

Camp 417

Where The Dead Live

Finnean Nilsen Projects



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Camp 417

For our boys,

R.L. & T.K.—October, 2013

EPISODE 1

FIRES IN THE SKY

ONE

Doctor Keith Manning touched the butt of his cigarette to his lips, pulled hard on it, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. Savoring it. Then let it out through his nose, enjoying the feel as it rolled around him like a cloud moving around a mountain. The day bright and clear. The pale winter sun shining down eerily, like a photo taken with the shutter open too wide.

“Dad,” Peter said, “I thought you said you were cutting back.”

The old doctor grunted. “I’m ninety years old,” he said, “if I wanna smoke, I’ll damn sure smoke as much as I want.”

Behind them, the house was alive with the sounds of children playing and fighting, the low hum of conversation from the living room, and the smells of baking from the kitchen. The party in full swing. Keith ignoring it. He had stopped feeling the day was worth celebrating after the first sixty. Now, at ninety, they were a chore.

“That’s it!” a woman screeched from inside. “Out, all of you!”

The screen door burst open and a stream of children surged out. Fifteen in all, ranging from knee high to nearly full-grown. As they streamed past, each said, “Hi Grandpa.”

He nodded and laughed, patting them on their heads when he could reach. They fanned out on the lawn. The older ones heading off to chat in low voices, exchanging secrets so explosive no adult could be permitted to hear.

“It’s a fine family you built, Old Man,” Peter told him.

“I had help,” Keith said and smiled again as he heard his wife’s voice from the kitchen. He imagined her in there, sitting heavily in her favorite chair, overseeing the proceedings with the watchful eye of a boot camp sergeant.

Frankie, barely seven, thin from his latest growth spurt, ran up to them and rattled off in the machine gun speech of excited children the world over: “Grandpa, Grandpa, we’re playing *War!*” He gave the name an announcer-type emphasis. “You were in a war, weren’t you? Dad said you were in World War Two. He called it the ‘Big One.’ Did you ever kill anyone, Grandpa? Didja?”

“Your Great Grandpa was a medic,” Peter explained. “He saved people, he didn’t kill them.”

Then he rose, touching Keith’s hand as he did, and crossed around his father. Took the boy by the shoulders and guided him into the house.

“And he doesn’t like to talk about it,” he whispered to his grandson as they passed into the house. “Let’s go check on that cake.”

Keith rolled the question over in his mind, memories probing the edges of his consciousness. Fighting to be heard, to be experienced again in their full intensity. Memories of violence, the kind very few men had ever known. Violence and rage and horror so white hot—even decades later—the potency never lessened. The fear never left. The nightmare never fully awoken from.

Did you kill anyone in the war?

“No one who didn’t ask me to,” he answered, but no one was listening.

TWO

The plane’s propellers thrummed so loudly Sergeant Anthony “Big Tony” St. Vincent had to shout “Doc!” three times before the private heard him. The young medic swayed with the motion of the

aircraft as he approached. On the young side of his twenties, with fading freckles and clover-green eyes, Private Keith “Doc” Manning was a solid man, especially for his age. He had saved countless lives in the field, but it was more than that. He was honest, hard working, and never bitched about anything. Big Tony thought he would probably walk barefoot in hell without complaining, if he was ordered.

“Yeah, Sarge?” he asked.

“Have a seat, we’ve got a while to ride and I’d like some company.”

“Every order’s a good order, Big Tony,” Keith said, and sat beside him.

“Tell me about that girl of yours. Kitty, is it?”

Keith nodded. “Finest damn woman Kentucky ever made,” he said. Reached into his jacket and pulled out his latest letter. “Got a letter from her just last night. Look at her.”

Keith passed Big Tony the picture. It was a color photo taken outside, Kitty standing by a tree, smiling big enough to blind the viewer. She was beautiful enough to stop a freight train, Tony thought, but said nothing. Only nodding as he passed it back.

“Well,” he told Keith after a moment, “I haven’t gotten a letter from home in six months. Why don’t you read it to me? It’ll be like swinging by the states.”

Keith shrugged. Once they’d shared a foxhole, there wasn’t much they didn’t share.

“My Dearest Keith,” Keith began. “The night we were separated, and the time we’ve spent apart, has been the hardest I have ever had to bear. But the memory of our last night together, the thoughts of how your hands felt on my skin, the way our bodies came together before God...”

“Wait,” Tony interrupted him. “You made it with her before you left? You two aren’t married, are you?”

Keith grinned wickedly. “Come on off it, Ton’. You saw the picture, could you say no to that? I don’t care if it *is* a mortal sin; it’s just plain crazy to think I wouldn’t.”

“When we get back,” Tony told him, “I’m going to tell your mother.”

“You don’t even *know* my mother, city boy.”

“I’ll find her. It would be worth it just to see the look on her face. I hope you went and apologized to the Lord.”

“It’s the Lord’s damn fault,” Keith said, “making something as fine as that and saying I can’t touch until we’re married. Besides, we *will* be shortly.”

He reached back into his pocket and came out with a piece of canvas wadded into a ball. Unfolded it and showed Tony a diamond ring.

“Got it in London before the jump to Italy,” he explained. “Jeweler said ‘diamonds are forever.’”

“Christ, look at the size of it. How much did you pay for that thing?”

“A hundred dollars.”

“A *hundred* dollars? It had better be forever, for that price. Where’d you get a hundred dollars?”

“I’ve been saving,” Keith explained. “I couldn’t put anything less on Kitty’s finger.”

“You better shove that thing up your ass or something,” Tony told him. “If the boys know you’re walking around with something like that, you’re liable to get shot from behind.”

They laughed together, and Keith gingerly wrapped it back up in canvas and stowed it in his jacket. Took the letter back up and started to continue.

He stopped when the first shells exploded.

THREE

Medical General Klaus Ebersbach sat up in bed as the guns roared to life. Leaned over and picked up his telephone. Told the operator to connect him with Civil Air Defense and waited for her to make the proper connections. When the phone was answered, he said,

“What are you shooting at? There shouldn’t be any Allied planes for a hundred miles.”

“I’m sorry, General, but they’re here. Perhaps they’ve gotten lost.”

