant. It's victory that matters. Any other attitude is simply defeatism."

Good God, Zengy thought. *I'm talking to myself, one year ago.* "I believe," he said, trying to choose his words carefully. "That our counterattack tomorrow will fail, and that in failing it will manage to kill off most of my men and probably most of Schlabredorf's too. That belief is not defeatism. It is a conclusion based on years of front-line experience. The odds are too great."

Nickolaus licked his lips again and took a deep breath; he seemed to be composing a reply from among the mass of quotations and slogans that teemed within his brain. "What matters in battle is not logistics, tactics, strategy, or the odds, but strength and will. Remember what the Führer said: nothing is really hopeless unless we believe it to be so. It is the responsibility of every commander to infuse the men in his command with that idea. If he cannot do it, well, I think the language of the order makes his duty plain."

For an instant—just an instant—Zengy had a vision of himself as an ordinary paratrooper, with no rank, no responsibility, nothing expected of him except courage under fire. The image was so clear and compelling that he quite forgot his anger. God, to be a private again! To jump into the fight not giving a damn about anything except killing the other fellow before he could kill you. But then he remembered Bastaby—that smooth white face with its pain-filled eyes, and Korroscheck, a fear-filled voice in the darkness, and Aumeyer, the storm-trooper with a crippled leg, and all the others who had so little chance of survival as it was, and none whatsoever without a real soldier to lead them, and his euphoria collapsed, leaving bitter resignation in its place.

"The question I am asking you," Zengy said through gritted teeth, "is how can men stuffed into a bunker many miles away, who

have never even seen this ground, possibly dictate to us exactly how we should fight? If we aren't to be allowed to use our military training, then for God's sake let us use our common sense!"

Ketterling blew cigarette smoke in an exasperated cloud. "I've tried to explain to *all* of you that it's no business of ours whether the plan makes sense. We've been ordered to carry it out. When it fails—ah, *if* it fails—Headquarters must accept the blame. *We* will be in the clear."

"And our oath of allegiance to the King wipes the crime of it from us." Zengy felt a sudden urge to weep. It occurred to him he had no right to judge the men in this room. How often had he repeated what they were saying, almost word for word, and what was more, actually believed it to be true? "I doubt that will go very far in inspiring our men."

"The men will find all the inspiration they need in the Führer's message," Nickolaus said.

No one spoke. Zengy found he had no desire to look anyone in the eye; he let his gaze rest on map. Reduced to lines and symbols, it looked like a chessboard. Here were the American pieces, and here were the German—pawns and rooks, knights and bishops, all moving in silent, bloodless opposition. It made perfect sense, but it bore no relationship to reality. A pawn did not scream when you shot it in the guts; a knight did not leave the stench of burnt hair and entrails when you removed it from the board. Even the idea that there was a "front" was phantasm. There *was* no front. There were only individual men—unshaven, unwashed, unfed, squatting in frozen holes with no feeling in their hands or feet and their hearts brimming with terror.

A black matter for the King, indeed!

6

The snow had stopped by the time Zengy reached his bunker; a formless gunpowder sky pressed down between the skeletal branches. He climbed off the Kettenkrad and trampled down the steps, unbuckling the chin strap of his helmet as he did so. After the conference—*Conference? Party rally, more like!*—his uniform seemed somehow unclean to him, like the institutional pajamas of a lunatic.

Inside was warmth, lamplight, and cigar smoke thick as fog. A song by Barnabas von Gezcy and his Orchestra played on the gramophone. He found Mutti Schulz leafing through his leather-bound “prayer book,” so-called because any paratrooper who found his name in that book was said not to have one. The sergeant-major took the cigar from his teeth when he saw his commanding officer; it was the equivalent of a salute. “I don’t suppose you brought a few hundred men with you? Or possibly one of those miracle weapons we keep hearing about?”

Zengy ignored the question. It was difficult for him to restrain his facial muscles; they seemed afire to twitch, to spasm, to convulse, and he had to clench his teeth until pain filled the inside of his head before the desire to scream passed. His gaze fell on the half-empty schnapps bottle by Obus’ cot—no, there was no relief there. Nothing

short of morphine could ease the agony that throbbing within him. Morphine—or a bullet.

He seized his submachine gun from the nail upon which it hung by its leather strap, hit the magazine release, opened the bolt to make sure the chamber was empty, and sat down on his cot, trembling. The Danuvia was of foreign manufacture but chambered to take Mauser ammunition. Although it strongly resembled the German Schmeisser, its frame was constructed of wood instead of steel, which made it friendlier to handle in extreme cold. What's more, it had a larger magazine capacity and better accuracy. Zengy had carried it since late 1941, when he'd obtained it from a Hungarian army captain in exchange for a captured Soviet battle flag, and it had never failed him. He prayed it would not fail him now.

He produced his pocket watch, opened the hunter case, and waited until the seconds hand swung around to the twelve. Then, with quick, almost desperate movements, he began to field-strip the weapon. Sights, butt-plate, receiver, bolt, breech-block, barrel guard, springs, magazine housing, firing pin, lever. In two minutes, he'd reduced it to a pile of simple machine parts, not much different than the works of a small grandfather clock. *Not fast enough.* He began to reassemble the weapon, cursing when he dropped the housing for the trigger guard, his gaze flicking from the face of the watch to the Danuvia and back again. A minute fifty-one seconds. *And you call yourself an officer?* He stripped it again, in ninety-six seconds, and reassembled it in eighty-five. *When did I get this slow?* The third time he broke it down in eighty-five seconds and reassembled it in eighty-one. *Pathetic! Pitiful! Disgraceful!*

The weapon came apart and came together, apart and together, until the grease from the springs and hinges made his fingers slick and clumsy and the time of assembly began to increase despite his best efforts. Ninety seconds. A hundred. A hundred five. The dial began to

smear in his vision, the image doubling and trebling, and still he struggled with the weapon, his curses sounding distorted in his own ears.

“Papa?”

Zengy looked up, startled as if from a dream. Schulz stood over him, his image blurred by tears. Zengy did not wipe them away; to do that would have been to acknowledge that they existed.

“Is something wrong?” the sergeant major asked, alarmed.

“Give me something to write with.”

Schulz went back to his desk, tore out a sheet from his prayer book, and handed it to Zengy along with a stub of pencil. Zengy pressed the paper to the ammunition box by his bed and began to write, studiously ignoring the tears that spattered it. “I want the men on this list brought to me at once.”

“Ah—may I ask why, Major?”

“I’m pulling them out of their squads and assigning them to me, personally, as a special unit.” Zengy found he was pushing the pencil so fast he was producing only meaningless scrawls. He took a deep breath and forced himself to write slowly and legibly. For a minute, there was no sound in the bunker except the gramophone—the sob of the fiddle, the whine of the clarinet—and the scratch of the pencil. “All right. I think this is everyone. If Schraepler or Eisenberg give you any shit, tell them to come and see me about it.”

Mutti had the eyes of a sergeant-major; that is to say, capable of only three expressions: worry, bafflement at the stupidity of others, and rage over that stupidity. As Zengy watched, he saw each of those emotions take its place in turn. “Herr Major, half these men aren’t even real soldiers. Weichold, here, is almost fifty years old, and he spent some time at Prinz Albrecht Strasse after he was shit-canned by the Court of Honor. Surely, you don’t want a man like *that* around you. And this one, Korroscheck, can’t even see in the dark. Litzwack and Bastaby are children. As for Aumeyer, he’s *lame*, for God’s sake.”

“I know all that,” Zengy said. He set down his helmet on the ammunition crate and ran his fingers through his hair. At twenty-six, it was already receding at the temples and thinning over the crown, though there was no history of baldness anywhere in his family. *Too much strain*, he thought. *Too much responsibility. Too much dying and not enough living.* “I want them brought to me anyway—immediately!”

Zengy seldom used his parade-ground voice and almost never with his personal staff. The effect on Schulz was as galvanizing as a jolt of electricity. He shot to his feet, seized his mud-crusting greatcoat from its resting place on the back of his chair, and trampled up the bunker steps. After a moment, Zengy realized he was alone; he wiped his face with a wool muffler. Scrubbed the grease from his fingers. Carefully put the Danuvia back together one last time. Slid a full magazine into the receiver. Replaced it on the nail by its strap. Without looking at his pocket mirror, he combed his hair, noticing that his hands were now perfectly steady. Having acted, his despair had ebbed, leaving a kind of thoughtful exhaustion in its wake. He became aware of the music again —“Gypsy Wine” this song was called, and it had been one of the biggest hits of 1939. Back then, nobody wanted to think about war, and the closer the war came, the more frantically exuberant the music had become, as if by sheer exertion it could somehow prevent the bombs from falling. Now, it seemed archaic, like laboratory equipment used in a failed experiment. All anyone wanted to hear were romantic-pathetic songs of the “Lili Marlene” type. Songs about loneliness, heartbreak, despair. *They* suited reality.

The record ran out. Zengy rose and mechanically changed the side. The scratchy, tinny sound seemed almost eerie in the silent bunker. When was the last time he’d been alone? He literally could not remember. Solitude was a luxury a commander was rarely afforded by others and could not afford himself.

He looked around at his surroundings. This cramped little space that stank of earth and smoke and sweat, that dripped water during every hard rain, and whose floor was often a half-frozen soup of mud and sunflower seeds and straw, now seemed to him more comfortable than Ketterling's HQ could ever be, and he knew why. Here, surrounded by the weapons hanging from nails by their straps, the boxes of hand grenades, the cut-down artillery shells filled with cigarette butts, the crumpled moisture-bloated magazines and greasy playing cards, one lived an honest life. You couldn't get that back home anymore. The radio and the newspapers were full of lies that would have been insulting even if the streets hadn't been full of rubble and the air with the shriek of air-raid sirens, and it wasn't enough for the government that the people merely endure it all, bombs and lies, without objecting. They had to *believe* the lies, had to parrot them back with sickly smiles plastered on their faces, lest they be branded defeatists and be taken away.

It wasn't like that here. Nickolaus wanted it to be, but it wasn't. Here, a man might be hungry, he might itch with lice, he might sting with pain from cuts that never healed, he might be empty-headed with fatigue and half-deafened from noise, but he always knew precisely where he stood—with his comrades and with the enemy. There were no intrigues, no politics, no flag-waving. A man never looked you in the eyes and told you black was white, or worse yet, demanded that you *agree* that black was white. There was no need because he had already asked you to die for him, and once you had agreed, what need was there for words?

Sinner's Cross

They approached in a double row, paratroopers on the left, grenadiers on the right, and Schulz bringing up the rear. Zengy, standing by the bunker entrance, was briefly reminded of soldiers on a parade ground—faces set, breath smoking, boots tramping almost rhythmically on the hard, snow-powdered earth.

All that's missing is a cadence, he thought.

But as they came nearer, he saw the error of his thinking. No parade ground had seen soldiers that looked like this, not even after the toughest field exercises. Every helmet bore innumerable scuff marks and in one case, the unmistakable cant made by the ricochet of a bullet. Hairless or clean-shaven faces were outnumbered by those wearing matted, greasy-looking beards that ran the spectrum from coal-black to pale gold, with dull brown, soft ginger or bright copper in between. Uniforms were an extraordinary miscellany of bone sacks, camouflage smocks, hooded white field jackets and gray-green greatcoats, the unifying theme being the dirt that soiled their every joint. Likewise the weapons; three of the younger grenadiers were carrying the new assault rifle, while the older men had elected to use the traditional bolt-action Mauser carbine. All of the paratroopers wore bandoliers around their necks, but Kubala carried a brass-handled American knuckle knife, a

Kampfpistole, and a stick grenade in his belt. Dorian was lumbered with enough explosives to bring down an apartment building; Big Schulz's belt sagged on one side from the weight of the hundred-round drums of machine gun ammunition that jostled there. Standardization was as nonexistent as cleanliness; everything bore the pathos of hard use as well as personal experience.

They look more like mercenaries than members of the Wehrmacht... mercenaries fighting for a lost cause.

"Halt!" Mutti barked. Like most sergeant majors he could turn on impressive gravity at will, and he was grave now as he threw up a rigid salute, his pale, heavy-jawed face as hard as marble. "Major! Beg to report the following reporting as ordered: Dorian, Racke, Schulz, Hanno, Cajus, Kubala, Weichold, Litzwack, Korroscheck, Aumeyer, Gaderman, Bastaby!"

Zengy nodded expressionlessly. He glanced again at the paratroopers, but it was the faces of the grenadiers that interested him. Last night they'd been nothing more than silhouettes, shadows granted the power of speech. Now, he could see them clearly, and he committed each to memory. *You owe them that much.*

The ex-colonel, Weichold, was easy to recognize: he stood stocky and straight-backed, with fierce gray eyes and all his features etched in lines of bitterness. He had recently shaven, and his pink-scraped jowls sagged over the collar of his tunic in a way that plainly indicated he'd lost a lot of weight in a hurry. His greatcoat fit poorly, its skirts dragging on the ground and filthy with mud, and Zengy wondered if the quartermaster had done that on purpose to further humiliate the man.

Aumeyer was tall, jug-eared, and gangling; his wrists extended a good two inches from his sleeves, and in contrast to Weichold, his coat scarcely covered his knees. The face beneath his helmet was hollow-cheeked and plain, with just a glint of fight in the eyes. No surprise

there; he was wearing his brown storm trooper's tunic beneath his coat as a hedge against the cold, and Zengy could see the gold pips and scarlet backing on his collar. Well, he'd soon discover that brawling in beer halls was poor training for war.

Litzwack, the thick-necked young farmer's son, clearly relished playing at soldier; with his stern expression, stiff spine, and spit-shined boots, he looked as if he were about to parade past a reviewing stand. He probably viewed the war as a welcome relief from the drudgery of shoveling manure; perhaps he didn't realize that shoveling manure, literally or figuratively, was a large part of a soldier's daily life.

It was easy enough to recognize Gadermann, the middle-aged florist, who peered out in bewilderment at the world through his good eye; the other stared blindly ahead from behind a milky white scrim that resembled fog over water. He was an ugly fellow, with tangled eyebrows, a beaked nose, and a loose, heavy-lipped mouth through which his tongue repeatedly and nervously darted to wet his lips. Almost grotesquely out of place in a helmet, his expression said plainly he would have much preferred tending to his flowers in Mecklenberg.

Korroscheck too was easy to spot; he was the only one in the bunch with a chevron on his sleeve. He was an intelligent-looking man with thick, ash-blond hair that fell to his earlobes, very pale green eyes winking from behind steel-rimmed glasses, and the sort of dimpled chin women tended to find attractive. In daylight, the fear Zengy had heard in the man's voice wasn't evident in his face; perhaps he was only frightened in the dark, when he couldn't see. *And that's reasonable enough, isn't it? Don't fancy I could play the hero in a blindfold, either.*

Teeth clenched, he allowed his gaze to fall on Bastaby. At once, Zengy's heart gave a painful lurch in his chest, and he had to fight to keep that pain out of his expression. Even a steel helmet couldn't harden the boy's limpid beauty. The fine black brows, the dark eyes, the smooth white complexion that held those flat cheekbones and delicate chin,

were all as he remembered them, though unmarred by tears. Zengy turned away suddenly, as a man staring at the sun.

In the military, silence intimidates; he let it lengthen. An icy wind, full of the scent of damp wood and pine needles, whipped down through the trees, stirring loose snow from the branches. The men blinked and shivered. The paratroopers were too savvy to let his expressions reveal anything; but in the faces of the others, he could see emotion—fear, curiosity, and in the weathered, heavy-browed face of Weichold, resentment. Well, let the seditious old bastard sulk; he would prefer his new assignment to the old one.

“Children,” he began, “we have been in this forest for nearly a month. In that time, we have endured one attack after another from the *Amis*. Many of our comrades have died—too many to name. Tomorrow, we get a chance to avenge them. The Americans are going to attack yet again, but we’re going to turn the tables on them and then some. As you know, their attack plan has fallen into our possession. They intend to smash through our bunker line on a narrow front, and it is our intention to let them do precisely that—extend themselves as deeply and as narrowly as possible into our bunker line, whereupon we of the Parachute Battalion will counter-attack behind Captain Schlabredorf’s King Tigers and decapitate them.

“It’s my intention, as always, to lead this operation from the front, accompanied by my personal staff. Given the nature of the terrain, however, I think it likely we will be doing a great deal of close-quarters fighting. Each of us may have to go in with the bayonet. However, I’ve found it is very hard to direct a battle when you’re busy stabbing someone in the guts. To that end, you men have been selected to form a special shock troop under my personal command. Your mission is to stick by me like skin on sausage and keep the *Amis* off my back, so I can do my job.” He straightened, walked slowly down the line until he came to Bastaby, whereupon he stopped. When he spoke again, he was

addressing the group, but gazing directly into the boy's hate-bright eyes. "You will accompany me into the fight, but you will not fight yourselves unless I order it. Under no circumstances—no circumstances *whatsoever*—are you to engage the enemy without my expressed permission. Anyone who disobeys will be handed over to the military police when the battle is finished. That is assuming—" He let his hand fall onto the butt of his holstered pistol. "—that I let you live that long."

Bastaby had been staring straight ahead, his face rigid, his slender young body like a statue in a crumpled wool uniform; but at Zengy's last words, the muscles in his jaw clenched so hard it looked as if his cheeks were packed with walnuts.

Good! Zengy thought. If I can keep you from any stupid heroics, maybe I can also keep you breathing.

"Some of you," he continued, walking back to his original position, "have considerably more combat experience than others. I expect that those who know will teach, and those who do not will learn. In any event, you will be serving together from now on. The sergeant major will see to your billeting, but don't get too comfortable; the Americans like to attack with the daylight, and it would be rude of us to greet our guests in our pajamas."

Mutti Schulz had been a soldier since 1927; he knew the wind-up of a speech when he heard one. He bellowed the company to attention, and twelve pairs of boots crashed together in a synchronicity Jung himself would have admired.

8

Zengy had often remarked on the different ways soldiers found relaxation in the field. The morose youngster Quast read rubbishy German translations of *Fred Faber's Adventures*, occasionally pushing his steel-rimmed glasses up his nose with his nicotine-stained middle finger. Sandrock, the muscular, sandy-headed private with the dimpled chin and hoarse voice, was an inveterate Skat player, always pestering everyone for a game. Unfortunately his best friend, Hapf, preferred clucking over his enormous collection of smutty postcards, which he kept in a greasy bundle in his gas mask canister and liked to lay out before him one dog-eared card at a time, as if he were playing solitaire. As for Signals Sergeant Merklinger, he passed the time playing fetch with his pet dog, Winston Churchill.

Mutti Schulz, like most career soldiers, was a closet sensualist, although his pleasures were out of necessity small ones; to soothe nerves jangled as much by the ceaseless flood of paperwork as by artillery fire, he would very carefully load his round-headed pipe with Fla-Fla tobacco, then lean back in his chair with his eyes drooping and his blunt fingers interlaced on his belly, huffing fragrant smoke as he listened to Schubert on the gramophone.

Fox'l, a vain young blond with skin like washed porcelain, had spent the first three years of the war recording the exploits of his fellow

paratroopers for Luftwaffe Propaganda Company No. 9; it was perhaps no surprise that he spent most of his off hours with a Leica cine-gun pressed to one crystal-blue eye. His favorite subjects were burning vehicles and dead enemy soldiers, whose twisted facial expressions he often shot in disconcerting close-up.

The company commanders likewise had their hobbies. Leutnant Schraepler, in addition to being a tobacco fiend, enjoyed composing rhyming couplets and mystic paeans to nature, in the windy style of Hermann Löhns. Leutnant Eisenberg was a passionate entomologist, forever digging into the earth with a bayonet despite his surgically fused spine. Leutnant Ballack, the self-styled Renaissance man, painted watercolors when he wasn't reliving his glory days as an amateur fighter for the *Box-Sport Gemeinschaft Edelstahl* or studying Italian. And anyone straying near Oberleutnant Cuda's command post was likely to hear him playing the Transylvanian opera *Székelyfőnök* on his battered violin.

Alone among the men in his command, only Obus seemed to need no relief from the war. He smoked cigars, drank, listened to music, wrote letters to his various mistresses, played cards, and read the Army's comic newspaper, but always with an air of distraction, as if it were within his duties that his real enjoyment lay. It was therefore no surprise to Zengy to find the man in a tree blind on a hilltop position overlooking the American lines to the southwest, a pair of field glasses around his neck and maps spread out around him like a picnic blanket. It was typical of the man that within easy reach of his ink-smudged right hand was a Gewehr 43 fitted with a telescopic sight, for Obus, in addition to the veritable tin shop of medals and orders fastened to his tunic pocket, also wore the cloth badge of a First Grade Sniper on his sleeve.

"The road there—" Obus pointed to a distant manila-colored streak on a hilltop, barely visible through the green of the woods. "—is heavily trafficked by the *Amis*. Vehicles, mostly. But all this morning, a

communication detail has been laying cable by the roadside. I'm going to try to bag a few of them before sundown."

Zengy, somewhat winded from the climb, took out his own field glasses and studied the road through the gaps in the trees. "It's got to be a thousand meters at least. Why not call for artillery?"

Obus cast a sardonic side-glance at him. "They'd probably end up hitting us by mistake. Besides, it would spoil my fun."

Zengy made no comment but unslung his submachine gun and tried to make himself comfortable against the back of the oak. The blind was small and cold and smelled heavily of dead leaves and the thermos of acorn coffee Obus had brought with him. Neither man spoke again for many minutes, though Obus periodically hummed snatches of a song Zengy eventually identified as "Evenings in the Tavern."

"So, Zengy," El Greco said, not lowering his binoculars. "What do you want to talk about? What did Ketterling have to say?"

"Nothing worth repeating."

"What a shock. But you have that look on your face."

"What look?"

"That 'I'm about to shit in the apple cart' look—yes, I can see it, I have excellent peripheral vision." He paused a moment and then bit his heavy lower lip. "Don't tell me they changed the plan on us. I've finally gotten everyone reciting it by memory, right down to the last clod-hopping grenadier."

"*They* didn't change the plan," Zengy said. "But I'm going to."

Obus lowered the glasses. His stare was puzzled and sullen.

"Well," Zengy kept his voice as light as he could, "not so much change as alter—a slight alteration."

"Alteration? It had better be slight if you haven't gotten the go-ahead from Ketterling!"

"What he doesn't know won't hurt me."

“Zengy, the Americans are coming tomorrow—and if our Signals Section is right, at dawn. It’s not a good idea to make changes so close to H-Hour.”

“I’m not going to move the battalion, just one part of it.” He directed El Greco’s attention to one of the maps, indicated an intersection of trails that vaguely resembled an inverted crucifix, and rested his finger on the crosspiece. “To cover this point here.”

The lines in Obus’ brow became furrows. “Sinner’s Cross. But I already have that position covered.”

“Yes...with one machine-gun team.”

“One team is more than enough!” Obus said, clearly offended. “You’ve seen that spot. It overlooks that huge ravine that covers our whole left flank. The only way in or out is through a shitty old cart track that’s half washed-out, and the last fifty meters of it, the grade is so steep you practically have to claw your way up with your hands. I’m telling you, one machine gun can hold it against anything up to a company.”

“And if they send two companies? Suppose they push through with a whole battalion?”

“Up *that* track?” Obus was now incredulous. “I’m telling you it’s not much wider than this—” He awkwardly held out his arms. “You could put the whole U.S. Army in the ravine; they would still have to advance three at a time, and we’d shoot them down like grouse before they could deploy. Besides, we *know* exactly where the Americans are going to hit us, and it’s not there. We can’t waste men in a place where there’s not going to be any fighting.”

Actually, that’s the whole point of this exercise, my dear comrade, but I can’t let you know that. “We don’t know anything for certain. Who’s to say the messages we intercepted aren’t fakes? And even if they are real, who’s to say they’re complete? Maybe the frontal

attack is just a demonstration to get us looking the wrong way, and the real *Schwerpunkt* is somewhere else.”

“But there’s no evidence to support that,” Obus snapped. “None whatsoever. The signals we got, the prisoners we’ve taken, the troop movements we’ve observed, even Cramm’s intelligence reports, none of it points to anything but a push up the main road.”

“Call it intuition, then,” Zengy said with a shrug and tapped the map again. “But I’m telling you, if I were the Americans, I’d not be so foolish as to launch a frontal assault against our strongest point without at least *trying* to pry us open somewhere else. And I think that somewhere else might be here.”

Obus clenched his jaw and then shrugged and returned his attention to the road. “Fine. I’ll tell Cuda. He’s closest. But he won’t like losing men on the eve of a big fight—you know how understrength he is.”

“There’s no need to bother Cuda. I’m taking care of this myself.”

“Meaning what?”

“I had Mutti Schulz organize a shock troop. I’m going to position them personally.”

“Surely there’s no need for that.”

Zengy retrieved his submachine gun and opened a gap in the netting, admitting a cold breeze and the dull metallic light of early afternoon. “Perhaps not. But if and when the Americans come, I want a proper greeting for them.”

He had just swung out into the rope ladder and begun his descent when he heard a sharp intake of breath. Obus had seen something, had put down his Zeiss, and was hastily sighting in with his rifle, tongue between his lips. With the agility of an ape, Zengy climbed back into the aerie and seized the glasses. Obus was focusing...there. A ragged tear in the foliage covering the hill a kilometer away. Zengy fiddled with the focus, saw blurred movement, sharpened it with his thumb. There was

an American jeep in three-quarters profile, its driver gesticulating angrily at someone Zengy couldn't see. Nearby, a red-faced, brown-bearded soldier wearing a pistol belt stood with his hands on his knees, great drafts of steam puffing silently from his open mouth, and a few other men standing indolently with their rifles slung. Obus stopped breathing, and a half second later the rifle cracked. Dust puffed off the driver's helmet, and he fell out of view. The echo of the shot hadn't faded before Obus had re-sighted and fired again. The panting soldier fell down as if he'd been pushed, and Zengy saw a scramble of movement between the shell-shot trees and then only bare earth. Obus fired again at something he could only see, cursed, and then fell silent, waiting. Only the soft rill of his breath on the stock of the rifle broke the stillness. After sixty seconds, Zengy cleared his throat and said softly, "We should displace."

"One more shot," Obus whispered.

"They'll be calling artillery on us."

"One more."

Zengy counted off another minute. "It's my funeral too."

"Nobody's paying you to stay."

Zengy bit his lip and waited, scanning the hilltop nervously with the Zeiss. Several times he thought he saw movement around the jeep, but it might simply have been branches swaying in the breeze. Then there was a flit of movement on the road, and Obus fired again—*crack!* As if in retaliation, there was a row of distant thumps and suddenly the sky was full of noise like a thousand geese flapping in unison.

"*Down!*" Zengy screamed.

And down they went, one after the other, hand over hand, hitting the ground running. The first shells were already slamming into the hillside above them, filling the air with whirling debris and shaking the ground beneath their feet. Zengy could feel the pressure wave roaring over him, staggering his legs, robbing the air from his lungs, knocking

blood out of his nose like an invisible fist. But he knew that to fall meant instant death, and so he kept moving, knocked almost double, scrabbling and scrambling and half-deaf, until the noises of bombardment began to fade. Gasping, they stumbled down a winding trail deep within the woods and fell into an old slit trench crowned by rotting sandbags. It was five minutes before either one of them could speak.

“That was stupid,” Zengy said, wheezing. “Damned stupid. You could have killed us both.”

“Well, I got two of *them*, didn't I? So it would all even out.”

“Don't talk like a fool.”

“I won't if you won't.”

“What the hell's that supposed to mean?”

“I didn't just fall off a fucking sausage truck, Martin. I've been fighting as long as you have, and I can read terrain as well as you can. They aren't coming up that road and you know it. What are you really up to?”

Zengy hesitated. His chest was still heaving, a steady tone like that of a tuning fork was sounding in his ears, and blood trickled steadily into the back of his throat.

He knew that Obus had kept them in that blind too long on purpose, had risked both their lives solely to punish him for withholding the truth. It was all the greater pity that the truth, if revealed, was something Obus would never believe or understand.

“I'm just winning the war, Kurt,” Zengy said and slowly began to climb out of the trench. “After all, the hour groweth late, and Hitler needs all the help he can get.”

The very worst thing about war, Zengy thought, crushing out yet another cigarette, is the waiting.

It was almost half-past seven in the morning. The night had passed slowly, quietly, anxiously, in a sleet that had turned to rain and then the rain to curling fog, which had seeped into the bunker and left every surface clammy to the touch. Zengy, stifling a yawn, found it ironic that once again his body only craved sleep at the precise moment when it was no longer possible. Glancing around, he saw that it was no different for anyone else: every face held the same ashen pallor, every eye the same bloodshot gleam. And yet neither could anyone keep entirely still. Even the dog, Churchill, whose muzzle lay dispiritedly between his muddy forepaws, thumped his tail restlessly against the floor. The ashtrays in the bunker were overflowing, Merklinger pulled out his silver-plated pocket watch every few minutes to scowl at the time, and Hapf clomped up the steps at regular intervals to relieve the pressure fear was exerting on his bladder. All conversation had long since been exhausted, and the silence had hardened over the hours, become a physical thing, a weight that caused time to drag and stagger.

Why don't they come? Zengy thought, watching Quast recheck the voltmeter on his radio for the thousandth time. *What the hell are*

they waiting for? Were our wireless-intercept people wrong about the time of the attack, or is their artillery just as unreliable as ours?

He took another glance at the map, even though its details had long since been seared on his brain. Every unit in the sector was accounted for, down to individual machine-gun nests. Most bore numbers; a few had names. The very last of these, on the extreme end of his own flank, where the two roads that made up Sinner's Cross intersected, was marked HANNELORE. It sat like a cork in the neck of the huge bottle-shaped ravine that ran through that part of the forest: the place the Americans, in their crude unimaginative way, referred to as "The Badlands," and the Germans as *Der Hexenkessel*—The Witches' Cauldron. Zengy tapped it with his forefinger. *Obus is right. Only a madman or a fool would try to storm this position. Bastaby will be safe there. Safe as anyone can be on a battlefield.*

He tossed the map aside and went over to the gramophone table, seeking relief from his own thoughts. A small stack of records in greasy, well-worn sleeves awaited him. It was an odd mélange of music, accumulated by luck and design over many years of war. Lale Anderson, a scratchy recording of Caruso that had to be twenty-five years old, Schubert's *String Quartet in C Major*, a duet between Lillian Harvey and Willi Fritsch, a few captured English rags, and even a Glen Miller record, which had been found in the field pack of a dead American paratrooper at Carentan. One record, however, was unlabeled. Frowning, he placed it on the turntable and cranked the handle. A moment later, a crackling hiss filled the air, followed by a concertina and a chorus of voices:

*Drunten im Unterland
Da ist's halt fein!
Schlehen im Oberland
Trauben im Unterland*

*Drunten im Unterland
Da möcht ich sein!*

Zengy froze solid. For just a moment, everything seemed to swim before his eyes: the earthen walls of the bunker, the oil lamp hanging from its nail, the swastika that Fox'l had carved into one of the beams. He was falling through a hole in time. It was no longer 1944 but the steamy summer of 1937, and he was not an officer but a lance-corporal, sitting at a trestle table in the Tavern am See in Stendahl. Obus, Kade, and Lejewski were on his left, Dirlwanger, Alexy, and Schörner on his right. Across the table were Lescanne and Miller, Ambrosius and Hackl. The air was perfumed with smoke, the beer was flowing freely, and everyone was singing—the unblooded young paratroopers in Luftwaffe blue, the middle-aged stormtroopers with their beefy red faces and sweat-dampened uniforms of mustard-colored khaki, the cock-eyed tavernkeeper with his huge Meerschaum pipe. They sang “Hannelore” and “The Happy Wanderer” and “Rosemunde” and “Heidemarie,” and the empty pitchers of beer were accumulating on the table as the huge Swiss clock tolled the hours and the hours grew late. Then, without any warning, during a pause for breath and a gale of drunken laughter, the tavernkeeper’s daughter had broken into song:

*Down in the lowlands,
Everything is fine!
Blackthorns in the highlands
Grapes in the lowlands
Down in the lowlands,
That's where I want to be!*

The whole of the tavern had fallen silent, watching the girl as she placed the empty steins and dripping pitchers onto her tray, her long

coppery braids swinging against the sweat-sheened top swells of her breasts. The men had been watching her with desire and the women with envy; now everyone merely listened, the lustful smirks yielding to soft, melancholic expressions and sad little smiles, as she sang the old Bavarian folk song in a sweet, clear, girlish voice that elevated it somehow into a hymn. Zengy had glanced up and down the table at the faces of his comrades as they watched the performance, their arms curled 'round each other's necks, their eyes glistening with sentimental tears.

And what had become of them, those old comrades from the Stendahl parachute school?

The tough and taciturn Kade had died in Norway, the victim of a too-low jump and a fouled parachute; Zengy could still remember the look of betrayed surprise on his face when they'd found his body, smashed deep into the pristine snow. Lejewski, Dirlwanger, and Alexy had been killed within 48 hours of each other on Crete, and for the fun-loving Alexy it had been particularly nasty: he had landed on the beach but been dragged out to sea by strong winds and drowned under the weight of his gear before he could unbuckle his harness. Miller had taken a bullet in the face at Sobakino and died in the back of a *panje* wagon whilst en route to a field hospital, mumbling his wife's name to the very last. Schörner, dubbed "The Saint" for the quiet intensity of his religious convictions, had gone missing at El Alamein, and Lescanne, whose National Socialist fervor was no less sincere, had been blown to pieces at Simeto Hill. Ambrosius had died in a stupid motorcycle wreck just south of Monte Cassino, and Hackl, like so many others, had simply vanished in the maelstrom of Carentan, five months before.

The memory faded away, leaving only Obus behind—an Obus who was seven years older, his face no longer smooth and pale and clean-shaven but coarse, wind-burned, and bearded, silently drawing smoke from a cigarette with nicotine-stained fingers. Zengy stared into

those fathomless dark eyes, which in a way were more familiar than his own. It seemed in that instant that another layer had peeled off his perceptions, and he was aware of El Greco in a way he had never been before. *This is not just a comrade*, he thought suddenly, with a mix of dismay and shame. *This is not just an asset. This is my friend.*

He was still staring at Obus when the dull thunder of the enemy shells began. At once, a sort of sigh filled the room, a collective release of tension. No, not a release—an exchange, one type of fear for another. Quast sat bolt upright and, licking his lips, pressed his headphones to his ears with a characteristic gesture. Minutes passed; the thunder grew more intense. “Companies are reporting in,” the boy announced, staring at the wall as if it were a window. “Nothing falling in our sector yet.... Forward positions of Regiment ‘F’ seem to be getting the brunt of it.” He fell silent for a full minute, his tongue making a continuous circuit around his lips. “Bombardment is moving eastward, creeping barrage....”