Klaus curled his hawkish features into a scowl. “Excuse me?” he snapped.

The man made a noise like a mouse, and then recovered with: *“With respect, General, Sir.”*

“Are they bombers?”

“There are only twenty of them, Sir. And if they’re bombers, they haven’t dropped their loads yet.”

“Where did they come from?”

“The south, perhaps Italy.”

Klaus hung up and got out of bed. Crossed the room, took his robe and put it on, cinching the belt tightly around his waist. He went out, down the hall, turned, and went down the stairs, through the foyer and outside. He stopped and looked up, squinting as the shells exploded hundreds of feet up.

He could see them silhouetted with each blast. Two of them, specifically. Others were off in the distance. Ten sets of two. He thought he saw white stars painted to the wings. Big bastards. Bombers or troop transports. Possibly paratroopers, though he had never been a part of that portion of the military and the Americans had barely used them since D-Day. But what were they doing here?

Did the United States know about his experiments? Did they know about his weapon?

“Impossible,” he said to no one.

He thought a moment as the explosions continued in the air above him. Blast after blast, each one illuminating the world around him in odd flickers and moving shadows.

“The supply lines,” he said, and nodded. Went back into his house, up the stairs to his bedroom, and picked up the phone again. The operator asked how she could help him. He said, “Connect me with the Eagle’s Nest immediately. I’d like to schedule a meeting with the Führer.”

FOUR

Hans Schmitt watched the shells exploding from his window, the curtains held in his right hand. He could see the planes up there, weaving through the onslaught. He wondered idly how anything could survive the blasts taking place all around it. His wife came up beside him.

“Who are they?” she asked. Young, but still a bit plump from their recent first child, she had curly blonde hair and a fair complexion. Hans loved her completely, and she him. That was why she hated his stance in the war.

“Americans,” he told her. “Probably coming to sabotage the supply lines, make trouble for the Nazis.”

“I suppose that means you’ll be leaving,” she said somberly. “For how long this time?”

“I have no idea.”

He turned to her and held her close, their child sleeping in the bedroom. Someday, he thought, when the war was over and the world was free of Nazis, he would find them a house where Agnes could have her own room. A house where they could fit a large family. He had always wanted children. Many, many children.

“But I’ll be back,” he promised, and wiped a tear from her cheek. “As soon as I can. As soon as I’ve found them, I’ll bring them back. And we’ll be safe. All of us. We’ll be free.”

FIVE

Lieutenant Nathaniel Gingrich grabbed the exposed strut on the inside of the plane as it shuddered from another near hit, shrapnel raking

the sides and punching holes. Wind roared in through the ruptures.

Hundreds of feet below them, the ground was dark and cold. He could see a few dots of light as they passed over houses, but it was difficult to see many with the explosions all around them.

“How far out?” his captain asked the pilot. Captain Weston was in his mid-thirties and built like an ox. He was a fine, capable paratrooper officer. A drunk when he could be, a brawler always. The men respected him with an air bordering on cultlike. Nathaniel had never thought he was all that impressive.

“Tough to say,” the pilot shouted back. “We’ve been moving all over the place trying to keep this bird in the air. Navigator’ll need a bit to figure the right course. Obviously, I don’t have time to confer with him when I’m flying all over hell, trying to keep us alive.”

Weston nodded, peering out of the windshield, his massive body just off from Nate’s. “Keep us on the road,” he told the pilot.

Nate just watched out the door. Across from him a shell exploded and the other plane burst into flames.

SIX

Big Tony was knocked three feet to the side from the impact, and Doc Manning was thrown, sprawling on the floor. Tony hauled him up and shouted, “Let’s go, everybody out!”

He pushed Keith to the door, hooked the carbineer to the latch, and pushed him out. The line pulled the chute and Anthony pushed the next man up. The jump master came out and looked around, bleary eyed. Tony ignored him and goaded the trooper in front of him on. The man latched on and jumped out. The next repeated the motion. Anthony touched their backs as they passed. Urging them on.

“Out,” he called after each. “Out. Out. Out. Out.”

Then he snatched the Jump Master and shouted, “Get a goddamned chute on and get out!” in his face. Spun him and sent him back into the cockpit to—hopefully—communicate the message to the pilot, copilot, and navigator.

Turned.

There were two men who hadn’t gotten up. Tony crossed the space and pushed one to the side: both dead. His lieutenant’s face was a mass of shattered bone and tissue. A misshapen, fragmented shadow of its former self. Like Picasso had repainted it on. The other man, their second medic, had taken shrapnel to his back. Probably the spine or heart, Tony guessed, because he hadn’t bled much at all.

Tony left them, tracked back through the plane, snatched his carbineer to the latch, and jumped.

SEVEN

“They’re jumping,” Gingrich shouted to Captain Weston.

The captain turned and walked to the door. Looked out, frowning.

“Damn it,” he said. “We’re gonna be scattered all over hell. And not even remotely where we should be.”

He went back to the pilot. “Is there any way we can bank around to drop back there?” he asked.

“Is there any way you can shit golden eggs?”

“Possibly,” Weston told him, “if I was ordered to.”

“No fucking way.”

“Fine.” He turned to Nate. “Latch up, boy, it’s time for us to go.”

Nate snapped his carbineer to the hook. Waited. His training all he knew. His training to wait for the green light. For the jump master to give him the go-ahead. For...

He looked over his shoulder at the captain.

Ready for orders.

Captain Weston smiled at him. And then the plane exploded.

EIGHT

The sun came over the horizon lazily, as if tired from the past evening's excitement. Hazy yellow with a dark blotched core, it slowly dragged itself free of the thickly forested mountains to the east and shone down on the parched spring morning.

Keith Manning sat huddled with Private Carlos Rodriguez and Mike Dickerson, "Jesus" and "Dallas" respectively. Dallas, big and blocky as a football player, was the heavy weapons specialist of this particular squad. On his back was the murderous Browning M2 machine gun, the only heavy weapon for the squad. Save for a single bazooka carried by Rodney "Hot Rod" Parks, who stood alone, leaning stoically against a tree, smoking a cigarette.