Zengy found himself nodding. The enemy was shooting precisely where Cramm had said they would, west to east toward the bunker line. More time passed. The thunder was continuous but punctuated with nerve-jangling volleys of many guns at once that made Churchill whimper pathetically in Merklinger’s arms. “Regiment ‘Y’ says shells falling in its sector as well. Very heavy shelling along the firebreak...uh-oh, getting a Triple Q from Regiment ‘F.’” Triple Q meant that the regimental radiomen were going off the air for ten minutes, probably because they could no longer hear or make themselves heard over the radio and were too addled by shellfire to use Morse. “SS Tank Company reports a hit near its command post, many killed...trucks on fire...they are sending a Triple Q....”

The bombardment continued; one by one the command posts, regimental and battalion, fell silent under the insistent hammering. The Americans were letting go with everything they had, and the shells were

getting closer. A fine drift of dirt began to fall between the overhead beams as the ashtrays and empty bottles jittered with each explosion. Quast raised his voice to be heard through the din. "Leutnant Ballack is transmitting by Morse..." The signaler licked a stub of pencil and began to jot letters down in his faint, uneven hand. "One of his infantry guns knocked out...four men killed..."

Zengy tried to picture what was happening outside—the ripped-linen sounds of the shells, the pounding, pants-shitting terror of the impacts, the hideous way the light would fail from the sheer weight of dirt being flung into the air by the bombs. He tried to focus on the men who had just been blown to smears in their gun pit, men who for all he knew may have been with him since Carentan or even before. But all he could think of was Bastaby; Bastaby and the others who he had tucked away in the one place within several square miles where no shells were going to fall. It was as if this one act of compassion, feeble as it was, had exhausted his ability to care about anything else.

There was a smattering of explosions and then one final *whump* that caused the oil-lamp to jangle on its chain and a sheaf of letters someone had tucked between balks of wood to displace and scatter over the bunker floor; then silence. Hapf let out a pent-up breath that was almost a sob and covered his face with his hand. "All right, Quast," Zengy said, pointedly ignoring both this and the paternalistic pat that Merklinger had laid on the man's shoulder. "Get on the line to all companies and then with Schlabredorf as soon as he's back on the air. It's going to be a wait, but I want the entire battalion ready to move out on five minutes' notice."

The clack of the Morse key soon filled the void left by the departing artillery. Eventually, the reports filtered back, one letter at a time: a few dead, a few wounded, some guns knocked out of action, one incautiously sited truck blown to smithereens. The condition of the grenadier regiments was undoubtedly much worse, but they were

directly in the path of the enemy advance, and in any case they were someone else's problem.

"Forward observer 'Hansel' reports enemy infantry advancing into the woods on a wide front west of Schmidt," Quast said finally, a minute after replacing the headphones over his ears. "They are moving in long skirmish lines on either side of the main road. Battalion strength or better."

"Infantry only?" Zengy said. "Where are the tanks?"

"There's no vehicle traffic on the main road, Major. None at all."

Fox'l, venturing a grin, made a remark about the Americans being fashionably late, but before anyone could reply, a terrible moaning, as of rebellious angels plummeting into hell, filled Zengy's ears. He knew these were German rockets, but the sound seemed to play directly on his nervous system, and it took all his Prussian reserve to hold his features steady. He was enormously relieved when the moaning died away and was replaced by the bandsaw-buzz of German machine guns. "Observers from Regiment 'F' reporting heavy contact north of the main road, sporadic contact south...Observer 'Gretl' just broadcast QRX 10...Position 'Loreli' just broadcast KR, but they've gone silent... 'Hansel' now reports vehicle noise through the woods..."

Quast's voice, toneless yet oddly tense, became a drone in Zengy's mind. He looked about the bunker and was vaguely reminded of watching the faces of men listening to a boxing match on the radio—men who had staked too much on the outcome and could not afford to lose. Minutes passed. A half-hour. An hour. Artillery fire thudded and moaned. Mortars whistled. Hapf and Sandrock trampled in and out of the bunker carrying verbal messages. Zengy crushed out a cigarette and discovered he had smoked half a pack; it was no wonder his throat felt so raw. He looked at the map yet again. The Americans were in the bunker line now; the trap was almost ready to be sprung. Another half an hour....

“Hannelore reporting enemy infantry on their front—”

Zengy, jarred out of his reverie, looked over at the signaler.
“What did you just say?”

“Regiment ‘Y’ reports enemy infantry advancing in open order
—”

“No, damn it—*before* that!”

Quast shoved his glasses up the snub of his nose, looking bewildered and slightly alarmed. “Hannelore has...ah...they have enemy infantry advancing on their position, sir.”

Zengy blinked and saw what must have been his own expression of astonishment mirrored in Obus’ face. For a moment, he could not find his voice. Then he stood and seized Quast by the shoulder. “In what strength?”

Quast was biting his lip and staring sideways, a sure sign of intense concentration. He repeated the question over the air and got no response. Finally, he abandoned the headphones and clacked at the Morse key. At last, he said, with a mixture of apprehension and fear: “They just broadcast QQQ—going off the air. They must be in it hot.”

Zengy lifted a hand to his face, then aborted the gesture by balling it into a fist. A sense of horror powerful enough to bring out the gooseflesh on his arms had overtaken him. *I never thought in a thousand years...they can't possibly...only a fool....*

Obus stepped forward. His surprised expression had yielded to a flushed, embarrassed look Zengy had never seen before. “I was wrong, Papa. I’ll go.”

“No. I’m going.”

“Your place is here.”

“Don’t tell me where my place is. They’re *my* men.”

Obus blinked. “We’re *all* your men, Papa.”

Zengy ignored this. “Sandrock, Hapf, Fox’l—you’re with me. Weapons and ammunition only. Obus, you’re in charge.”

“But the counterattack—”

“Damn it, Obus, if the enemy gets out of that ravine in any strength, there won’t *be* a counterattack—they’ll roll us up like a carpet before we can even get out of our burrows. We have to be ready to turn around and reinforce this point—with the whole battalion, if necessary.”

“That would mean scrapping the entire plan. Ketterling will never approve that.”

Zengy seized the Danuvia and slung it over his shoulder. “Listen, this may be nothing; some patrol activity or a few fools who got their brains rattled by the shelling and lost their way. If so, I’ll be back in half an hour and no harm done. But if it’s an attack in force and Hannelore’s being overrun, I’ll send up a red flare. That will be your signal to tell Cuda to redeploy his men to support me, just behind the crossroads. Hold the other companies in reserve, but make sure they’re ready to swing ‘round and fight if need be. Don’t radio HQ for permission; just do it and *then* tell them what’s happened.” Before Obus could object further, he turned to the others and raised his voice: “Everyone here is a witness that I gave this order on my own responsibility and despite the objections of Oberleutnant Obus. Carry on!”

Outside the air seemed to waver with the sounds of battle: the echoing report of Spandaus, the whistle and crump of mortars, the vicious *crack* of infantry guns. But, of course, there was nothing to see except patches of sky through a filigree of branches and tree trunks half-obscured by the remains of the fog. The idea that they were in fact surrounded by hundreds of men, that these hillsides were drilled almost hollow with wolf burrows, slit trenches, bunkers, gun emplacements, seemed as remote as the moon. Fox’l was grinning beneath his helmet, his blue eyes alight with battle joy. Sandrock, taking a last drag on a cigarette as he shouldered his Schmeisser, looked considerably less pleased, and Hapf downright sullen. They moved out swiftly, wending through the trees to the game trail that straggled down toward the mouth

of the ravine. It was no more than a kilometer to Hannelore, but the terrain was bad crumbling to worse; the rains had turned the ground to soap, and tree limbs, half-severed by shrapnel, swung wet needle-covered branches against their faces as they ran. They came to a muddy crossroad, whose lesser fork vanished into the scrub oak beyond. The sound of shooting, echoed yet distorted by the rolling hills, seemed to be coming from all directions, but the further they moved down the trail, the louder it became—a continuous fury of machine guns and small arms.

Another two hundred meters and they could see lurid flashes against the drab scheme of browns and grays ahead. Tracer bullets skipped through the trees like disembodied jets of light; grenades burst everywhere. He saw Mutti Schulz crouched down beside a machine gun, whose asbestos-gloved crew was unscrewing its smoking, red-hot barrel with frantic urgency; past them and down the slope, he could see flits and scurries of movement. He caught glimpses of helmets, German and American, intermingled among the trees and brush and thought, *What?* The only thing that made less sense than the *Amis* attacking up this veritable cattle chute of a road were outnumbered Germans leaving cover to fight with them hand to hand.

Breathing hard, Zengy jumped down into the foxhole, ignoring Schulz's look of surprise as well as the scratch that was leaking blood down one of his pale cheeks. "What the devil's going on here? Why have your men left cover?"

"Bastaby!" The sergeant major shouted, reloading his pistol with a look of almost demonic fury. "That crazy little shitass!"

"What are you talking about?"

"We were sitting here in ambush position exactly as you ordered. It was quiet as a church, even during the shelling. Then—" He stopped as bullets shirred wildly overhead, forcing everyone to duck. "—we hear movement. Lots of men tramping through the bush down there. Dozens.

Maybe hundreds. I have Corper call it in, but before I can even finish, they're swarming up the slope thick as crabs on a whore's hole. Heinemann gives them a whole belt, and they go to ground. We chuck some bombs every time they try to deploy, and we can't miss. I was just thinking how easy this was going to be when that little fool Bastaby jumped out of his hole like a wild Indian and charged, and he hadn't gotten ten paces when everyone climbed over their sandbags—including the fucking radioman—and started after him, firing from the hip. Now, they're all down there—" He waved the pistol at the fuming, thrashing underbrush, where a grenade had just burst. "—outnumbered ten to one!"

Zengy closed his eyes. It had all gone to smash—Headquarters' plans and his own. He knew as well that he should simply leave the whole troop to its fate, send up the red flare, and withdraw quietly up the crossroad. A dozen or so lives were nothing compared to the hundreds of men who would fall if the Americans were not stopped. Then, quite unexpectedly, he heard the sound of his own voice in the darkness: *Do you even know how to shoot?* And Bastaby replying, in that quiet, hate-filled voice: *I'll live long enough to learn, Major, I promise you that.*

It was that which decided him. Yanking back the slide on his Danuvia, he rose to a crouch and slapped Schulz on one meaty shoulder. "Well, then what the hell are we all doing up here watching? You—" He nodded with his chin at the machine gunners. "When you see us coming back up this slope, give the Amis two belts and then run like hell for the crossroads. We'll be on your heels, and *they'll* be on ours, so get that thing set up and ready to fire when you get there. The rest of you are with me. *Heia Safari!*"

And without waiting for acknowledgment, or even to see if anyone followed him, he leaped over the sandbags and ran to the sound of the guns.

10

It was a wild fight and reminded Zengy more of the shootouts in the Old West novels he had read as a boy than any battle he had yet experienced. Men seemed to be firing from behind every tree, hand grenades were bouncing off trunks and bursting in midair, ricochets whined off crops of exposed rock. The slick, slanting ground was an obstacle course and already strewn with bundles of bloody rags that had once been soldiers. He saw Cajus firing a submachine gun, Gadermann clumsily working the bolt of his rifle, Kubala knuckling blood out of his eye as he reloaded his *Kampfpistole*. Big Schulz staggering up the slope, a limp-limbed body draped over his shoulders, while bullets plucked the ground around him. The boy Litzwack, covering Schulz's withdrawal, was standing on a patch of open ground as if on a rifle range, his tongue between his lips as he squeezed off one careful shot after another.

Zengy's heart pounded, his breath coming in wolf-like pants, but his mind was perfectly clear—clearer than it had been for days. The apathy, the depression, the hopelessness were gone. He was back in his element, once again amid the brutal honesty of gunfire. And if his experience told him there was only a slight chance of pulling this off, well, slight chances were better than none.

He had no conscious thoughts. The hundred actions he had fought in guided him with the assurance of a sleepwalker. Flipping the

selector switch on the Danuvia from automatic to single fire, he socked the weapon into his shoulder and peered down the blade sight until he saw a green helmet bobbing in the underbrush perhaps twenty yards away. The helmet bobbed up, revealing a strained white face, a khaki shoulder, an arm, and at the end of the arm, a pineapple grenade. For a splinter-second, the man seemed frozen in mid-throw; then Zengy took up the slack on the trigger and the soldier jerked backward as if on an invisible wire, the angle of the slope carrying him out of view. Another splinter and the grenade went off in a boiling eruption of dirt, rocks, roots, blood. But Zengy was already moving, leaping from trunk to trunk, sliding through the cold muck to a hulking moss-covered boulder that gave him a partially obstructed view of the edge of the ravine. He saw a red-faced American, one hand on his helmet to steady it, lugging machine-gun ammunition between two trees, followed by an equally exhausted-looking soldier who had a machine-gun tripod balanced over his shoulder. A third man lugged the gun itself. He flipped the selector back to auto-fire, and by the time he released the trigger, the magazine was empty and all three men were gone, dead or driven to cover—he could scarcely see for the smoke and hardly cared.

Mutti Schulz, firing a huge Mauser pistol that was probably almost as old as he was, barked orders left and right, trying to get the men to fall back in alternating rushes, just like the field manuals taught. But too many of the soldiers had never read the manual, and the *Amis* were pressing hard. At this rate, the whole shock troop would be wiped out before they could reach the top of the hill.

“*Dorian!*” Zengy roared. “*Dorian, where are you?*”

“Here!” the high-pitched voice came from somewhere far to his left.

“You have any baled charges left?”

“Two!”

A sudden fusillade of gunfire showered Zengy with bark and fragments of wood. The Americans were shooting at the sound of his voice, as he knew they would. "Prime both of them, and on my signal throw them both!"

"I've got no—" Dorian's voice was briefly drowned out in a roar of hand grenades. "I've got no target!"

"Never mind the target! Just throw when I tell you." He raised his voice still further. "*When I give the word, everyone follows me back to the crossroad! Is that understood?*"

An American fired an entire clip at the sound of him; eight bullets whined off the boulder, followed by the distinctive *ting!* of a strip clip being ejected. No telling if his men had heard him or would follow, but it was now or never.

"*Dorian—go!*"

There was a maddening pause, a grunt of exertion plainly audible over the pops of rifle fire, and then something that resembled a five-pound sledgehammer heaved itself through the air, describing a long, smoking arc before it landed in the underbrush. It had hardly landed when a second followed it, falling a few meters behind the first. An American rose from cover, presumably to run, and then disappeared along with the trees, the shrubs, the rocks—an area the size of a stage simply disintegrated in an explosion that struck Zengy's eardrums like fists. Staggered and breathless, he shouted for the men to move, but he wasn't sure anything came out of his smoke-tortured lungs but an asthmatic wheeze. It didn't matter. He had bought them time. Only a handful of seconds, but it had to be enough.

It very nearly wasn't. The hill was as slick as it was steep, the ground broken and treacherous, and climbing it involved the hands as much as the feet. Every moment his back was exposed it seemed to throb with the anticipation of being torn open by a rifle bullet, and after the space of a few breaths, the bullets were indeed flying once again,

and in both directions—rifles from behind, Heinemann's machine gun from the front. He saw Aumeyer, the gangling, half-lame ex-stormtrooper, weeping with frustration and terror as he tried to claw his way over a tangle of roots and branches; saw a helmetless Weichold slumped down in the fork of a sapling, too tired and too old and too fat to run, reloading his pistol between heaving breaths as if he had decided to salvage his dignity and die where he stood. Years ago, last year, perhaps even last month, Zengy would have let them fall where they were, following the stark calculus that his life was more important and that he must not risk it to save those who were easily replaceable. Now, the thought filled him with cold fury. Pausing long enough to unscrew the cap on a grenade, he yanked the fuse and tossed it almost casually between them, bellowing that they had not been given permission to die. A moment later, both men were in *front* of Zengy and bounding like deer over the top of the hill.

He was the last man out, leaping over the now-empty machine gun and breaking into a full sprint. The woods were flattish ahead, but cut every which way by ruts, shell holes, fallen logs, slushy streams. He could see spatters of blood on the leaves where wounded men had preceded him, and many cast-off bandoliers, pistol belts, and canteens, hastily tossed away so that their owners could run faster; he could hear the Americans following behind, thrashing the underbrush like enraged beasts. His thigh muscles were quivering with exhaustion, but he pushed through the fatigue as he had been taught to push through pain and fear, knowing from experience he could demand more from his body than it wanted to give. He saw Weichold, trailing vapor like a locomotive as he puffed forward; and Aumeyer, hopping along, using his rifle as a sort of walking stick, then Big Schulz, staggering along beneath the weight of Racke's body, then five or six others running with their backs turned, and lastly Mutti Schulz and Kubala, half-hidden by tree-trunks and covering the retreat over the sights of their guns. Zengy shouted at them

to move, but his words had the opposite effect; at the sound of his voice, the two men left cover and ran *toward* him.