The platoon—originally consisting of twenty-two men, now down to twenty—was split into four squads, each with a special weapons man—bazooka and dynamite—a heavy weapons expert—Browning M2—and a sniper. There was only one medic for the platoon after the loss of Cookson in the plane. Four Thompson's—one to each squad—rounded out the firepower, even if every man—including Doc Manning—had an M1 Garand. The thinking was: He may be a medic, but he was a rifleman first.

But Keith had never fired a shot in combat. And he never planned to, either.

Much smaller than the average platoon, both of the twenty-two man platoons had been meant to serve under Captain Weston, one of the most seasoned behind-the-lines leaders available. He had recommended smaller, lighter, extremely experienced platoons. He had personally said

before the launch: “There’s nothing fiercer than a twenty-two man platoon, because you’ve already cleared out the riff-raff.”

And so here they were, Manning thought, twenty-two already down to twenty.

“Report,” Big Tony told Sam “Ski” Kowalski. Tall and thin in a muscular way, Kowalski was the only Jew in the platoon. He was also a hot head and a scrapper when it came to a fight. The only thing he enjoyed more than kicking someone’s ass was the Torah. And he loved to wear his Star of David out, loose against his chest on a silver chain, just to piss off the Nazis.

“Two patrols to the north, Big Tony,” he said. “They’ve picked the plane apart to nothing. Fanned out and moving through in a wave two ranks deep, trying to flush us out.”

“How far?”

Ski shrugged. “A mile, no more. But they’re moving slow, trying to track us. It’ll take them the better part of an hour to get here.”

“Fuck,” Tony said. He rarely used the word. This time he thought it was warranted. “What about the second crash?”

“There can’t be any survivors from the second plane, Sarge. We all saw it explode while we were coming down.”

“We’re twenty men in ... God knows where, probably the eastern tip of Germany or western Austria. If even a single man survived that crash, we’ll need him. Now, I know we’re all a bit disoriented, but we were flying north.”

“Big Tony,” Keith called, “are you sure it was straight north?”

“We were turning all over the place trying to get away from the flak,” Rodney agreed. “How do we know we were still heading north when we went out?”

“Anyone stop to check their compass?” Dallas asked.

“Kind of,” the head of second squad offered. His name was Adam Smith. Tall, lean, Cajun bred and whiskey fed, he was the rock that sheltered second squad in the hard times and grounded them in the

good. He was also seventeen and everyone knew it. No one ever thought to tell their superiors. “Judging by the moon when we went out, I’d say we were heading northeast at the time of the jump.”

“Good,” Tony told him. “And they were paralleling us, more or less. Which would put the crash in that direction.” He pointed.

“If they didn’t turn again,” Keith told him.

“We saw the plane explode,” Tony reminded them. “Not more than a mile or so away. So, it should be about two to five miles northeast.”

Sergeant St. Vincent checked his bags and turned back to his men. They were doing the same. Getting ready to move.

“You all need to stay sharp,” he said. “We’re in the bad-guy’s bedroom and we’re half naked with his daughter. Keep weapons ready and move the way we know to move. We’re going to find the survivors or we’re going to find bodies, but we’re going to find something. And then we’re going to make those sausage-eating bastards pay. Got it?”

“What’s wrong with sausage?” someone called from the ranks. “I love sausage.”

NINE

Lieutenant Nathaniel Gingrich was scared as hell. He had come down about six hundred yards from the crash. The plane had just crumpled up like torched paper. The only thing that saved him was the lurch of the impact and the fact that he had already connected his chute’s cord with the hook. He had been blown backward and the force had pulled the line and his parachute had deployed.

To his knowledge, no one else had been so lucky.

He hadn’t checked on them, though, and didn’t plan on it. If anyone had survived, he was sure he would have heard the shots. It had only taken about fifteen minutes for the Germans to get there.

He held his M1 Garand in his shaky hands, and watched the countryside for any signs of patrols. He knew they had to be out there. Looking for him. There was no question. Unless they judged the crash as a total loss of life. Did they know how many soldiers made up a platoon? he wondered. Probably. The military was the military, and they'd been fighting each other long enough. If there was one less body than there should have been, they'd notice. And there would be, because *asshole* Weston liked his companies small and his platoons smaller. They would notice, and they would be out looking for survivors.

Looking for Gingrich.

And they'd find him, eventually.

TEN

Hans Schmitt watched them move. They were very professional. He had expected nothing less. The Americans—despite being a volunteer army—were incredibly professional. The Germans would mock them as cowboys in green, but when it came to the business of warfare, the Americans were far more interested in victory than pomp and ceremony.

The same could not be said for the Nazis.

Hans clicked his tongue twice. The leader—three back from the front—stopped and turned. Cocked his head left, and then right. He was a massive man. Over six feet tall. Shoulders as broad as a barn. He had dark olive skin and jet black hair. Looked to be Italian, but in the cardstock uniform of a GI. The other thing Hans knew about the Americans was they came in all shades and sizes. He respected that. Again, the same could not be said for the Nazis.

“Friendly,” Hans called in heavily accented English, “coming out.”

The leader nodded, but his men's rifles never wavered. Hans stepped out

of the tree line, his hands raised, Sten submachine gun hanging by its strap.

The leader nodded again. "You must be Spiegelman," he said.

"Spiegelman?" Hans asked. "Spiegelman was hanged three weeks ago. And he operated over the border."

"What border?"

"The *German* border," Hans explained. "You're in Austria."

"I'll be damned. The birthplace of Adolph Hitler."

"Wrong," Hans corrected. "The birth *nation* of Adolph Hitler. But it was also the birth nation of Mozart, Sigmund Freud, and Rainer. The *birthplace* of Adolph Hitler has been destroyed. He let his artillery Generals use it as target practice."

"He's a sick fuck," one of the soldiers called. Very big. Hans hadn't seen many men that big. He imagined he must be from Texas. He had heard somewhere that Texans were practically farm animals.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Dallas."

Spot on, Hans thought.

"Then who are you?" the leader asked.

"My name is Hans Schmitt. I'm the local leader of the resistance."

"Sergeant Anthony St. Vincent," the man said, and reached out a hand. Hans took it and they shook.

"Very glad to meet you."

"If we're still in Austria, our mission is DOA," Tony told him.

"Maybe not." Hans looked at the small band of heavily armed Americans lined up and said, "You may still end the war."

ELEVEN

The Great Assanti watched the patrol, not knowing if they were looking for him again or someone new. Behind him, his son

whimpered from the cold. He shushed the child and returned his attention to the Nazis. It had been three years since his traveling circus was arrested. He and Morova had been the only two to get away. The local warlord had been searching for them ever since. But the Great Assanti was far craftier than his hunters, and they had survived outside of civilization.

For now.

Ruggedly handsome, body corded with muscle, he resembled a Rottweiler in build and personality. And he missed his wife terribly. Every time he looked in his son's eyes he saw her, and every time he saw her, he wanted to tear the head off of every German he could find.

One by one.

Until they led him back to her, or to Hitler.

He preferred the former, but would have had a hell of a lot of fun with the latter.

"They are past us," he told Morova.

"What are they looking for?" the boy asked. Short and thin from lack of nutrition, his face smudged with dirt as camouflage, he still looked at his father with a gaze of wide-eyed amazement. That a man so powerful even existed seemed to boggle his mind. It was the look every father cherishes, because it's so fleeting with age.

"I do not know." Assanti watched as the German soldiers grew smaller in the distance. Then his steel-eyed glare flicked to where they had come from. Something off in the distance must have drawn them.

Assanti and Morova had heard the blasts throughout the night, and Assanti had seen the fires in the sky, but they had been huddled in a barn, the local farmer friendly to their plight, and hadn't seen the cause of the fighting. Now, Assanti squinted at the woods the Nazis had emerged from, and wondered.

"Stay here," he told his son, "I am going to find out."

TWELVE

Private Keith Manning stopped when the sergeant raised his hand. The rest of the column did the same. Then, Tony St. Vincent motioned to the side of the road and the men all jumped into the brush, disappearing like a mirage.

Keith watched the road from inside the hedge. The bush had thorns and it tore at his shoulders, but the thick GI uniform tried its best to stop the points. It was a valiant if worthless effort. Keith betted he was bleeding from a thousand tiny pricks. He couldn't remember if Austria had poisonous shrubs. Mostly because he had never planned on going to Austria.

Engines droned to the west, and then a line of trucks rumbled past—ten in all, each brimming with soldiers. They drove on, unaware of the platoon of GI's, turned the corner, and disappeared from sight.

Keith tore himself free of the hedge and brushed off his uniform as the men assembled back in the road.

"Doc," Big Tony called. Keith hustled up next to him. "Take Mr. Schmitt up to the next bend and see what we can expect. I don't want to walk into an army of Panzers."

"You got it," Keith said, and nodded to the Austrian. The man followed and Keith double-timed it up the road. Staying close to the hedge. M1 ready. They came to the bend and peered around it. The road was empty for as far as Keith could see.

"What's down that road?" he asked Hans.

"A lot," Hans explained. "It can lead to town, or to the camp."

"Camp?"

"There's a camp just outside of the town where I live. Strange and horrible things have been said about it."

"Rumors?"

“I’ve seen it. After we find your friends, I want you to take a look.”

“You’ve been there?”

A shadow passed over Hans’ face. He didn’t reply, and Keith didn’t need him to. He’d been there. And whatever he saw was something he regretted.

“Fine. How often do trucks go through town?”

“Not often. The guards for the camp have taken over all the comfortable housing. The town now exists just to service the Nazis. If they need supplies, we might see a truck. But not often.”

“How many guards are there at the camp?”

Hans shrugged. “Hundreds.”

Keith nodded. “Okay,” he said, “so this road is out. Is there another way to find the plane?”

“If we turned here,” Hans said, and pointed to a field surrounded by trees, “we can go around it. It’ll be slower, but we’re less likely to run into a patrol.”

Keith nodded again. “I like that idea better,” he told Hans, and the two men turned and ran back.

THIRTEEN

Lieutenant Gingrich was starting to feel better, but also a bit lonely. The patrol was gone, and with them the fear of capture. But now he was left with the brutal knowledge that he was completely alone in a hostile nation, with a few hundred rounds and rations for a week.

He was fucked, in other words.

So he just sat there. Motionless. Thinking. What the hell *had* he been thinking? He didn’t give a damn what the Nazis did with their spare time. It was the Japanese that had pissed him off. And even then it had been more of a regional sentiment than a personal one. Being from Hawaii, everyone felt like the Japanese had personally insulted them.

They had attacked *Hawaii*, if only as a means of hurting America. And everyone had been doing it; it was all his family had been talking about. No one was going anywhere if they hadn't at least *tried* joining up. Again, still, Gingrich could have had his pick of a thousand jobs with less risk, but he had chosen to be a damned soldier. What a fucking *idiot*, he thought.

He wanted to move up, make a name for himself. That was all. Nothing big. Nothing groundbreaking. He wanted to get away from his old man, the family name, the family business. He wanted out. But he didn't want to end up *here*.

Another thought struck him: There was something very cold and very sharp touching his throat. And someone was speaking gibberish in his right ear.

"I'm sorry," Nate lied, "I don't speak German."

"That's good," the man said, though Nate thought it could have been "Das gute," for the accent. The next statement confirmed it had been in English: "I would have killed you, if you had."

The knife was slowly taken away and Nate let his breath out in a whoosh. Spun around and found a dirty man in his mid-thirties. Handsome despite the grime and imposing in physique, he eyed Gingrich skeptically.

"American?" he asked.

Gingrich nodded. "How'd you guess?"

"Americans and Brits," he said, shook his head and wagged a finger, "not look the same."

"Okay. Can I ask who you are?"

"I am the *Great Assanti!*"

Nate stared at him. Blinked twice. Said, "Is that a stage name?"

"It is *my* name," Assanti told him coldly.

"The 'Great' part, too?"

"I do not impress you?" he asked. "I do not strike you as Great?"

"I didn't mean to insult you...."

“No,” Assanti stopped him with another finger wag. “*This*, is insult. I, the Great Assanti, am the greatest circus performer of *all* time. I can stack chairs twice as high as your head and balance on them just as you stand on the ground. I can juggle *seven flaming* swords. I can....”

“I get it.”

“I can wrestle a *bear*. I can walk upon a wire from one side of the street to the other. I can jump across *rivers*....”