Zengy let fly with the curses, but these too had the opposing effect: like hounds responding to their masters' voice, the survivors of the shock troop had stopped and seemed to be waiting for him to catch up. Zengy looked for Bastaby, but his hammering pulse and the eye-watering stink of cordite blurred the faces beyond recognition.

"I thought you'd copped it for sure," said Kubala.

"We'll *all* cop it if we don't get moving!" Zengy snapped. "Next time do as you're told!"

Mutti shook his head angrily. "We do as you do, Papa, not as you say."

Zengy had scarcely opened his mouth to shout that the sergeant major would do exactly as he was goddamned well told when the whistle of a German ten-point-five shell drove everyone flat. The detonation was followed by a rain of debris and the crack and groan of several trees falling over. Rolling onto his back, Zengy saw the branches overhead remained as tight as mesh. He couldn't possibly use the flare gun here, and he could hear the American NCOs shouting as they moved up the slope in pursuit. "Well, then if no one has any objections, what I'd like to *do* is run."

It was easier said than done. Shells were falling regularly now without warning or pattern, including American one-fifty-fives that detonated with such a terrific roar that those who didn't hit the dirt fast enough were literally blown off their feet by the pressure wave. The woods, already dim enough, began to fill with dirty, acrid-smelling smoke that made navigation even more difficult. Aumeyer had to be helped along by Cajus, and even the beastlike strength of Big Schulz was waning under the strain of carrying Racke. Zengy tried to read his compass on the move, but the needle spun like a weathervane in a storm, and with a curse he flung it away.

Now, the woods were gradually thinning out, the quality of the light changing—not brightening exactly but becoming clearer. Another minute and he came up upon a wide, muddy track—a branch of the main road perhaps, but was it north or south of the damned crossroads? Which way to go? His boots seemed to be inclining right, so right he went, fumbling for the flare gun. He had no idea where he was, but with the shells not caring where they fell, he'd have to chance a shot now, and pray that someone saw it. He was just pulling it from his belt when he saw an American emerge from the trees beside him and point a submachine gun directly at his chest.

Zengy saw the man clearly. He was rising into a crouch, revealing fresh mud on his knees and on one elbow, above which were two rows of chevrons, three up and three down with a diamond between them. His green helmet had been canted in on one side, as if by a steel fist, and had been rather carelessly pushed up on his head, so that the whole of his face was revealed. It was a hard-jawed, flat-cheekboned face, with a strong nose and dark blue eyes, and the eyes tightened as the man took aim.

The muzzle of the weapon looked as big as a tunnel to Zengy, and he knew that any moment it would spit smoke and flame and then that would be it, everything would be over, finished, *kaput*. There was no fear, but he felt a brief, hollow sadness that he had failed in his missions—both to warn headquarters and to save these men. Still, it was not his first failure, and since he hated to fail, there was some consolation in the fact that it would be his last.

Do it, he thought wearily. *Do it and let me rest.*

But the *Ami* did not fire. He simply watched, tracking Zengy first with his eyes and then with his head and finally with the muzzle of the gun. Zengy realized if the man did not fire *now* he would lose his chance, and now had come and gone and the American receded and disappeared into the trees, like a signpost in a rear-view mirror. It made

Sinner's Cross

no sense, but there was no more time to think about it. Zengy lifted the muzzle to the sky and squeezed the trigger. There was a crack, a piercing whistle, and then a *pop* that sent brilliant red sparkles every which way across the formless gray heavens.

No rest for the wicked, he thought.

One of the first things Zengy had learned about commanding large bodies of men was that it was impossible. He knew he had good officers, damn good non-coms, and that his paratroops were among the best-drilled soldiers in the entire Wehrmacht. He knew, as well, that his countrymen had a long tradition of unconditional obedience to authority, which had been face-hardened by Hitler's rule—the “leader principle” ran very deep with the younger ones especially. But in the end, the idea of control was largely an illusion. Once the fight commenced, his battalion shattered into hundreds of individual human wills—some driven by duty, some by battle madness or natural bloodlust, some by fear of the hangman's rope, some by confusion, some by temporary panic or bone-deep cowardice. To go into battle was akin to opening several hundred pigeon coops simultaneously during a gale; one had only a vague idea of what the birds would do, or where they would go, or if they would go anywhere at all. You had to trust in the plan, in your people, and in your training. The rest was luck.

Luck was with him when he saw the road ahead swerve abruptly into the trail he had taken down into the rim of the ravine, for in addition to Heinemann and Corper, busy feeding ammunition into their machine gun, he saw a number of Cuda's men amongst the underbrush, their spades flying as they clawed out hasty burrows between the trees. The

flare had been seen, Obus had been informed, and in spite of all his instincts in the other direction, the hot-tempered Greek had followed his orders.

Falling to his knees in the thickets, trying to repay the vast debt of oxygen he owed his tormented body, Zengy took stock of his men. Aumeyer had fallen on his face and was sobbing with exhaustion and pain, while Fox'l, panting, looked at him with contempt. Gray-headed Weichold steadied himself against a tree as if fighting off the urge to vomit. Big Schulz, his face crimson and dripping sweat despite the cold, was lowering Racke's body gently to the earth, while Dorian and Hanno knelt beside it, their faces anxious. Hapf and Sandrock passed a canteen back and forth, and Kubala, bleeding down his cheek and ear, calmly reloaded his Schmeisser, as if the events of the last half-hour had been nothing more than a field exercise. But where were the others? And where the devil was Bastaby?

Using the butt of the Danuvia as leverage, Zengy forced himself to his feet. He heard a disgusting glottal noise and walked over to where Racke lay. "Orderly! Let's have a medical orderly over here—*now!*"

Dorian looked up, his baby-blue eyes lensed with tears of impotent rage. "He doesn't need a medic, Major. He needs a priest."

Zengy looked down. Racke stared up at the sky, his jaws agape, his teeth showing in vulgar rows around a tongue that looked like a fat worm drowning in blood. He jerked and jerked, his long, meager frame straining against the six hands that held him down, the heels of his boots digging furrows in the earth. "Let him go, damn you!"

Without realizing he was going to do it, Zengy knelt and shoved his way through them, slapping their hands away and rolling Racke's body sideways, so that a great welter of blood and bile sluiced out of his mouth like muck out of an unstopped drain. A great wheezing inhalation of air and Racke's body ceased its struggling. Zengy held him close, pressing his lips to the dying man's ear. "It's all right, Eberhard; you're

going to be fine. I've cut myself worse than this shaving. Just catch your breath....”

Racke was young and in superb condition; it took him a long time to die. The hot coppery smell of the blood was thick in the air, along with the stench of urine and shit, as everything within the man slowly spilled out into the mud. Pressed against him like a lover, Zengy spoke to him steadily, calmly, softly, no longer conscious of the words he was using, only of the pressure Racke exerted on his hand, and the necessity of continuing the words so long as it did. The pressure slackened, the body went limp, and Racke was dead. The Sweeper had swept his last.

Zengy looked at his glistening hands. *Blood and piss*, he thought. *Life and waste. And wasted life. Eberhard Racke, I failed you.*

Dorian's lip was atremble; Big Schulz sobbed into his bloody hands, and Hanno looked pathetically into Racke's staring eyes as if still expecting to see life within them. Zengy stood up. “That's it. Put his cape over him and get your asses into those trees. The *Amis* will be coming across this road any second.”

As if to confirm this, the bushes across the way rustled. There was a curse, the sound of a hand striking flesh, and Mutti Schulz emerged from the undergrowth on the other side of the road, a furious grimace distorting his features. He dragged an undersized grenadier by the collar of his greatcoat as one might drag a reluctant puppy by its leash. “—ate little shitass...playing the hero...I ought to put a rope around your neck...!”

Mutti threw the man into the dirt at Zengy's feet. He lay there momentarily like a broken doll, showing small white hands as smooth and unmarked as a young girl's; then, he pushed himself sullenly to his knees, and Zengy saw the face beneath the downturned helmet rim, glowering defiantly back up at him.

“Bastaby!”

“Reporting as ordered.” The boy spat dirt out of his mouth. His obsidian eyes burned with hatred and glee as he patted his muddy assault rifle. “Got three of them for sure, Major. The last one, I saw his brains on the ground. I *told* you I’d learn.”

“I caught this little fool trying to turn around and go back,” Mutti said, his normally marble complexion now livid pink. “As if he didn’t do enough damage, leading that damned-fool charge!”

“And why not?” Bastaby began to rise, his lip curled into something between a sneer and a snarl. “That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it? To kill the enemy?”

Mutti’s boot caught the boy square in the ribs, sending him rolling onto his side with a grunt of pain. “You miserable streak of piss! How many lives did that stunt cost?”

“Who are we missing?” Zengy said.

“Korroscheck. He took a bullet smack in the face. Litzwack copped it too—saw him fold up with a belly wound. No idea what happened to Gadermann.”

Zengy’s stomach clenched like a fist, the way it had on his first parachute jump over Stendahl all those years ago. Korroscheck with his bad eyes, Litzwack the farmer’s son, wretched Gadermann who just wanted to go home and play with his orchids—gone, all gone, because of *his* mistake. *Going to smash*, he thought again. *All going to smash. Why didn’t that damned American kill me when he had the chance?*

The sound of tank engines jarred him—many engines, muffled by the trees but getting louder. The nausea evaporated, leaving only cold resolve: *Save the ones you have left.*

He barked a scarcely necessary order to get out of sight, and when the last helmet had bobbed down amongst the underbrush, he took cover himself. “Let’s have some *Panzerfausts* up here!”

But the tanks did not come. The engine noises persisted but seemed to be passing somewhere through the woods to his right, perhaps

following the log road that led to the bunker line, and faded to a low grumble. In the meanwhile, Cuda's men were arriving by squads and by platoons, taking up positions within the tree line, setting up machine guns, priming their anti-tank rifles. Cuda himself finally appeared, huffing and disconcerted, a Luger pistol in one bony hand. He was a scrawny, vulpine man with bulging eyes and rather sharp teeth, and because of his Transylvanian birth and swiftness with the gypsy violin had been dubbed *Das Wampyre*.

"What the devil's going on?" he demanded in that coarse, oddly accented German of his. "All hell is breaking loose back there. The *Amis* are pushing over the firebreak, and it won't be long before we get the attack order. What are we doing *here*?"

"They've broken through," Zengy said, reloading the Danuvia and thrusting the barrel in the direction of the ravine. "In company strength at least. They were right behind us...."

But the woods ahead lay silent; a freshening wind, cold as the face of a glacier, whirled a flurry of snow through the branches. It was the only movement.

Minutes passed; a quarter of an hour. The sounds of battle began to intensify from the direction of the firebreak, but in front of their guns, nothing happened. Zengy began to sweat despite the temperature. He had often been wrong today—was he wrong again? *Had* the attack on Hannelore been a feint after all?

Cuda's radioman crawled beside him. Headquarters was on the line, demanding to know why he had deviated from the plan and spluttering threats of court-martial. Reception was poor, they had to switch to Morse, and Cuda's signaler was nowhere near as fleet-fingered as Quast; but in the end, Zengy was able to explain the situation. Tense minutes followed; headquarters had signaled QX 5; Cuda chewed nervously on a cold briar pipe. After a small eternity, the radioman

jerked a hand to his headphones and began to scribble nervously on a sheet of paper. Zengy watched the order appear one letter at a time:

trespass with prior notice

“They want us to attack,” Zengy said finally, crumpling the sheet in his fist. “The ten-point-fives are going to plaster them, and then we go in.”

Cuda’s face, not handsome under ideal circumstances, was rendered further frightening by a frown. “But if the *Amis* haven’t attacked, it’s because they’re digging in themselves. Go in now, we’ll run right into their guns like fools. If we stay here, it’s a standoff; we have them neutralized.”

“Division doesn’t *want* them neutralized; they want them *gone* so they can salvage their precious plan. If we knock them back down in that ravine, we can seal it off with some heavy machine guns and still have your men back in their original positions in time for the circus.” Zengy raised a hand to massage his temples but thought better of it when he saw Racke’s blood sticky on his fingers. “Tell everyone to wolf-burrow—there’s no telling where the shells will land.”

The men were still hacking into the soil with their entrenching tools when the thunder began. The sound of the detonations rolled back over the German positions, trembling the earth, shaking needles from the branches, causing lips to tremble and breath to come short. A burning smell—burned propellant, burned explosive, burned wood, and perhaps burned flesh—flavored the air, growing steadily thicker until the eyes stung and the nose ran and the lungs itched. The company had three 81 mm mortars, and Cuda soon had them going as well, sending bomb after bomb whistling over the trees and down onto the edge of the ravine. Zengy, lying prone in the cable work of a pine tree, shook out a cigarette and studied it while the ground vibrated beneath him. The old Zengy

hadn't needed schnapps or tobacco to take the edge off; the old Zengy had enjoyed the edge, wanted the edge, used the edge to slash the enemy to pieces. *And now it's cutting into me.* He threw the cigarette away in disgust. The bombardment lifted. He scrambled to his feet, and with a swing of his arm, almost as if he were scooping up the whole company and flinging it ahead of him, shouted:

"Heia Safari!"

It was the old Afrika Korps rallying cry, and it hadn't left his lips in years, but today it seemed to fill him with fresh energy, to propel him across the road and back into those same accursed woods. And in what seemed like an eyeblink, the bullets were flying, a crazy profusion of tracer fire in vivid colors skipping through the trees like phosphorescent stones across a pond. The Americans had dug in, just as Cuda had warned; a short wall of earth and logs had been erected between the tree trunks like a crude fence, half-obscured by smoke. German bombs slammed into that wall, knocking sections of it into the air in dirty clouds, but angry spurts of light shone through like lighting within thunderheads, and Zengy saw men falling everywhere, their weapons spinning away from their out-flung hands. A tree loomed, and he let it check his momentum, used it as cover. He hunted the enemy gun flashes. A flip of the selector and he fired single shots at each one, watching as they went silent, turning to others, then cowering as his own were seen and fired upon, the *thunk* of bullets into the wood like the beating of some ancient tribal drum. He found an egg grenade in his belt, yanked the pin, tossed it, heard the crash, flipped the selector back to automatic fire and burned off the magazine all at once, not knowing if he hit anything. Movement on his right; a grenadier sergeant with steel-rimmed glasses was leading a small charge over the parapet. In a flash, he and his men were up and over, and Zengy, carried away by their courage, followed. His leap seemed to take hours; it was as if he were

suspended on guide wires, and in that moment, he had a panoramic view of the whole fight.

The *Amis* swarmed like olive-drab and brown khaki ants, firing furiously, the way soldiers always did when they couldn't see what they were aiming at. One of them, not ten meters away, stood on the rim of a foxhole covered by a log, almost casually shooting a carbine. In his hyper-awareness, Zengy could see the gold bar welded onto the man's helmet: an officer. His boots hit the dirt, he tucked himself into a paratrooper's roll, came up ready to fire, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. The Danuvia was empty. The American fired another two shots, then turned and vanished back into his foxhole, presumably to reload. Cursing, Zengy clawed for a grenade, but he'd thrown his last, and in any case, the bespectacled sergeant and his men were already fading back, much fewer in number than before, clambering up the smashed parapet, firing as they went. The fire overhead was heavier now, coming from all directions, bullets of every caliber shirring and whining, making a kind of wind that was like the wind a blade makes when it passes close to your face, except there were a thousand blades, all slashing at once. It was like fighting a storm; there was nothing to aim at. So, he too scampered back over the parapet and up the slope, ducking and dodging between the trunks, the men falling back ahead of him, some pausing to take the wounded by their wrists and drag them, bleeding, through the leaves, until the storm faded away.

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It had happened to Zengy before—a sense that was senselessness, a feeling as if his perceptions had been jumbled together beyond any hope of separating them, as if time had ceased to be linear and instead was a cloud of smoke surrounding him, past and present and future intermixed and flowing around him simultaneously.

He knew the shell had done it. Zengy was quite good at gauging the caliber of a shell by the sound it made, and he was certain, despite everything (even the blood running from his nose and ears), that it had been a fifteen-centimeter howitzer. German, of course; but then one was always getting knocked around by one's own artillery. It had burst to one side of him, and his head was full of a great high-pitched ringing, like the shrill warble of a radio trying and failing to find a frequency, and he had not even known he was down until the particular texture of dead leaves and cold earth had pressed against his cheek. But he'd found himself intact; there were no holes, just a warm wetness on his mouth and earlobes. When he tried to get up, he was able to do it on just the third attempt. But it seemed, moving on, that the dams in his mind, the heavy partitions that separated and channeled thoughts and experiences, had burst. Was he on the attack again? Ordering the men to regroup? Huddled in a shallow hole, waiting for a bombardment to cease? Dragging a soldier whose leg had been shot away from the shin

downward to safety? It seemed the answer to all of these questions was yes.

Sometimes, in the less noisy moments, he was able to snatch individual memories from the maelstrom, like a man fishing for trout with his bare hands. He remembered that Aumeyer had not returned from one of the attacks and that after another, Hapf had staggered back white-faced and drenched in blood, his field jacket torn in a dozen places by shrapnel, before collapsing into the arms of a medical orderly. He could recall that Hanno too had been wounded; Zengy could see his lean, shifty-eyed features glistening with sweat and contorted with pain as he regarded a hole like a cigarette burn in the meat of his right forearm. But was that happening now? Or had it happened hours ago? Or had the pressure wave caused some strange rupture within his mind that allowed him to look into the future?