“No, I got it. It’s fine. I believe you.”

“I could crush your head between these hands.” He showed them to Nate, and then imitated the act in all its intensity. Then he leveled his brutal gaze on the American and asked, “Is that not *Great*?”

“Incredible,” Nate assured him. “I just have one thing I’d like to tell you.”

“And *what* is *that*?”

“There’s someone behind you.”

Assanti spun, but too late. Sergeant Anthony St. Vincent hit him between the eyes with the butt of his rifle. For all his hype, the Great Assanti crumpled like a folded rug.

FOURTEEN

“I never met a circus performer before,” Tony said. “I never imagined they would be that arrogant.”

“My God,” Hans called from behind him. “You’ve killed the Great Assanti!”

Nathaniel Gingrich groaned. “Not you, too!”

“You know this peckerwood?” Dallas asked.

“Three years ago his family was crossing through the countryside. They had a traveling circus. They didn’t even know there was a war on. The Nazis arrested everyone, all thirty of them. Only Assanti and his son made it out.”

“Where are the ones they arrested?”

“They’re Gypsies,” Hans told them.

“And?”

“They were shipped away to a camp, I assume.”

“The camp outside of town?” Keith asked.

Hans looked at them like he had never considered the possibility. Like it had just now struck him. Probably, Tony thought, because it did. Hans opened his mouth to say something and then shut it. Finally, he said, “We and the other resistance members have been sheltering them when we can.”

“Okay,” Tony said, nodded. “Well, we’re not taking on civilians, so he can just stay where he is. He’ll sleep it off and be right as rain by morning.”

“What about his son?” Hans asked.

“What about him?”

“He’s eight years old. He won’t survive the night without his father.”

Tony sighed. “We’ve wasted enough time already. How long could it take us to find this kid? And even if we do, what are we supposed to do with him? We’re twenty men in a hostile country.”

No one said anything.

“Lieutenant Gingrich,” Tony called.

Gingrich started at the mention of his name. He looked at the big sergeant and said, “Sir?”

“Lieutenant Kaplan was killed before the jump. I assume Captain Weston didn’t make it out of the plane?”

Nate shook his head.

“Then you’re the highest ranking Officer here, which means you’re in charge, effective immediately. What are your orders, Sir?”

Gingrich passed a glance from one man to the other as they stood, waiting for him to speak. He was lost for a moment, and then recovered with: “We’re here to sabotage supply lines, not babysit. The kid will survive or not, but the war goes on.”

Tony nodded. Spoken like a true soldier, he thought. But there was one problem: “We won’t be sabotaging any supply lines. We’re in Austria.”

He let that register a moment. Nate scowled. “How did *that* happen?” he asked.

“We were flying over on our way into Germany,” Sam Kowalski explained. “We got shot down, Sir.”

“I know that,” Nate snapped. Shook his head. “Alright, so what do we do now? We’re not walking to Germany.”

“The local resistance has a personal affinity for a camp not far from here,” Tony said. “They think there might be something there extremely important to the war effort, and they’d like us to check it out.”

Gingrich nodded but remained silent a moment. Then he said, “Fine. If this guy can wrestle a bear and jump over a river, we might find a use for him. We’ll drag him along until he wakes up, try and find his kid. Mr....?” he looked at Hans.

“Schmitt,” Hans supplied. “Hans Schmitt.”

“Fine,” Nate said again, “how far off would Mr. Assanti’s kid be?”

“Not far. More than a few hundred yards and Assanti couldn’t protect him. I’m honestly surprised he left him at all.”

“Good. Let’s find the little shit and get on with this.”

FIFTEEN

General Alfred A. Coel sat at his desk, pouring over information as it streamed in. Papers stacked everywhere. A giant map covering the table in the center of the room. Metal statues were slid this way and that by runners with long poles, to show the changing positions and troop movements. It reminded Coel of a giant chessboard, with each piece being repositioned for the next move. He thought about that, and then he thought about what a brilliant game chess really was, and how much he wished he had played it more.

“General, Sir,” a Major called.

“What is it?”

“General Patton would like a report as soon as possible.”

“Tell him it will be on his desk before he hangs up.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Then to another Officer, “Send him the same one I sent yesterday, see if he notices.”

The Officer smiled and then disappeared into the mass of working soldiers.

General Coel studied the paper in front of him. Information came and went so quickly that he rarely slept anymore. At any given moment the entire war could be decided. He felt certain it would be decided in the Ally’s favor, but he didn’t feel like taking any fucking chances.

A runner used his pole to slide a statue of a Nazi saluting three inches to the left. Coel looked up from the paper and cocked his head to the side. “Private,” he said.

“Sir?”

“Explain that.” Coel pointed at the Nazi statue.

“Reports are that the Hundred Seventeenth was moved back, closer to the border.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea, Sir.”

“I wasn’t asking you,” Coel told him. Got up and came around his desk. Leaned against the table and eyed the statue like it was a cockroach attacking his dinner plate. “I was asking myself. Why would they pull them back? Those were supposed to be the reinforcements for the Seventy-Fifth Regiment.”

He glared at the map, as if waiting for it to answer. His mind running through possibilities. There was no reason to pull them back now. The Russians weren’t a threat there, and Coel’s men had been pressing the enemy on the American’s side. They were literally making their own reinforcements useless. Taking them out without any tactical explanation.

“What’s your game?” he asked Hitler.

Hitler didn't respond.

The Officer came back in and said, "He noticed, Sir."

SIXTEEN

Morova watched the trucks pass. Twelve of them, he counted. Each filled with soldiers talking loudly. He couldn't catch what they were saying as they rolled past, but they seemed to be excited about something.

Once they were out of sight, he turned his attention back to the field his father had crossed. Beyond it a line of trees, and beyond that—Morova knew—another field. But on this viewing—unlike the previous—the field wasn't empty. There was a line of men in it. He counted them quickly: twenty-one, plus one that a massive man was carrying on his back. He was having a hard time of it, too. Whoever he was carrying wasn't light.

Morova watched them, his stomach knotting. He had never been without his father this long. Not in all his life. Certainly not in the last three years. He felt alone, helpless. His young eyes searched around, scanning left and then right. His father must be close, must be watching, he would never leave Morova alone. The boy was sure of that.

He trained his steady gaze back on the men crossing the field. There was something wrong with them. They weren't dressed like any of the soldiers he had ever seen. And they moved differently. They had a loose sort of walk. Like a regular person, not like a soldier.

He studied them. They looked wrong. Not in any way uniform. Some were tall, some short. Their skin tones ran through every stage of Caucasian. And when they spoke, each had their own accent. Like they were all from different worlds, brought together for a single war. Morova didn't like it, because he couldn't place them. Every group he had ever

seen could be placed into their individual spot. The Germans with their wooden soles, marching in perfect unison. The Gypsies he had known, all looking similar, though speaking differently from changing regions. But the regions were vast, the movements long. Never had he seen such diversity in a single grouping of men.

He watched and he listened, and then he caught sight of the man draped across the monster's back, and he cried out.

It was his father: the Great Assanti.

SEVENTEEN

Private Keith Manning heard a child's voice scream, "Papa!" just as a small black form emerged from the tree line on the other side of the field at a dead run. Arms flailing. Head jerking from side to side as he pushed his small body. He crossed the space in seconds and closed in on his father, hanging by his arms across Big Tony's back. The child threw himself at Tony, and began beating his chest. St. Vincent accepted the assault without a word, and then as the kid tired himself, said, "You must be the Great Assanti's boy."

The child backed away slowly.

"Don't worry," Hans called. "They're Americans. They are here to help."

"What happened to Papa?"

"Just a misunderstanding."

The boy looked puzzled, and Hans rattled off an explanation in German. Finally, he nodded, and Hans said, "These are good men. Come, we're going to take you someplace safe."

The boy followed. Keith wondered if the Nazis would have made a similar case had they been the ones dragging a boy's father away. Probably, he conceded. The only positive was that they actually *were* good men and had no intension of hurting anyone who didn't have it coming.

"What's your name, son?" Keith asked him.

“Morova,” the boy answered.

“Not the Great Morova?”

The boy shook his head somberly.

“Some day, then,” Keith told him and smiled.

EIGHTEEN

Samantha Schmitt watched as the sun dipped below the mountains in the west. Hans had been gone all of a day and she missed him already. She was always lonesome when he was gone, and the strain of never knowing if he would return sometimes felt like too much to bear.

Having Agnes hadn't relieved the void; it only enhanced it. Enhanced, too, was the knowledge that if he was ever caught, they would punish Samantha and Agnes for his crimes. Not that that mattered to Samantha—there would be no point in living without Hans.

She heard something like an explosion far off to the south but ignored it. Obviously, the war was moving nearer to them, the planes from the past night only the first of what was to come. How much longer their little Austrian village could go without tasting the violence the rest of the world was engulfed in, she had no idea.

She scoffed at her own thought: as if they hadn't seen violence. With the Nazis the threat was always there. Like a psychotic, it was only a matter of time until the disease of hate and evil engulfed them completely. They were already desperate; it would only get worse as time went on. The closer the Americans and Russians got, the more insane every Nazi would become.

They would be conscripting every male old enough to hold a gun soon, Samantha knew, and then Hans would be lost to her forever. She held no hope that he would fight for the Nazis. Never. He would be shot dead for treason before it was even an option. Samantha would be

arrested, probably raped, and sent to a camp. Where she would kill herself as soon as possible. Agnes would be taken and given to a good Nazi family.

Samantha thought maybe, just maybe, she would have time to spare her daughter that fate and kill her before the bastards took her. But she didn't know. She could never know until it happened, and she didn't want to know early. When her world ended—no matter how it happened—it would be coming far too soon.

NINETEEN

“What was that?” Dallas Dickerson asked as an explosion tore through the night.

“Somebody's playing with firecrackers,” Rodney Parks told him.

“That was bigger than a firecracker,” Sergeant St. Vincent said. “More like dynamite. Is there a quarry near here?”

Hans shook his head. “The only thing near here is the camp,” he said, “that's why the camp's here.”

St. Vincent nodded. “Where?”

“North, about ten miles.”

“The blast was from the south,” Dallas said to no one—every soldier knew where it had come from.

“We'll just have to ignore the explosion and concentrate on the camp,” Lieutenant Gingrich said. “Ten miles will take us most of the night, if we stay sharp and move cautious.”

“Which we'll have to with trucks full of Jerries driving around.”

What Hans had promised wouldn't happen often was happening extremely often. Trucks full of soldiers rumbling past at least every hour. No one knew if they were patrols or not, but they all assumed they must be. Having a platoon of Americans running around wasn't

something the Germans took lightly.

“Fine,” Gingrich said. “We’ll stay in the woods. Move slow and steady, I want to be at that camp about sunrise. The guards’ll be sleepy and not paying much attention, and we can get a good look. Figure it out from there. Mr. Schmitt...”

“Call me Hans.”

“Don’t interrupt me again,” Gingrich told him. “Hans, you lead the way. I want two columns running single file, about fifty yards from one another. Sergeant St. Vincent and first platoon will go left. I’ll take second platoon...”

“What second platoon?” St. Vincent asked.

Gingrich stopped. He had only ever been in control of a company during drills. Protocol was to have three platoons. In training, he had run through drills with the two platoons in case of an emergency. When he had been selected to be under Captain Weston, he had been thankful for the extra drilling with just two. But it had always been intended to be *at least* two platoons—never a single one.

“I’m splitting first platoon in half,” he said after a moment. “Two squads each. Doc Manning will have to float between the two if we see any action.”

“Understood.”

“These are your men, sergeant, you know them better than I do, so pick which squads you want and I’ll take the others.”

“Take Dallas and Smith, Doc can stay with Dallas’ squad unless we need him.”

“You’ll be running a little light,” Gingrich told him. “You’ll have ten men total with you included, I’ll have twelve. And you’ve got dead weight.” He pointed at the Gypsy, still out cold.

“I can handle it, Sir,” St. Vincent assured him.

“When we get back, I’ll recommend you for a battlefield commission.”

“That recommendation has already been made and turned down.”

Big Tony put a hand on Gingrich’s small shoulder. “The men are in your hands, Sir.”