The morning had worn on into afternoon. His men, lugging machine guns and ammunition and mortar bombs amidst a dusting of snow, trampled the roads—Ballack's boys, then Schraepler's, then Eisenberg's, one company after another, and Obus among them too, looking chastened and grim as he set up a command post within a triangle of knocked-over trees. It seemed odd; this was precisely what headquarters didn't want. *I must have violated orders again.* But then he remembered seeing Major Nickolaus, spattered with mud and looking decidedly odd under a steel helmet, climbing off a motorcycle sidecar and shouting that the Americans were to be driven off the ridge at all costs. Evidently, the shithouse masterminds at HQ had fallen ass-backward into the understanding that you could not launch a flank attack when you yourself were flanked. Nickolaus really was something! And yet the man did have guts. Waving a pistol, he'd led one of the charges himself, even holstering his weapon to help a team of grenadiers push an iron-wheeled infantry gun over the rocky, root-strewn, shell-gutted soil.

Nickolaus had disappeared after that, killed or captured or simply swept along by the currents of battle to some other part of the field.

It was that type of fight—confusion piled on confusion; chaos piled upon chaos. The shells fell in waves—ten-point-fives, twenty-ones, mortar bombs of every size, rockets—but they landed as often among the German positions as among the *Amis*. One salvo had struck a horse-drawn supply wagon as its driver whipped his team up the log road, and for what seemed like hours (perhaps it *was* hours), there was an almost continuous eruption of exploding ammunition. There was no communicating with the artillery regiment, either; Quast could get nothing on the regimental net but static, and his Morse inquiries yielded only silence.

Now, Zengy found himself returning from yet another charge. It must have lasted half an hour, but all he could remember was watching Sandrock crumple into a shell hole, apparently dead, only to rise moments later and, with an expression of disgust, fling off his helmet and bandolier, shuck out of his field jacket, and throw away his submachine gun. One last, rude gesture in the direction of the American position, and he'd simply limped away, blood steadily darkening the seat of his pants.

Why, he's gone and quit the war!

Time had passed. The company commanders conferred around a map. There was Cuda, chewing his cold pipe and declaring that this whole attack was criminal because the grenadiers were not fit for combat; the poor fools kept clumping up and getting killed four and five at a time by bursts of machine-gun fire or even lone hand grenades. Ballack, always a daredevil, wanted to swing his company around and pry the Americans open from the right while someone else—anyone else—drew fire on the left. Eisenberg was all for the plan—if Ballack was the one who drew the fire. Schraepler, his right hand showing blood through a crudely wrapped bandage, said nothing at all; he just idly

opened and shut, opened and shut the cover of a gold locket that held a clipping of his daughter's sandy hair. And Obus? He kept casting brief, tentative glances at Zengy, as if to say, *This is all my fault*.

But Zengy wasn't really paying attention. He was trying to remember, precisely, when Dorian had fallen. Perhaps it had been only moments ago. Perhaps it had been hours. He just couldn't remember. But how well he could recall those baby-blue eyes staring sightlessly at the sky, one half of his Cupid's-bow mouth drawn back over the small white teeth, his submachine gun still clutched in his hands. A hero's death for Dorian, who had missed out on the Olympics because of the war and, because the war was greedy, on the rest of his life as well.

It wasn't only his side that was suffering, of course. The Americans were getting it in the neck as well. Advancing down the slope under heavy fire, past the ruins of the now-abandoned parapet, Zengy had stumbled into a shell hole half-covered by a log and found two Yanks inside—well, parts of them anyway, with the first man missing only his head whilst the second, caught in the act of rising to his knees, possessed nothing at all above the cartridge belt. And Zengy had done his best to add to this toll, clearly recalling a bareheaded fellow with short auburn hair he had shot quite literally out of his boots. Bastaby had seen that happen; Zengy knew this because he'd heard the boy laughing delightedly between bursts from his assault rifle. Laughing when he shot an American corpsman through the Red Cross on his helmet. Laughing when he shot a Yank whose gun had jammed and who was trying desperately to surrender. Laughing when he'd ended a wounded soldier's pleas for mercy with a fusillade of bullets and a cry of, "*For Caesar, you cunt! This is for Caesar!*"

And yet though they bent, though the bow-shaped position they'd hacked into the ridge had been battered inward at many points, though their dead and their dying lay everywhere, strewn along the ploughed-up soil, the *Amis* had not collapsed, and their stubbornness had

ruined everything. Schlabredorf had radioed that enemy tanks were a hundred yards from his position and that he could no longer wait; he was going out to meet them. The trap had been sprung, but with only one of its jaws. Quast was soon reporting that the enemy was fading back, leaving many burning tanks on the field, but like a battering ram withdrawn back through a hole, they had left only wreckage in their wake: Regiment 'F' had apparently ceased to exist, Regiment 'Y' had been badly mauled, and American counterbattery fire had knocked out half the Division's artillery. Daylight was burning down like a fuse, and a fine snow had begun as the temperature sagged toward the freezing point once more. It seemed certain that headquarters would call off the attacks on the ridge, as they no longer served any purpose, and Zengy, knowing the American artillery would eventually nose out his position, ordered Quast to tap out "KR"—*request permission to withdraw*. Before a reply could arrive, however, Major Nickolaus reappeared, his pale face black with gunpowder, and after drinking half a canteen of water, harshly ordered the assault continued. Obus refused before Zengy could even open his mouth, but after a brief shouting match, during which Nickolaus accused Obus of cowardice and Obus responded by threatening to throw his Iron Cross at Nickolaus' feet (and which Zengy watched like a drunk observing a game of tennis), Quast cleared his throat and read out Ketterling's reply: "Enemy is to be driven off the ridge at all costs."

At all costs. Now *there* was an interesting phrase. Not quite as Prussian as "*whatever it costs*" but it fit the logic of the lunatic asylum that posed as Headquarters. Don't pay attention to the facts. Don't trust the evidence of your eyes. Ignore your years of training, your years of experience, your common sense. Just believe, just *obey*. Sieg Heil! Suddenly, Zengy was twelve years old again, walking through the gate of the military academy for the first time. The legend chiseled into the stone read: *Our civilization must build its temple on mountains of*

corpses, an ocean of tears, and the groans of innumerable dying men. It cannot be otherwise. He had never questioned that ethic—until now. Until now, he had never realized how easily heroism came to those who asked no questions.

Nickolaus was talking. He wanted to go in immediately, but Zengy shook his head. First clench the fist, he said, then strike! Holding a bandage to his still-bleeding ear (how long had it been bleeding, anyway? Minutes? Hours?), he scratched out a plan in the dirt—the same plan that Ballack had suggested, with the exception that every one of the battalion's thirteen mortars be added to the weight of fire being provided by Division. "Obus, you see to it. The moment the heavy stuff stops, let fly and keep it flying until the tubes feel like stovepipes. I want it to roll ahead of us—" He marched his blood-crusting fingers across his thigh. "—like a carpet, no more than forty meters in front. Keep the *Amis'* heads down until we're almost on top of them. When you see a white star shell, that will be the signal to stop. I'll send it myself so they don't pull up at the wrong time. Eisenberg's company will go in, and then Ballack on the right. That will finish them."

"*Zu befehl,*" Obus said, with unusual formality. And then, in the same tone: "Request permission to lead the attack."

"I've just told you I'm going to lead it."

"You're in no condition."

"Don't tell me—" Zengy started to rise and then sagged back into a sitting position; he would have fallen had not Mutti seized his elbow. He felt time sliding around again and tried very hard to hold onto it, to force it along its normal path. It wasn't working. He was here, now, at this precise moment, drawing breath and bleeding into his bandage and feeling Mutti Schulz's grip through his field jacket; but he was also leading an attack, an hour ago, and Big Schulz was on his right, gulping air as he lugged his machine gun forward, his dull-eyed bovine face sheened in sweat. And the next time Zengy saw the man he'd been in a

fetal knot on the ground, looking as if he were trying to contract himself into some invisible womb.

Running out of men named Schulz, he thought. Must ask Berlin for more....

Later—much later, perhaps—Quast was busy tapping Morse to headquarters; he probably didn't want to talk to Hitler. Anyway, it was getting dark. The shells screamed overhead, and the air stank despite the cold. Fox'l was running about, directing the mortar crews, who crouched tensely in their pits, drumming their fingers on the bombs and trying to keep the sleet out of their tubes. Zengy could not recall agreeing to sit out the latest push, but evidently he had, for the companies started across the road without him. Fresh ringing in his ears told him the artillery had stopped. He saw Major Nickolaus, a straight-backed figure in an Army helmet, waving the men on with his pistol, and Obus, a contemptuous look on his face, walking stiffly past him, his machine gun slung muzzle-down over one shoulder. Now, they were filtering into the woods by squads and platoons, advancing in the half-crouched, hunch-shouldered manner of men going into battle, their camouflage field jackets blending them into the gathering gloom so that they resembled an army of forest spirits. At the last moment, Obus turned and sought out Zengy through the stream of figures; their gazes met. El Greco slowly raised a gloved hand, and on his hard heavy-lipped mouth played the shadow of a sad smile. Then, he too was gone.

Fox'l yelled an order in his distinctive Berlin accent, and the mortar barrage began. Bomb after bomb described long, whistling arcs over the shell-shredded woods, until smoke curled along the ground like the evening fog that was slowly rising off the forest floor. The observer, Leutnant Aden, a very round-faced, red-lipped boy in a crumpled, filthy uniform, who spent as much time wiping the lenses of his field glasses as observing anything, called adjustments from his position in the fork of a tall tree.

Zengy swallowed a Pervitin tablet, and while he waited for it to digest he looked idly at the scene around him. Quast had his eyes closed and both hands pressed to his headset; he was trying to filter out the noise of the mortars and give a running commentary on what he was hearing. Merklinger, a cigarette burning in one corner of his mouth, was scribbling down these utterances on a small notepad, the dirt on his hand leaving smears on the gritty gray-green paper. Mutti Schulz had gotten a trench stove going and was brewing up what smelled like chicory; his helmet and coat were greasy with mud and his face and fingers smeared, making him resemble a tramp huddling by a campfire. Weichold, squatting beside him, had replaced his missing helmet with a shapeless field cap; he poked at the fire with a stick, looking oddly composed

despite the unhealthy flush that still clung to his cheeks. Cajus and Kubala were sitting side by side against a log, not speaking, not moving, just staring dully into the middle distance, each one reliving the deaths of his friends and wondering if they were next to fall. Bastaby sat apart from the others, and with deliberate, almost loving movements, was reloading his empty magazines, one bullet at a time. *Click, click, click.* The dreamy expression on his face, the suggestion of a smile on his limpid mouth, was perhaps the worst thing Zengy had seen all day, and he turned away from it, feeling sick.

A flare burst over the tree tops in frantic incandescence; the day was in its death-struggle, not quite ready to yield to twilight. Fox'l was running up and down before the mortar-pits, yelping at the crews to cease fire. Shooting had started up from deep within the woods, and it grew more and more violent with each passing moment. Zengy, feeling the amphetamines begin to glow in his bloodstream, was soon unable to distinguish between the German and the American weapons; the unseen fight had become a single continuous noise, as one might imagine the earth had made when it was being assembled, the only difference being that now its inhabitants were trying to smash it apart. Then, the firing slackened. The end must be very near. Zengy stood up and peered into the trees with his glasses. There was nothing to see, but he could picture it easily enough, Obus glowering over the sights of his machine gun, the surviving Americans rising whey-faced from their foxholes with rifles raised, that odd post-battle quiet descending over everything....

Except that something strange was happening. The shooting had resumed—lively shooting—but the weapon-noises were unmistakably American. He couldn't hear any German guns at all. And no celebratory second flare had popped in the purple gloom over the trees. Several very long minutes passed, during which the woods fell completely silent. Zengy studied the tree line again, his heart pounding from more than the Pervitin. He saw movement in the underbrush. He snapped an order over

at Heinemann, who hastily swung the muzzle of his machine gun into position, but the figures beginning to stream out of the forest were Germans. Some looked winded and angry, as men prematurely pulled from a fight; others were limping or being half-dragged free of the underbrush, their faces ghastly white with shock and pain. Many had thrown away their helmets and rifles and were stumbling across the road as if only their exhaustion prevented them from running.

It was like the aftermath of some terrible vandalism. Squads and platoons that a half an hour ago had been intact were now sliding past Zengy like the broken remains of a vase down an up-ended dustpan. Here and there he saw a recognizable pattern—a sergeant limping amid four or five of his men, a machine-gunner helping his ammunition bearer hop along on one leg—but for the most part, it was simply a jumble of men, a mob, a rabble.

He moved among them. *Where are your officers? Where is Obus?* No one answered him; few even met his gaze. Insults and even blows yielded no information. He drew his pistol and fired into the ground at their feet, the gun flashes livid against the gathering dark, but the men could not be roused. They might simply have faded away into the woods on the opposite side of the road had not the scream of shells commenced once again, driving them to the ground as if bowled over by a single gust of wind. Rolling into cover, Zengy saw Aden scamper down from his aerie in the tree; evidently, the boy had seen the men coming back and called in artillery to cover their withdrawal.

A glance at the pocket watch told him it was now seventeen hundred hours, but it may as well have been midnight for all the light that shone. Explosions provided the only illumination; they threw the forest into a crazy, nightmarish relief, all black silhouette and shifting shadow. Occasionally, a bomb exploded within the German lines, provoking cries of terror and rage. Once, a very large tree simply disintegrated into a million fragments of smoking shrapnel, and for

many minutes afterward there came a chorus of anguish that sounded as if it had emitted from a crack in the ceiling of hell. Zengy ignored all of it. Walking from hole to hole, position to position, he kicked at each huddled, cowering, sobbing form and asked the same questions: *Where are your officers? Where is Obus?* No one seemed to know. There appeared an upturned face that Zengy recognized, despite the dull, unfocused look in the eyes and the stark pallor, made all the ghastlier by its close-cropped black hair and short, pointed beard....

“Obus!”

He was huddled in a two-man wolfs-burrow, without helmet or weapon, an unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth and a brass lighter loose in one hand. He seemed to lack the strength to ignite the flame. Zengy fell down beside him. “What the devil happened to you?”

Obus swallowed. He stared at the lighter with a vaguely baffled expression, as if he couldn't remember how to get it going. “Bayonet. Stuck me like a rabbit. Saw it coming and turned. Didn't even have the guts to take it *in the guts*.”

Zengy dug a field dressing out of a pouch in his bandolier. “Lean forward.”

“Not much point to it now.”

“I said lean forward, damn you!”

The back of Obus' field jacket glistened black with blood, and Zengy couldn't find the hole. He pulled his gravity knife from his boot and slit the fabric apart, exposing a blood-drenched shirt.

“You're destroying Reich property,” Obus mumbled.

“Shut up. Why in God's name didn't you find an orderly?”

“Don't want an orderly. Want a cigarette.”

“Obus, what happened out there?”

The flint wheel flicked; there was a brief spark of light and then a puff of smoke. “Went perfect. At first. Just like a field exercise. The bombs were plastering them. When we got close enough to get the dirt

in our eyes, I sent up the flare myself. Had Eisenberg's boys draw their fire while I worked 'round the right with Ballack's mob. A nasty belly-crawl, but they didn't see us. We hit the Yanks end-on; they didn't even have time to run. We were shooting them dead in their holes and some of them were giving up, and I thought it was finished...."

The shirt had given way beneath the blade, exposing the wound, a black slit that wept continuous red. Zengy pressed the dressing to it; in moments, it was saturated.

"...then I heard this God-awful screaming and looked over and saw a whole group of them charging us, a whole line of bayonets just cutting everything down in front of them...I remember in thirty-four...in the Labor Service...saw a nest of rats go under a combine. It was like that. I dropped my gun and ran. I could have taken out the whole goddamned pack of them with two short bursts, but I just dropped it and ran. *Everyone* was running, and they were jamming those things into our backs while we did it, and I felt one go into me. Didn't hurt going in. Hurt coming *out*." He shook his head. "I kept going, and all of the sudden we were smack in the middle of Eisenberg's company, them coming forward and us running back, and they couldn't shoot for hitting us, but the Americans got a machine gun up on what was left of that parapet and let go with it, and I could see the tracers going through two, three men at a time, we were so jammed up, and then it was a rout...."

"Stop talking," Zengy said. Blood ran between his fingers, down the back of his hand, onto the cuff of his jacket. He couldn't stop it. "It doesn't matter. They're as bad off as we are. We'll finish them yet. *Orderly!*"

"Dropped my gun," Obus muttered, leaning back. His eyes were closed, and the cigarette bobbed when he spoke. "Dropped my gun and ran. Bet *you* wouldn't have dropped your gun."

"Don't be so damned sure. *I need a medical orderly here, now!*"

"Dear old Papa. Always the good comrade."

"I'm not your comrade. I'm your friend. I'm your brother. Now stop talking."

"Why? I don't want to die with my mouth shut...."