Gingrich nodded. "Then let's get a move on."

St. Vincent nodded in turn and started to position his men.

"And sergeant," Gingrich called. Big Tony turned to him. "I'd like to know the moment the Great Whatever wakes up."

TWENTY

Adolph Hitler glared across the desk at Medical General Klaus Ebersbach. "Everything is in order," Klaus assured him.

"It had better be," Hitler said in his clipped way. "I am taking a substantial risk by diverting that regiment."

"It will be worth it, my Führer. You will be thoroughly impressed."

"And what if it is *too* successful? What if you cannot contain it?"

"The entire Hundred Seventeenth is being inoculated as we speak. They will contain the outbreak, and you will have your proof of the power of the God of genetics. The war ends this very night. And not just the war. All wars. After tonight, after I have awed you with this new power, we will unleash it upon the world. And the true Arians will take their rightful place as the owners of earth."

Hitler shifted, cocked his head, and said, "Are you running the war effort now?"

"My Führer, of course not. Just the excitement of the moment."

"Try to contain it."

"Yes, my Führer."

Hitler stared at him a moment, then finally nodded and said, "Then it is done. I expect to be briefed in the morning."

"Yes, my Führer," Klaus said, and rose from the chair. Crossed the room, where the door was opened for him.

Hitler stopped him with, "Medical General, one more question."

"Sir?"

“How many Americans did you say were around this camp?”

“I believe around twenty, my Führer.”

“And how long do you expect them to last?”

“Not long,” Klaus told him, and smiled. “Not long at all.”

TWENTY-ONE

Something was wrong. Samantha could feel it. It was far too quiet. On a normal day, the town's people hustled and bustled around, going about their lives. At night they were completely replaced by Nazis. The guards from the camp would descend on their little village to drink and chase the girls. Boast about atrocities, talk what politics was allowed, and catch up on news from the front.

But tonight: empty. Desolate. Not a person in sight. No trucks moving. No trucks at all, she realized. She hadn't heard a vehicle in hours. Not since the blast off to the south.

“Strange,” she said of the empty street.

Perhaps, she thought, they had been sent to the front. Or, maybe, they had fled. That would mean either the Russians were coming from one direction or the Americans from the other. Either way, it would be like heaven descending to earth, she told herself.

Anything was better than the Nazis, she thought. Absolutely *anything*.

TWENTY-TWO

The Great Assanti groaned and Big Tony dropped him in a heap on the ground.

“I *kill* you,” Assanti muttered.

“Breeze,” St. Vincent called to the nearest private. “Go tell the lieutenant our friend’s awake.”

The private nodded and took off.

“I don’t suggest you threaten to kill me or my men,” St. Vincent told Assanti. “I told your boy I wouldn’t hurt you, but that doesn’t mean I won’t defend myself.”

“You are cheap punching oaf,” Assanti told Big Tony. “When I fight, I fight *fair*.”

“You’re a Gypsy,” Big Tony reminded him. “When I think of fair fighters, Gypsies don’t usually come to mind.”

The Great Assanti laughed. “If I stab,” he said, “I stab in the side, not the back.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.” Big Tony started to say something else, but stopped when he heard someone scream.

TWENTY-THREE

Jerry Breeze had always wanted to be a soldier. Always. His father had fought in World War I. Or what they originally called the War to End All Wars. Jerry wanted to know how they thought that title was working out.

But between that war and this one, being a soldier hadn’t been a great career choice. Not that there had been a lot of good ones. He—like most everyone else—had decided the soup line was the best possible line to prosperity, and had stayed in one for the majority of the past decade.

And then: Pearl Harbor. If Jerry was going to be completely honest, Pearl Harbor was probably the best thing that had ever happened to him. He had marched right down and enlisted. Hadn’t even brought a duffel bag.

Had said, “I’m ready when you are.”

And off he went. All around America, training. What did he want to

specialize in? they asked. He said he wanted to be a paratrooper. Why? It paid fifty more bucks a month.

Now, years later, he had seen most of the world. Squandered every penny he had made—including the extra fifties—and had done it all as a soldier. Carrying a gun. The rush of battle coursing through his veins. When all this was over, he told himself often, he'd probably enlist with some other army.

There was always a war going on somewhere.

But for now he was in Austria, which was as good a place as any, running to give Lieutenant Gingrich—whom he had never really liked—news about a strange Gypsy who had finally woken up. Not a bad assignment, either. But....

He stopped cold. He had heard something.

There it was again. Something moving through the woods. It didn't sound like an animal. Human, but strange. Not like they were moving with steady strides. Not even the long, slow ones of a soldier stalking. Rather short, shuffling steps.

Guards for the camp? he wondered. Possibly. They had been walking most of the night. The sun would be up in under an hour. They were probably within two miles of the camp. Not far from here he guessed it would open up and there would be a field that the camp would be smack dab in the middle of. Hans had said it was big. Very, very big.

Whoever was up ahead was moving closer. It certainly wasn't the lieutenant's column. The feet shuffling. Jerry squinted in the low light.

Then he saw it: a person. They were wearing a striped prison uniform. Jerry couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman in the gloom.

"Psst," Jerry called as quietly as he could. "Over here."

The prisoner seemed to hear him. It started moving faster. Coming toward him. It was a man, he realized. Bald. Extremely thin. He was moving faster now, picking up speed. Running.

"Hey," Jerry said, "slow up, Pal. It's okay, we're the good guys."

But the man didn't slow down. He ran faster. Weaving between the

trees. Jerry was frozen. He knew he couldn't shoot, and didn't know why he was so afraid of this frail old man.

The man closed the final ten feet in a flash, bursting around a tree and tackling Jerry to the ground. Twigs snapping and branches digging into his back. The man was on top of Jerry. Brought his head back, teeth bared, and then snapped it forward, locking onto the meat between Jerry's shoulder and neck.

Jerry screamed as blood gushed out. He tried to kick the crazed prisoner off but the jaw was clamped down like a vice. Gnawing. The jaw moving up and down almost imperceptibly. Chewing. Digging deeper into his flesh. Blood pouring out of the wound. Running down his shoulder. Saturating his uniform. Flowing around the dried leaves and branches and needles.