"You're not going to die!" A shell, booming like an aeroplane as it descended, clipped through a hundred feet of branches and struck earth with a roar that had debris pitter-pattering all around them for nearly a minute. Zengy scarcely noticed. "*If I don't see an orderly here in ten seconds, when I get up I'll shoot every man wearing a red cross, so help me!*"

"Think the *Amis* did it for you, brother," Obus said. He was smiling dreamily beneath his closed eyelids. "Doesn't matter. I'm finished. Serves me right too. Thought you were up to something. Thought...it's so fucking silly, I'm ashamed of it, but I thought you'd gone soft, putting all those men out of harm's way. Thought you felt sorry for them. But you knew. You *knew* they'd come up that road...."

"Damn it, Kurt, you don't understand—"

"Bet you'd have had a whole company dug in there if Ketterling had let you. And here I was fighting you about it. Fool. Goddamned fool...never was fit to shine your boots...." Obus' head slumped backward against the wall of the hole as if he no longer possessed the strength to hold it up; the cigarette fell off his lower lip. "Oh shit. I can't see. Are my eyes open?"

More shells exploded in succession: *Crump! Crump! Crump!* Dirt and pebbles fell in a fine rain. Somewhere nearby, a young voice cried uncontrollably for his mother. Zengy could feel the blood pulsing over his wrist in time with El Greco's heart, and a mindless, formless hatred broke loose within Zengy's breast, a hatred that was so intense it was almost an insanity. Everything that had brought Obus to this moment, he hated, whether it spoke English or German or the shrill, wordless language of warfare; but most of all, he hated himself, and it was the power of that hatred (and surely not the Pervitin pumping into

Sinner's Cross

his muscles) that allowed him to lift Obus from the burrow as if he were made of straw and to carry him sure-footedly through the maze of toppled trees and holes full of huddled men, into the flash-lit night.

His mind whirled again; time seemed to be collapsing in on itself once more, and though he could feel the blood-drenched body loose in his trembling arms, it seemed that he could hear voices, see the dull glow of lamps, smell smoke that came from burning tobacco and not scorched earth. The sound of artillery faded, and the burden on his muscles disappeared. He thought he had arrived at the hospital, but no—he was in a forward command post of some kind—a vast, open-sided tent whose roof flapped and shivered in an icy, sleet-sprinkled wind. A group of haggard-looking officers in Army gray were clustered around a map. One of them wore a heavy greatcoat of chocolate-colored leather with the collar turned up; it was Bix, the Divisional Chief of Staff, his skin sallow and his eyes red-rimmed and heavy, as much from exhaustion as from the disease that was slowly killing him. Bix was declaiming about the need to regroup, bring up reinforcements, attack, but Zengy was not listening. He looked instead down at his hands. They were gloved in dried blood. He must have carried Obus all the way to a dressing station, but he had no memory of it, nor of leaving and coming to this place. *Is he still alive? What am I doing here? How much time has passed?*

He lowered his hands and studied the lamplit faces around the map. It looked like all the Divisional bigwigs—“the bronze,” as they

were collectively known—but Ketterling was nowhere to be seen. Nickolaus too was absent, and everyone was arguing, in the particularly truculent way men do when reason has long since exhausted itself yet the argument remains.

“Reinforcements, where the devil are you going to get them? As it is, my line is manned with cooks, wagon-drivers, veterinarians, walking wounded....”

“Not to mention that every time my guns open up, they get plastered by counterbattery fire....”

“You can’t even call what *I’ve* got a regiment anymore. It’s scarcely a battalion!”

“Schlabredorf’s down to three Tigers, but I suppose if we could get them up to the edge of that ravine—”

“Are you mad? Those Tigers are the only thing holding the bunker line together. Take them away, and—”

“We can’t use tanks at the Hannelore position anyway. They weigh seventy tons a piece; those shitty little roads won’t hold them. What we need are men, and we don’t have them.”

“Look, the Green Devils can contain the Yanks through the night just by staying where they are. Come the morning, however—”

“Come the morning the Americans will put fresh troops in that position, probably a whole battalion, and burst out of it like an erupting boil—right *behind* the extreme left wing of our line. We have no choice. If we can’t knock them back down into that ravine, we must pull back our entire left flank.”

“After what happened to Ketterling, you talk about retreating?”

“We won’t call it a retreat. We’ll call it a ‘tactical readjustment of the line’ or some such thing.”

“Do you think they’re complete fools at Headquarters? That they won’t notice your ‘re-adjustment’ will give up Schmidt?”

“It will be a *fait accompli*. And once it’s done—”

“Once it’s done, the car that took Ketterling away will come back for *us*.”

“I’m willing to take that chance.”

“And so I would be, if I thought it was only me that was going up the rope. But Himmler has threatened to extend the Law of Kin Liability to Wehrmacht officers’ families as well. Do you want to see your wife and children in a damned concentration camp? No, we must drive the enemy out of that position before morning, and it falls on the Parachute Battalion to do it.”

It gradually occurred to Zengy that everyone was staring at him. The room had gone completely silent, save for the crackle of an unseen radio, the insistent flapping of the wind on the canvas, and the mutter and rumble of distant guns. He replayed the words he had just heard in his mind, traced them back to the mouth and the man who had uttered them: Bix. A towering presence with a balding forehead, Aquiline nose, and furrowed cheeks, imposing despite his pallor and the spasms of pain that caused his hand to tremble as it lay upon the table.

He thought of Obus, lying somewhere in an aid station in the stench of piss and pus and Lysol, of Racke with blood and bile pouring out of his mouth, Big Schulz curled up like the scroll of a cello, Aumeyer with tears glistening in his stubble, and all of his confusion evaporated. He pushed his matted, blood-crusting hair from his forehead and said, “And what is it exactly, Herr Oberst, that you think we have been trying to do all day?”

Bix poured himself a water glass of vodka. “I am aware of your efforts. I know that you haven’t spared yourself.”

“It’s my men who haven’t been spared. Half of them are dead.”

The colonel nerved himself as if for a shock, then drank down the entire glass of vodka, his face twisting and revealing large horsey teeth. “Come now, Zenger,” he rasped, wiping his mouth. “I know your reputation. You consistently have the highest casualty rate of any

battalion commander in this theater, just as I once did in Africa. That is why we wear the Knight's Cross; we both know the mission must come before the men. And the mission here is clear: get the Americans off that ridge by sunrise, or—”

“Or we will have to pull back. A course I advocated in writing weeks ago.”

“And very appropriately, if I may say so,” someone muttered.

There was a thud as Bix brought the bottle down hard on the map table. “You may *not* say so, Cramm! And there will be no further discussion of withdrawal! It's absolutely out of the question!” In the silence that followed this outburst, Bix composed himself and turned back to Zengy. “You must attack, and the attack must succeed.”

“*Zu befehl*,” Zengy said. “But whether it succeeds or fails, it is my duty to tell you it will mean the end of my battalion. We have perhaps a quarter of our original strength presently ready for battle. The rest we will burn up taking that position. Whatever survives won't be enough to fill out a company – if that.”

“*Dura lex, sed lex*. I would rather lose one battalion than half the sector.”

“Even if you know perfectly well that we will lose it anyway, the next time the Americans attack, for lack of men to defend it?”

Bix waved a dismissive hand. “I am not concerned with what will happen tomorrow. That is the responsibility of Supreme Headquarters. Now, you'd best return to your troops ...what the devil's so funny?”

“I'm sorry, Herr Oberst.” Zengy was indeed laughing, a trembling, quietly hysterical sort of laugh that brought tears to his eyes. “It's just that for a moment you reminded me of General Ketterling. I do trust you will have better luck.”

And before the colonel could reply, Zengy snapped to attention, turned on his heel, and marched back out into the rain.

15

He had all his senses again; he only wished he did not. Reality drove home to him with every step of his boots, every breath of iced-over air, every amphetamine-fueled thump of his anguished heart. He saw the men around him with almost photographic clarity—a dispatch rider in a heavy leather overcoat, slumped over his motorcycle with his goggles pushed up over his helmet to reveal an oil-smearred face; a hard-eyed military policeman with a scarred chin, tapping a gloved finger on the butt of his submachine gun; a grenadier lieutenant, his face slack with exhaustion behind his glasses, sitting on the tailgate of a truck, staring at his boots. And through it all, the voice of Bix haunted him.

I know your reputation. You consistently have the highest casualty rate of any battalion commander in this theater....

It was true; in a perverse sort of way, he had even been proud of it.

You must attack, and the attack must succeed.

Of course it must. For the paratrooper, victory or death was a point of honor. The reasoning behind the fight did not concern him.

We both know the mission must come before the men....

Hadn't it always?

Zengy scarcely knew where he was going, only that if he paused even for an instant his knees would buckle. For a moment, he was back at Stendahl, and Sergeant Zierarch was marching him at the duck step across the parade ground, bellowing in that hoarse voice of his: “*Left—right—left—right!—left!*” And that was what he did now. Just one foot in front of the other, though every fiber of his being cried out for him to stop.

He knew he must return to his men immediately. Return and scratch a new attack plan in the dirt with the officers who were still breathing. He had been given the order; he must obey it. Fourteen years of soldiering and centuries of tradition were behind him, carrying him along like a wave to his own almost certain death. But it was not the prospect of death that frightened him. It was the prospect of living.

Left—right—left—right—left—what the hell do you think you're doing, Zenger? You call that marching? LIFT those legs!

For years, he had lived to serve the battalion. Now, he was being asked—told—to destroy it. To take the men he had left and herd them into the American guns as casually as you would shoot a shovelful of coke into a furnace. Not because the situation demanded it, but because everyone was afraid of the black Mercedes, the one that appeared when you'd displeased Supreme Command. The one that had collected Ketterling, for the terrible crime of failing to achieve the impossible.

You say you want to join the paratroops, but you stagger around like a whore after a good screwing! Get those legs up! LEFT—RIGHT—LEFT!

Bix wasn't afraid for himself any more than Zengy was. The colonel just didn't want the next communication with his wife to be a postcard from Dachau. Understandable. But in his desire to protect his family from the Law of Kin Liability, he was condemning hundreds of other families to ruin.

Higher, you lazy little shitass! I want to see HOBNAILS!

Zengy wanted to hate the man, but he was denied the pleasure of moral superiority. In battle, he'd always been reckless—the first into the flames and the last to back out of them. He'd had a hunger for recognition, for the admiration of his fellows, for the creak the box made when it opened and revealed the medal gleaming on the velvet beneath. He had built his legend one grave at a time, never quite able to remember the faces of the dead. He and Bix had been a matched pair, like dueling pistols.

But that Martin Zenger was gone. He had fallen by the body of a dead horse and been washed away on a young boy's tears. Zengy could see all too clearly the faces of the men waiting for him down the road—waiting for their Papa to return and lead them. What was the Second Commandment of the Paratrooper? *Cultivate true comradeship, for together with your comrades you will triumph or die.* God knew he had cultivated true comradeship. His men worshipped and adored him. But triumph was no longer a possibility, and that left only death. Pointless, meaningless, and futile. For all of them.

He took off his helmet and lifted his face to the rain. Thought again of Obus, lying in the hole with his lifeblood streaming out of him, muttering *I never was fit to shine your boots*, and he suddenly knew where he was going. He had to see Obus a final time, to look him in the eye, to explain what his presence had meant over all these years...and to confess that it was he, Zengy, who was unfit; he, Zengy, who was unworthy; he, Zengy, who was and always had been the lesser man.

I owe him that much.

The casualty clearing station was located in a long-abandoned barn surrounded by fallow fields. The nearby farmhouse had long since been reduced to ashes, and the fields themselves were little more than a mass of old shell holes and wrecked vehicles, the victims of an American air attack weeks ago, which had been shoved ruthlessly off the road and lay in a litter of torn metal, loose wheels, broken lengths of

chain, melted tires, and unidentifiable pieces of machinery. Zengy had to thread his way through this debris as wagons full of wounded men clattered and splashed past him, their drivers urging on their horses with curses and whips.

Inside was hell as he'd always imagined it. Noise. Stench. Confusion. Sobs and cries of pain. The glint of surgical instruments in lamplight. Wounded men huddled on muddy straw. Wads of bloody gauze, dirty bandages, puddles of blood and vomit. The picture grew even worse as his eyes adjusted. A senior medical orderly with sergeant's piping on his shoulder straps wearily pinned evacuation tags to uniform tunics with blood-slick fingers. Not far from him stood a sweating surgeon in a spattered leather apron, removing shards of bone from the black hole that had once been a grenadier's kneecap.

"Stop that goddamned bawling!" The surgeon roared at his patient, tossing a piece of bone into a chamber pot with his forceps. "Are you a soldier or a pants-shitter?"

"Don't talk to him like that!" Zengy said.

The surgeon glanced up briefly. His eyes were so bloodshot it was impossible to determine the color of their irises, and there was a lighted cigar clenched between his teeth. "Who the devil are you?"

"Zenger. Major. Parachute Battalion."

"Ah, yes." The surgeon threw another piece of bone into the pot. "Let me take a moment to thank you for all the business you've sent our way. I don't think we could keep our doors open without you." He turned abruptly and raised his voice to a shout. "Stuckwisch, you lazy dog! Get over here and put that snout to use."

A gray-faced blond boy in a crumpled Army uniform with a Red Cross on the sleeve stumbled over, thrust his face over the glistening wound in the grenadier's leg, and took a deep inhalation. After a moment, he looked up at the surgeon and shook his head. The surgeon waved him away with the forceps and turned back to the tear-streaked

grenadier, who chewed the sleeve of his field jacket to stifle his own screams.

Zengy had to swallow his gorge before he could speak. "What was that about?"

"Some men prospect for gold, Stackwisch prospects for gangrene. Why are you pestering me, anyway? Shouldn't you be up at the front, making more wounded?"

"I brought a man in here before," Zengy said and then paused. *At least I think I did.* "A paratrooper. Oberleutenant Obus. Has he been evacuated yet?"

"How the devil should I know? We've had hundreds through here today—hundreds!"

"Dark hair. Short beard. Looks like a Spaniard. Would have come in maybe an hour ago."

"Don't remember. Go to the field hospital and look there."

"He had a bayonet wound."

Clink went another fragment. "I said I don't remember. Now kindly piss off!"

"He wore the Knight's Cross."

The forceps paused in midair. Blood curled around the smutty steel, dripped. Some of the belligerence went out of the surgeon's expression as he stared at something only he could see. "Ah, you mean the *hero*. Yes, I *do* remember that one." Abruptly he returned to his work. "He's dead."

"What?"

"I said he's *dead*. Artery was cut. Right aortic intercostal. He bled out. Nothing we could do for him. You want to go through his pockets for loose change, he's with the rest of the stiff's." He screamed at the grenadier, "*I told you to stop that bawling!*" The cigar fell smoking from his mouth and extinguished with a hiss in a puddle of blood on the

ground. “*Now* look what you made me do, you wretched little pants-shitter....”

It was as if the shell had struck again; everything seemed to go away—sound and smell and jostle. Zengy was alone in the theater of his mind, watching images of Obus as he might watch a newsreel: Obus lifting a beer stein to his lips in the Tavern am See; Obus shrugging out of his bone sack after a training jump at Borstal; Obus rigid as a statue as the Iron Cross is pinned on his breast pocket on the parade ground at Gardelegen. On and on the movie played; Obus had become El Greco, of the curved mustache and jutting black chin-beard, and he was swimming naked in Suma Bay with the wrecks of British destroyers smoking faintly beyond him in the turquoise water, and many months after that, slogging red-faced through the snow at Szappszo, and still later digging a burrow west of Tunis under a merciless white sun, his bare knees scraped and peeling, his skin like blistered leather beneath the rags of his tropical uniform. A blink of the eye and it was ‘43; he was sitting gaunt and sunburned on the back of an armored car, a machine gun across his knees, watching Scalagrandia roll past with an expressionless face, getting ever closer to death though he did not know it, because after Sicily came Italy and the place names that defeated the German tongue: Montescaglioso and Potenza and Minervina, Stella and Voltuarra and Ascoli, and then Monte Cassino, and he was down with a wound that might have killed him. After that, the hospital at Lörrach, and Zengy had the next bed over because the same blast had clobbered them both. It was late, the sky was purple, and they sat out on the terrace playing cards to the murmur of the radio and the whisper of the cool, fragrant breeze that blew off the Rhône River....

The movie in his head had ended; the end was flapping around the reel. Zengy found himself in the barn, amid the stink and the screaming, watching the red-eyed surgeon curse the boy with no kneecap. Watching Stuckwisch puke all over his boots. Watching the

tired sergeant with the red fingers drive his pins home into the lapels of greatcoats, the folds of field jackets, the sodden fabric of undershirts. Zengy could endure no more; he went outside, back into the rain that was once again becoming sleet. In the lee of the barn lay shadowy rows of still silent forms—dozens of them, their muddy boots stuck up like the teeth of a storm-damaged fence, with some of the posts missing. Grenadiers and paratroopers and tank crewmen, officers and men, lying together in the absolute socialism of death. He walked among them, staring at the faces, or the places where the faces had been, wondering if he would be able to recognize the one he was looking for. Obus, however, was not difficult to find; drained of blood, his undamaged features shone like washed chalk in the darkness. When Zengy knelt by his body, he could read El Greco's expression quite clearly. It was not contorted with pain or shock as so many of its companions were; neither did it carry that look of betrayal that so often adorned the dead on a battlefield. The appearance was one Zengy had never seen during Obus' life: the half-open eyes were averted, the cheeks slack, the heavy red-lipped mouth down-turned, and though motionless in death, somehow managed to give the appearance of trembling.

He looks like he's going to cry, Zengy thought, and then a strangled sob escaped him and it was he who was crying—a miserable flood of tears, undignified and squalid, mercifully drowned out by the cries of the wounded and the snort of the horses. He did not weep for Obus, nor for himself. He wept because he knew now why he had not led that last charge into the wood, why he had allowed his friend to try to redeem himself for a mistake he had not committed. Some part of him had grasped even then that there was only one way out, that for the men to come before the mission, the mission must come before those men who would stand in its way.

Stuckwisch had stumbled outside the barn and flopped down in a puddle on his hands and knees, retching. The boy's greasy ash-blond

hair fell over his forehead in matted strings, and his thin, almost emaciated face was the picture of misery. Knuckling tears from his eyes, Zengy wondered what the boy's duties entailed besides the Gangrene Patrol. Collecting dog tags from corpses? Mopping up vomit and shit and blood? Burying amputated limbs? It was strange to think that this child, in his own way, knew more about war than Zengy did, for it was he who picked the gristle from its fangs, stood in the sour wash of its stinking breath. What would he had thought of the words chiseled into the stone over the military academy, the words Zengy had chiseled into the souls of every soldier who had ever served under him? *Our civilization must build its temple on mountains of corpses, an ocean of tears, and the groans of innumerable dying men. It cannot be otherwise....*

But it could. It must. There lay a duty beyond the duty he had been taught and that he had taught Obus and the others. Perhaps only he could see it or, upon seeing it, give this thing that looked so much like cowardice its proper name. It scarcely mattered. Only one thing mattered anymore. To save those who could be saved.

Whether they wanted it or not.

16

“You must be mad,” Weichold said.

“Perhaps,” Zengy said.

“They will certainly shoot you.”

“They will not get the chance.”

“Then they will certainly shoot *me*.”

“It’s a distinct possibility. But it doesn’t really matter, does it, what happens to us, so long as the rest of them live?”

In Zengy’s absence there had been another attack; the Americans had broken it up by firing white phosphorous shells, which despite the ever-falling sleet and snow, lighted whatever they touched with bold bright flames hot enough to melt steel. The air was foul with the stink of things burning, and the glow of the fires caught the melting ice on the trees and sheened them with a peculiar, silvery light. The two men squatted on opposite sides of a burning log as if it were a campfire. Weichold took off his field cap and ran a heavy hand through his matted gray hair. “It’s not just a question of saving their lives. What you’re doing could be called treason.”

“Do *you* think it’s treason?”

The old man was silent for a time. “Yes,” he said. “But when your leaders are criminals, perhaps treason is the only true patriotism.”

“That settles it then.”

Weichold moodily poked at the fire with a stick. The heat was so intense it caused the moisture on the sleeve of his coat to steam. “Not entirely. There is your family to consider. The Law—”

“Applies only to *immediate* family. I have none left. You?”

“My son was killed at Banja Luka in forty-three. My wife divorced me when I was denounced. She’s since remarried. Our daughters have...taken their stepfathers’ name. He’s a director in the Ministry of *Justice*.” Weichold abruptly snapped the stick in half and threw it into the flames. “I hope they *do* try to arrest me again. Seven rounds in the Walther—that will be seven hangmen less.”

“It would be better if you lived. Germany will need men like you when all this is over.”

Weichold shook his head. “To do what? I was bred from boyhood for war—*Dulce et Decorum est, Pro patria mori*. No one will ever believe that again. Not in Germany. You and I are anachronisms. And perhaps it’s for the best.”

The guns began once again. A sound like the beating of a thousand wings filled the air, and then the ground began to shake. The two men stood. Zengy unfastened the flap on his holster; Weichold replaced the cap on his head. Side by side, they walked toward the command post. Cuda was waiting there, smoking his briar pipe, his vulturine face inscrutable with weariness. Schraepler, his helmet resting in the dirt by his boots, continued to play with his locket, his snow-flecked hair giving him a pathetic, defeated look. Even Fox’l, who normally regarded combat as a sort of sporting match, had a glazed look in his eyes; he had apparently only narrowly avoided being burnt to a cinder by the phosphorous. Only Bastaby showed any enthusiasm; eyes glinting, he ran his doll hands over his assault rifle as if it were the body of his lover. The others mutely stared, like prisoners awaiting their sentence.

“Children,” Zengy began, “we have been ordered to continue the attack. Division has made it clear they expect Hannelore to be recaptured even if it means the total annihilation of this battalion.”

No one said anything. A muscle in Mutti’s jaw twitched, and he thought he saw Quast’s lips tremble. Schraepler took a deep, shuddering breath. Zengy opened his field jacket and removed the document that had lain folded in the inside pocket for two days. “The following is a Führer decree. When it was given to me, I had no intention of reading it to you, but circumstances have changed.” In a stiff parade-ground voice, he intoned: “*Should a commander, left to his own resources, think that he must give up the struggle, he will first ask his officers, then his noncommissioned officers, and finally his troops, if one of them is ready to carry on the task and continue the fight. If one of them will, he will hand over command to that man—regardless of his rank—and himself fall in. The new leader will then assume the command, with all its rights and duties.*” He lowered the paper. “We have been left to our own resources, and for the first time in this war, I feel I cannot carry on the struggle. In accordance with this decree, I therefore ask you, my officers, if any of you are willing to take command in my place.”

No one spoke. Bastaby’s nasty little half-smile evaporated. The only movement was Cuda’s pipe as it fell from his unclenched teeth to the ground. The guns thundered, but somehow the sound seemed very far away. After what seemed like ages, Fox’l drew breath, but before he could speak, Zengy said, “Keeping in mind, of course, that you will be expected to carry out the attack?”

Fox’l’s mouth shut with a snap.

“I see. And my non-coms? Mutti, do *you* want command?”

Schulz stared at him as if he’d grown a second head. When he did not reply, Zengy turned to Merklinger. “What about you, August? Feel like playing hero?”

The sergeant said nothing. Zengy nodded. "Then it remains merely to ask my troops. Are there none who will answer our Führer's call?"

Cajus was all eyes. He stepped away as if threatened by a knife. Kubala, fingering the clotted cut on his cheek, studied Zengy's face without expression, then shook his head.

"Private Weichold, what say you?"

"What *is* this?" Bastaby took his feet so fast his rifle fell off his knees. "Some kind of joke?"

"The Führer is not known for his sense of humor."

"But you can't just *resign*."

"On the contrary...the language of the order makes my duty plain. I am ready to fall in and fight, but the battalion must have a leader."

Bastaby's gaze jerked from face to face. He looked like a child who had just been told that Christmas had been canceled. "We have been given an order!"

"I cannot in conscience obey it."

"*Conscience!*" Bastaby screamed. "What conscience can a man like you possibly have?" He thrust a finger at the Knight's Cross hanging at Zengy's throat. "How many lives did that cost?"

"All that I am going to pay."

"You're *afraid!*" The boy's face was demonic in its fury, the cherub had become an imp. "You don't want to attack because you're afraid! Well, I'm not!"

"That's because you're a fool."

"And you're a coward!" He spun around to face the others. "If none of you know your duty, then I'll do it—I'll take command myself!"

"I'm afraid that's impossible."

"Why, damn you?"

“The nature of your wounds forbids it.” Zengy drew his Walther and shot Bastaby in the foot.

The boy crumpled, his face a rictus of shock, his doll hands turning red as they clawed at the ragged, smoking hole in his boot. As the men around him scattered and stumbled away from the noise of the gunshot, he uttered a short scream—more of frustration than of pain, and turned hate-filled eyes upward. “*You bastard!*”

“Someone get an orderly,” Zengy said. “I’m afraid I accidentally discharged my pistol.”

“Papa, are you out of your mind?” Mutti shouted. He had fallen into a sort of crouch and had his Mauser pointed at Zengy’s chest. “What in God’s name are you *doing?*”

“My duty. At very long last.” He threw away the gun. “Private Weichold, you haven’t answered my question. Will you take command of this battalion?”

“I will.”

“Then pursuant to the decree, I fall into ranks. What are your orders?”

Weichold turned to the others. Several had fallen over at the explosion of the pistol; others had their weapons leveled, as if to defend themselves. On each face there was the same look of astonishment. Bastaby writhed in agony on the ground, his teeth bared, spit and tears gleaming on his marbled face, but Weichold ignored him. “The attack is canceled. All companies will prepare to move out in march order for the bunker line.”

No one responded. The fury of the guns grew more terrible every moment, filling the sky with ghost-light. Bastaby tried to grab his rifle, and Zengy had to kick it out of his reach. Everyone stared at him. “Listen to me. You all know perfectly well that to carry out this attack is suicide. If it would gain us something...anything...I would do it. But it

won't. It can't. We've lost this battle. We've lost this war. We have only one responsibility now, and that's to save what's left."

"I don't accept that the war is lost," Cuda shouted. "And I'm willing to fight to the end to prove I'm right!"

"All this can't have been for nothing," Cajus's eyes were wet. "Racke...Big Schulz...Dorian...all the others...it *can't* have been for nothing."

"Even if it was, I'll never surrender," Kubala's voice was as hard as tombstone. "They'll have to bury me where I fall."

"That's the response I'd expect from a man I trained," Zengy said, trying to keep the sadness out of his voice. "So, I can't condemn you for it. But if you're going to die, Kubala, would you rather die because some sniveling asshole at Headquarters doesn't want to move a pin on a map for fear of upsetting the Führer, or on your own terms—making *Amis* slip on blood with every step they take? You go into those woods, you'll die before you even see an American. In the bunkers, you'll have a fighting chance. That's a death worthy of a Green Devil."

"They'll hang the lot of us when we get back," Mutti said miserably.

"Weichold, maybe, for calling off the attack. But he's agreed to take that risk. As for the rest...." Zengy managed a smile. "Your obedience to the decree wipes the crime of it out of you."

"And *your* crime?" Cuda's voice was full of bitterness. "Do you honestly think a scrap of paper will keep your head out of the noose?"

A panting young orderly had arrived. He cast a bewildered glance around the circle of figures and then, seeing Bastaby writhing on the ground, shrugged and pulled a field dressing out of his bag.

"I haven't fought all these years to be strung up by my own countrymen," Zengy said. "But my friend Bastaby here has reminded me of one thing. This"—he touched the medal at his throat—"is an

expensive piece of hardware. I bought it in blood, and I'm not quite through paying."

"Stop talking like a damned Sphinx," Mutti shouted, not sounding very much like a sergeant major.

"Colonel Bix has ordered an attack, and I intend to carry it out. Just on a smaller scale than he expected."

He looked down at Bastaby. The boy's face was wet and the eyes and features bulging, as if driven outward by the force of his agony, yet he was still cursing, still scrabbling for the rifle that lay a yard beyond his reach. "One day, you'll understand why I did this. But even if you never do...you'll have years and years to hate me."

Around him the faces continued to stare, united in their disbelief. He wanted to make a grand speech, to tell these men what they were worth, why it was so important that they survive, to look each of them in the eyes and take their hands one by one in solemn ritual. But there was no time. What he was planning must be done now, or not at all. He clicked his heels, raised a hand in salute, and began toward the road and the woods beyond. Then, he remembered Obus, sitting with his back against the bunker wall, a tin mug of schnapps brimming in one scratched and dirty hand, quoting Shakespeare at him, and in spite of it all, a smile played over his lips. He turned around and raised his voice loud enough to be heard clear against the thunder of the guns:

"*Auf wiedersehen*, my friends. If we do meet again, we'll smile indeed. If not, 'tis true this parting was well made."

Zengy walked toward his death but not fast enough to suit him. The ground was treacherous—full of holes and blowdowns and ankle-snagging roots, full of shell holes and discarded equipment...and as he progressed, full of dead men too. He was too far from the American positions for these to be anything but his own, and they lay everywhere, sometimes singly, sometimes in clumps of three or four...and sometimes in pieces. But the darkness was merciful, and he could make out few details. A white face here, a clawed hand there, a lingering sheen that probably meant blood. There was still enough of the old Zengy left in him to feel a sense of pride at how hard his boys had fought, but the pride was tempered by grief.

It can't have been for nothing, Cajus had said. But he was wrong. All the sweat and strain and sacrifice had been expended in vain, all the slogans had run hollow, all the traditions had gone bankrupt. Bastaby had called him a coward, and he supposed that was true. He had sent the others to face a truth he was fleeing—that he really was an anachronism, the last acolyte of the dying faith of blind obedience. It had taken him twenty-six years to grasp the difference between physical and moral courage. And he could not live with the knowledge.

A Sinner's Cross indeed, Zengy thought. And mine to bear...if only for a little while longer.

The forest ahead was catching hell—and he was getting close enough so that the flashes of shell bursts flickered at him through the trees and made the ground rock beneath his feet. It was odd. Among the things he'd discovered about himself since the war began was his talent for staying alive. Right from the beginning he'd seemed to know which way to dodge when the shell came over, which part of the minefield was the least dangerous to cross, in what particular stand of trees the sniper would be lurking. Even as a private, men had followed his lead in battle, understanding perhaps instinctively that this was one man the bullets could not hit. And now here he was, deliberately moving toward annihilation. It would have been less bizarre had he decided to go in guns blazing, like the tragic hero of some ridiculous war movie, but he wasn't even armed. He'd thrown away his Walther and left the Danuvia leaning on a log a few dozen yards from the command post. He may as well have been taking a stroll on the Kurfürstendamm.

Of course, it didn't really matter. If he wanted to fight, there were weapons laying everywhere around him. It would be simple enough to pry a Schmeisser from the hands of one of these dead Devils, and he rather fancied the war-hero image. But it was pointless. His fighting days were over. The trusty old Danuvia had fired its last round—at least for him. And with any luck, no one would return for it, and soon, the battle would roll past this part of the forest and the tramp of boots and the curses of men would fade from the wounded hills along with the sound of the guns. The log roads would rot and the burnt-out wrecks of vehicles and bomb-smashed bunkers would disappear into the underbrush. The forest would resume the unearthly quiet that had wrapped it for centuries, broken only by the hoots of owls at night and the furtive movements of deer. Days would pass, and as the sun described its course overhead, its rays would fall through the waves of

branches to glint coldly on the forged iron. More snow would fall, and the flakes would alight on the metal and collect there. The wood would warp. Moisture would penetrate the shells and foul the gunpowder. Come springtime, there would be rains, and rust would begin to eat away at the barrel; in the summer, spiders would spin webs between the magazine and trigger guard. The fall winds would bury it in leaves, and beetles would make their home in the dirt beneath the decaying butt. In a year or two, it would be hidden from the world. There would be no monument to the places it had been, the things it had done. It would simply return to the earth, unmarked and unlamented.

As I will.

It was strange. So many years had passed since he'd been alone, even for a moment. In the barracks, on the parade ground, in the taverns and the transport aircraft, in the tomblike bunkers and the command posts built in shell holes, in the flea-ridden *isbas* on the Russian steppe and the wind-flapped tents of the Tunisian desert—always there had been the presence of others, the crackle of radios, the clatter of field typewriters and the indignant shouts of sergeants. Even at funerals, he'd looked out over the vast rows of military crosses, lying in serried ranks, and thought, *Not even here?* But now there would be no monument for him, and no companions in death. The solitude he'd craved would be his at last, and it would be eternal.

He thought about Bastaby. The wound would save the boy's life; by the time it healed, the war would be over, and he'd have no further opportunities for revenge. Zengy hoped the limp would not be too bad, and that over the years that would follow, as Bastaby's porcelain skin became weathered and his jetty hair touched with gray, that the hate in his dark eyes would fade, and he would understand the bequest he'd received—a chance for a fully human life, for a wife and children, for all the things Zengy had been denied and denied himself....

Something clipped through the trees above and detonated not far away with a roar that knocked him to his hands and knees; a moment later, a heavy branch struck his back hard enough to drive the breath from his lungs. He lay there for perhaps a full minute, face pressed into the icy dirt, and then forced himself back to his feet. He was close now; the bodies lying about him were now frequently in American uniforms, and twenty or thirty meters ahead, through swirls of smoke, he could see the shot-up remains of an abatis, upon which a coil of intestine lay like a telegraph cable. Ten seconds and he'd be right among the enemy. Ten seconds and some American gangster would shoot him dead.

There was very little fear, and such as there was belonged to his body and not his heart. They'd taught him as a child that his life was of no consequence, that he was a mere corpuscle, that by dying he purchased the life of his country, and he'd believed it so long it no longer mattered if it were true. His last thought, as he broke into a run, was a prideful one: he hoped the man who killed him was as good a soldier as he had been. Someone like that jut-jawed sergeant he'd seen on the trail. Now, *there* was a face right out of the Karl May cowboy novels Zengy had devoured as a child—cold blue eyes startling in a sun-blasted face and a chin like iron. A real gunslinger type. *Anyone but a weakling. Or a fool.*

Zengy had taken perhaps twenty hard strides when he saw the foxhole looming ahead. A flash of light from an exploding bomb revealed that it was occupied—there was a helmetless American cringing within. Time seemed to slow down; he could hear the descending howl of a shell, feel the sting of flying dirt against his cheek, taste the smoke on his tongue. He leaped high in the air, and for an instant he felt the full power of his body, its magnificent coordination and flexibility, and he knew that even unarmed he could certainly kill this man if he wished. Then, his boots hit the bottom of the hole, the force of impact driving him once again to his knees. He and the Yank

were at eye level, but the man wasn't even looking at him; a near-miss had screwed up the fellow's face into an almost comic picture of terror—eyes shut, cheeks puffed, lips pressed white. Zengy realized he was going to have to wait for his own execution.

The American's eyes opened, releasing a pair of tears that spilled over the burnt gunpowder on his cheeks. Zengy could see him more clearly, captured as he was in the stuttering light of the bursting shells. He was young but haggard-looking, almost wretched despite the gold bar that glimmered on his collar; he wore the filth of battle like a once-wealthy man might wear a beggar's robes. An officer, but not a professional. Probably one of those collegiate dance-hall fops—vain, sensitive, cheaply clever. Someone who'd thought the war was going to be all tailored uniforms and background music and would never recover from discovering otherwise.

Not what I wanted at all, Zengy thought, looking the man in the eyes. It was so pathetic he wanted to laugh out loud, but all he said was: "I guess you'll have to do."

The American looked stupidly back at him. Then recognition shallowed in his eyes. His right arm jerked, bringing a short-barreled carbine up off his lap, and Zengy had just enough time to feel the cold hardness of its muzzle high on his ribcage and then it went off with a flash and he was crumpling forward and everything was going dark, a strange swirling silent darkness, a darkness that became a whirlpool, into which all his life was vanishing. He was five years old, and his mother was showing him a sepia-toned photograph of his dead father, a stern and slightly ridiculous figure in an old Imperial Army uniform. Nine, and Liselotte Burgus was kissing him beneath an oak tree by a wheat field, the sun making a glory around her blonde curls. Twelve, and Cadet Raschenberg had laid open his cheek with a whip because he had a tarnished button on his tunic. Eighteen, and the Luftwaffe recruiter was recommending him for the paratroops, saying anyone who'd been

expelled from a military academy for trying to drown an upperclassman in a toilet had just the sort of spirit the *fallschirmjäger* were looking for. Twenty-one, hanging in a parachute high over Crete, and the sky was full of billowing yellow silk and long, oily black banners of smoke. And now one last memory glittered before him, like a speck of gold dust on velvet, and beyond it lay the final darkness. It belonged to a few minutes past, and he was walking away from the command post across the muddy, stony road, headed into the trees and toward the man who would kill him, when he heard the thud of boots and saw Mutti Schulz.

“I’m going with you!”

“No,” Zengy had said. “You head back to the bunker line with the others. That’s an order.”

“You gave up your rank. You can’t give me orders anymore.”

Zengy felt an ironic smile touch his lips. “Then consider it a request from a friend. Go back, Mutti. Do the best job you can. Keep the men together and keep them alive. And when things get hopeless, remember that you have obligations that lay beyond what those bastards tell you is your duty.”

“I’m a Green Devil!”

“You’re also a father—to your children and to them. Do your job, but live through this war. Raise your girls. Teach them how to live. And if you ever have a son...for God’s sake, don’t let him play with toy soldiers.”

EPILOGUE

“And how are you feeling today, Sergeant?”

“Same as the last hundred times you asked me, Doc. Just fine.”

“Hmmm. If you can't remember that you're supposed to call me *sir*, maybe we need to keep you another week or two for observation.”

“Not funny, Doc.”

“Well, at least you remember I'm a *physician*. I guess you know why I'm here?”

“My discharge came through?”

“Not hardly. I want to set you up for some more X-rays.”

“You X-ray my noggin anymore and it'll glow in the dark. You wanna do somethin' *useful*, hand me my discharge papers.”

“Sergeant, you really are something else. Most men we get in here aren't exactly eager to return to the front.”

“I could give a hoot in hell for most men. I got a job to do.”

“According to that captain—Duffy?—you've already gone above and beyond the call of duty, so to speak. If you wanted me to, I could probably get you reassigned to some easier duty when you *are* discharged.”

“Doc, I been sittin' around in these jammies eatin' donuts and drinkin' coffee and listenin' to *Tom Mix* on Armed Forces Radio for two

weeks now. I've had all the easy duty I can stand. The only thing wrong with me is that I'm goin' stir-crazy."

"You're supposed to leave the diagnoses to me."

"Look, my vision's all better, and the headaches are gone. I don't get dizzy or tired no more. I don't forget things."

"You're irritable and refractory in your conduct. That's a symptom of concussion."

"It's also a symptom of me bein' me. The irritable part anyway. Far as 'refractory' goes, I don't know what the hell that means."

"Sergeant, sometimes I think you play dumb just to get away with your insubordination."

"Think what you like, Doc. Just put your John Hancock on my discharge sheet. Otherwise, I'm likely to bust out of this place and thumb a ride back to my outfit whether you sign it or not."

"Is that a threat?"

"Reckon so."

"I guess I can't fault you for your fighting spirit."

"My boys need me."

"Not as badly as you might think. Your Division got pulled out of the Hürtgen nine or ten days ago. First Army decided they were all used up and needed a rest and refit. They got put somewhere in the Ardennes. Quietest spot in the whole European Theater of Operations. They call it the Ghost Front."

"Ardennes...Ardennes. Ain't that the spot where the Krauts came through in forty with their whole got-damned army?"

"That was then, Sergeant. It's a whole different ballgame now. The Germans are out of gasoline. Their air force is finished. Their best men are long dead. They don't have an army to throw at anyone anymore."

"Then why does my helmet look like it lost a fight with a Missouri mule?"

“Sergeant, look out the window. That snow’s knee-deep all over the map, and the mercury’s six feet under. Even Hitler’s not crazy enough to try to attack through mountains and forests in this weather. Trust me, the worst of the fighting’s over. It may be that that mule who kicked in your helmet did you the biggest favor you’ll ever get in your whole life.”

“Well, I’ll just be sure to give him a big ole sloppy kiss when I see him, Doc. But I can’t do that until you let me *go*.”

“Subacute subdural hematoma is no laughing matter, Sergeant. You are very lucky we didn’t have to perform a craniotomy. As it is, I still don’t think you understand the seriousness of your injury.”

“Like I said, Doc: I’m fine.”

“Like *I* said, Sergeant: I’ll be the judge of that. X-rays at fourteen hundred hours. And don’t give the nurse any guff this time.”

The doctor left. Halleck got up off the examination table and went to the window. It was indeed snowing like all hell. The landscape was almost solid white, and he could feel the cold through the window despite the heat coming from the radiators—deep, numbing, lethal cold. He remembered getting caught south of Comanche in a blizzard like this years before, tipping the brim of his hat down low to keep the worst of it out of his eyes, feeling the flakes accumulate in his shearling collar and wondering just what the hell he’d do if his horse froze to death before he reached Marlow.

Doc’s right about one thing, he thought, his breath fogging the glass. *A man would have to be plumb loco to order an attack now. Absolutely plumb loco. Bad enough just to pull guard duty in this shit, much less have to fight.*

He shortened his gaze to the reflection in the window. He looked a bit silly in this damned bathrobe but otherwise good—well-rested, well-fed, warm, and clean. Getting three squares and hot showers and all the nurses he could ogle while his boys were huddled out there

somewhere, holding their hands over the piss holes in the snow just to keep the circulation in their fingers. And wondering if they'd live to see another hour, much less another day.

Guess maybe that mule did me a favor after all, he thought. More's the got-damn pity.

Halleck deserted the hospital an hour later, and it wasn't very hard. Personal effects and weapons were under lock and key, but nobody guarded the laundry room or the coatroom, and some of the staff were damned careless about their boots. When he walked out, smooth-shaven and bright-eyed, in stiff starched fatigues and a brand-new mackinaw coat, nobody questioned him. The truck driver who picked him up by the roadside didn't either and neither did the military police at any of the checkpoints. Nobody ever questioned anyone going *to* the front. It didn't make sense.

Of course, neither did an attack through mountains and forest in a snowstorm. And that was the point. When somebody in this man's army told you something was impossible, you could pretty much bet the farm it was gonna happen.

Halleck aimed to be there when it did.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

At the end of the 1965 war movie *The Battle of the Bulge*, there is a disclaimer that reads: “To encompass the whole of the heroic contributions of all the participants, places, names, and characters have been generalized and action has been synthesized in order to convey the spirit and the essence of the battle.” In writing *Sinner’s Cross*, I have taken the same approach. Though inspired by and based upon the Battle of the Hürtgen Forest (September 19, 1944–February 10, 1945), and meticulously researched to provide a maximum sense of realism, I have both “generalized” and “synthesized” the chronology and geography of that battle to convey its spirit and essence. I also refused to let my research interfere with the emotional story I wished to tell. In short, I have sacrificed historical accuracy at every point in which it conflicted with my intended narrative. I make no apologies for this. If one wants precise historical accounts of the conflict, there are superb resources available, including Charles Whiting’s very approachable books *The Battle of the Hurtgen Forest* and *The Siegfried Line* and Charles B. MacDonald’s more scholarly *The Siegfried Line Campaign*. However, in writing this novel, I was motivated more by the spirit of Stephen Crane, “who explained his rationale for writing *The Red Badge of Courage* by stating that to simply read the cold history of the Civil War was not enough: he wanted to know what it was like to *be* there.”¹ *Sinner’s Cross* was my attempt to bring the reader to an emotional and physical awareness of that battle without binding myself too tightly to the historical record. This is a story about human beings, not technology, places, or dates.

The reader may be tempted to ask why I chose the Hürtgen Forest campaign as the place to inaugurate a series of novels about the Second World War. The answer is simple: so far as I know, nobody else has done it.² In fact, the entire campaign is scarcely known to the American public. In a sense, this is utterly incredible. The campaign was

1. Quoted from Michael Shaara’s introduction to *The Killer Angels* (1974).

the longest ever fought by the United States military, and certainly one of the most arduous and least successful. Between September 1944 and February 1945, the U.S. Army suffered at least 44,000 casualties in the Hürtgen—14,000 dead and 30,000 wounded.³ The psychological damage suffered by those whose flesh remained unscarred cannot be calculated, but few if any who have been interviewed about their experiences there are able to speak without mingled feelings of bitterness and horror. That greatest of all wars was everywhere a terrible experience, but a very powerful argument can be made that nowhere was it more terrible than in that forest on the German-Belgian border, which the G.I.s called “The Green Hell” or even more bluntly, “The Death Factory.” It is my belief that the men who fell there deserve a better epitaph than the pitiful one left to them by their commander, General Eisenhower, who in his memoir *Crusade in Europe* devoted exactly fifteen words to the battle, to wit: “The Germans, aided by geography, conducted an unusually stubborn defense, but Yankee doggedness won through.”

Eisenhower’s reluctance to talk about the campaign is understandable because in many ways the entire enterprise was pointless and unjustifiable: from a strategic standpoint, the Hürtgen was almost worthless. Indeed, no really clear explanation has ever been made as to why the generals involved—Eisenhower, Bradley, Hodges, and Collins—chose to mount a major offensive through such unfavorable terrain, or why they kept up the attack long after it had become obvious to everyone involved that the real estate in question was not worth the price being paid. The few comments made or released publicly about the reasoning involved—a desire to take the Rur River Dams, for example—amount to little more than *ex post facto* justifications. Ego may have been a factor, or perhaps a misplaced sense of national pride: the appalling but all-too-human tendency to double-down on failure, to spill

2. HBO Films did release quite a good movie about the battle, *When Trumpets Fade*, in 1998.

3. Estimates of American casualties have been put as high as 55,000.

good blood after bad, may have played a large part as well. In any event, it scarcely made a difference to the ordinary American soldier sent to fight there. Like Halleck and Breese, he was far too busy trying to dodge bullets and bombs to puzzle out the arcane motivations of his commanders.

For the Germans, the Hürtgen was no less of a hell. The dire strategic situation and the manpower shortage faced by Germany in the last year of the war forced countless thousands of men into uniform who had no business being there: thus, the grotesque sight of elite paratroopers like Martin Zenger and Kurt Obus fighting side by side with old men and half-trained children, many of whom, if I may borrow a phrase from a journalist covering the battle, “were dead before they had learned the names of their sergeants.” The notorious “stomach and eye battalions,” consisting of men with bleeding ulcers, failing eyesight, flat feet, and various other medical conditions that ought to have disqualified them for military service, much less front-line combat duty, were a pitiful but common sight at that stage of the conflict. Yet, as Zenger’s example shows, even the toughest of Hitler’s soldiers suffered agonies in the Hürtgen, and those agonies were not merely physical. The realization that the war was lost, that the Fatherland had been deceived and was now being destroyed by a cabal of bloodthirsty psychopaths, that all the struggles of the last six years had been in vain, was a belated and bitter one, and for many, impossible to swallow. Some elected to fight to the death: others yielded to despair and shot themselves. Zenger’s solution was perhaps more elegant, but by no means unique.

It may be said by some that I have been too sympathetic to the Germans in this novel, that in my attempt to humanize them I have perhaps crossed the line into romanticization. I disagree. The German soldier was neither a robot nor a beast but a human being, with all the marvelous and terrifying complexity those words imply, and I treated him as such and did not surrender to the impulse, both facile and cowardly, to depict “the Krauts” as mere caricatures. Indeed, if I have an overriding purpose in this book and the sequels which will follow, it is,

at least to the extent that I am capable of the act, to lay waste once and for all to the cartoonish image of the Second World War that has endured for the last 75 years, both on film and to some extent in print. I have never felt it did any honor to those who bore the burden of destroying Hitler's war machine to depict that machine as a garbage heap, and thus the war itself as a mere taking-out of the trash. The energies Hitler summoned and controlled were terrible and required terrible effort to defeat, and it is only by depicting the war as it really was on an emotional and physical level—all of its wretchedness, all of its glory, all of its cowardice, and all of its courage—that I can do a full measure of justice to those who fell. The extent to which I have done so is for the reader to decide.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every novel is a journey, and *Sinner's Cross* a longer and more arduous one than most. I took the first tentative steps while living in a rundown apartment that sat on the corner of Market and Duke Streets in York, Pennsylvania, in 2000 or so, and applied the final polish almost twenty years later, while living in a much larger (but equally rundown) house in Los Angeles. But in reality, the road to *Sinner's Cross* began even earlier than this, when I started—as a very young boy—to ravenously devour any and every text about World War II that I could lay hands on. At some point during all that frantic late-night page turning, conducted when I ought to be doing my homework, I encountered the works of Charles Whiting, who, if was not exactly the most diligent or reputable historian under God's roof, was certainly among the most entertaining. It was Whiting, a British veteran of that war, who first introduced me to the terrible ordeal known as the Battle of the Hürtgen Forest, sparking a lifelong interest that culminated in *Sinner's Cross*. So, while I chose to dedicate the book to someone who was there—more about him in a moment—I would be utterly remiss if I failed to acknowledge the late Mr. Whiting for triggering a curiosity that will never be satisfied this side of the grave.

I have said before that although writing is a solitary process, no author ever really works alone, and I maintain this to be true. In composing this novel, I consulted innumerable books, most notably *FUBAR: Soldier Slang of World War II* by Gordon L. Rottman; *The Armed Forces of World War II* by Andrew Mollo; *The Handbook on German Military Forces*, an American War Department technical manual (TM-E 30-451) produced during the conflict; *Personal Effects of the German Soldier in World War II* by Chris Mason; back issues of *Infantry Journal* (1944–1945); as well as that vast, ever-shifting body of knowledge available on the internet, especially at places like <https://forum.axishistory.com>. My ability to evaluate the veracity of source material I attribute in large part to Dr. Kay McAdams of York

College of Pennsylvania, who, in the immortal words of Michael Ruppert, taught me to separate the ice cream from the bullshit; but it is to my parents that most of the credit belongs. They taught me not only to read but how to love reading, something every writer worth a damn must do if he is to produce a single compelling word.

I am also indebted to my editor, Michael Dell of One Nine Books, not only for sweeping away my various errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and whatnot, and for his willingness to deal with formatting issues quite beyond my understanding, but also for providing me with valuable insights back in 2011–2012 which saved *Sinner's Cross* from deteriorating into tired war-movie cliché.

Regarding the quotations that open and precede the three acts of this novel: the initial (“Some rise by sin...”) is taken from Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. “When you lose, don’t lose the lesson” is an axiom as old as Texas; the passage about “sleeping vine-clad hills” is taken from Ernst Jünger’s allegorical novel *Auf den Marmorklippen* (*On the Marble Cliffs*), published in 1939; and “Courage ought to have eyes as well as arms” is taken from H. G. Bohn. The song Zengy recalls from the Tavern am See is “Drunten im Unterland” (“Down in the Lowlands”), a traditional German favorite sung in dialect.

Lastly, I acknowledge Dr. Günter Stüttgen, of the German Army Medical Corps, who, with the permission of his commanding officer Oberst Eberhard Rösler, negotiated the Kall Bridge cease fires with the U.S. Army’s 28th Infantry Division (Pennsylvania National Guard) during the period of November 7–12, 1944, acts which saved innumerable human lives and for which he was honored, after the war, by the Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.



**SINNER'S
CROSS**

MILES WATSON