In all the horror Jerry had seen of war, this was the worst. It was too much. His mind locked up. It wouldn't process anymore. No options leaped from it. It just sat there, floating in its little puddle inside his skull. Moments passed.

Then it was like he woke up out of a dream, and he realized something. Got his hand beside him, took his Colt 1911 out, and shot the prisoner in the side of the head.

TWENTY-FOUR

Lieutenant Gingrich heard the scream and stopped the column. The sound punctuated by forty-five seconds of silence. The men of the two-squad platoon passed a look along the line. Hans and Gingrich locked eyes a moment. Then the sound of a pistol being fired echoed through the forest.

Gingrich pointed in the direction of the source and nodded. The platoon changed course and headed that way. Went ten feet and could

hear shouting. Maybe thirty yards away. Still too far to see in the trees and dark. Shouting again and then gunfire. Rifle fire this time. Eight shots and then a distinct *ping*.

Gingrich and the platoon kept on. Caught movement to his left and tracked that way and found Sergeant St. Vincent, fifty feet off, moving in the same direction: toward the gunfire.

They were closer now, and Gingrich could see a GI standing, leaning against a tree, reloading his rifle. He shouted something again, snapped the clip in, and raised his rifle.

Fired until it *pinged* again. Tried to reload, but from this distance Gingrich could see he was wounded.

How? The first shot. Had to be.

TWENTY-FIVE

Big Tony St. Vincent got to Jerry Breeze first. Turned his massive body in the direction the private had been firing in, and didn't know what to do from there. There were three bodies laid out at varying distances. All dressed in the striped uniform of concentration camp prisoners.

Tony realized there was another dead prisoner at Jerry's feet. Saw movement and realized another prisoner running toward them. Before he knew what was happening, Jerry fired, hitting the prisoner in the shoulder. It barely even slowed down. Jerry fired again. And again. One right after the other:

Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. *Ping*.

The prisoner fell to the cold, frozen ground. Motionless.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Big Tony said to Jerry. "What in the hell is wrong with you?"

Gingrich was there with his platoon now. He marched over and snatched Breeze's rifle away. "This," he said, "is a fucking atrocity!"

“They were trying to *eat* me!” Breeze cried, his eyes flowing with tears, his face ashen with shock.

“Get a hold of yourself,” St. Vincent told him, “no one’s trying to eat you. Doc, has he lost it?”

Doc Manning came up beside them, pushed Breeze against the tree and tore open his shirt. Tony recoiled at the sight of it. Jerry Breeze hadn’t lost it. His shoulder was mangled and torn. The flesh shredded by what were very obviously teeth. Bite marks peppered the wound’s edges like the spread of a shotgun blast. Blood was pouring out in a steady stream.

Tony leaned down and flipped over the body at his feet. Blood was caked on the prisoner’s face, around his mouth, bits of flesh in between the teeth.

“What the fuck?” Tony asked.

No one answered. Someone to his left mumbled something and then a shot rang out. Tony looked up and then stumbled backward. Genuinely frightened for the first time in his life. True, gut-wrenching horror. Not like during battle—that was bad enough. This was instinctual, rabid fear. One that had no basis in statistics. Tony couldn’t talk to this fear, tell it that even with the shells bursting and the bombs falling he was still more than likely to make it home.

No. In his heart—in his soul—this terror was all consuming.

There were prisoners. They were everywhere. And they were running at breakneck speed.

Toward Tony and his men.

TWENTY-SIX

General Alfred A. Coel stared at the map. A private moved a statue of a GI an inch forward. Coel watched, then said, “Have we received any information about last night’s drops?”

Colonel Martin Loeb said, “Yes, Sir. We lost four planes. That would

be ten percent. Not surprising, it was a rough trek.”

“That means thirty-six made it through to their drop. Did any make it back?”

“Yes, Sir. We only actually lost two before their drops. The other two went down trying to get back out.”

“I see,” Coel said, even if he couldn’t. He could listen, and he could imagine, but there was no way for him to actually see the planes going down, especially not with an enormous map in front of him. “Then it was a success.”

“We won’t know that until they start to strike. But they should be in touch with their respective contacts in the resistance by now. If we start seeing shortages on the German line, we’ll know it went well.”

General Coel nodded. “Out of curiosity, which planes went down?”

“Captain Weston’s entire company was wiped out,” Colonel Loeb explained. “Both planes down. We have no way of knowing if there were any survivors, but if there were, we should hear from them through the resistance network soon. A few days at most.”

Coel nodded again. “Pity,” he said. “Those were good men.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Not that it matters, but do you have any idea where they crashed?” Coel asked. “In case they did survive, I mean.”

“Yes, General. Based on flight time and last message received, I would put their position—roughly—right there,” Colonel Loeb said, and pointed at the little Nazi statue. “Right where they’ve redeployed the Hundred Seventeenth.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

Samantha Schmitt was awoken by the sound of gunfire. Just four quick snaps and then deathly silence. It hadn’t stirred Agnes, and

she was glad for that. But, who had been shooting?

The sound of shouting drew her from bed. She crossed the room, glancing in Agnes' crib as she did, and found the child sleeping peacefully. Passed into the family room and pulled the curtains back a hair and looked out.

The Nazis hadn't left. Not all of them. There were three of them in the street—possibly drunk—shouting at four forms that were running toward them. One of the soldiers raised a pistol and fired until it ran dry. The person he shot stumbled and then regained their composure and kept coming.

The second Nazi shot the man again. Samantha watched a plume of black against the oil lights as the man's head exploded. He fell to the cobblestone. The other three didn't seem to notice. They passed and continued after the soldiers, who were backing away, running and shooting. Samantha didn't recognize the pursuer's uniforms. White, but smeared with grime, black stripes running horizontally along them in blocks.

An attacker caught up with the slowest Nazi. The one with the empty pistol. He tackled him to the ground. Then the other two were on him. They converged and merged into one mass of limbs until—to Samantha's abject horror—they pulled back and tore the Nazi into three large chunks.

Then the things—whoever they were, whatever they were—started feeding.

TWENTY-EIGHT

“What the hell do we do?” Lieutenant Gingrich asked Big Tony St. Vincent, as men started firing. “We can't slaughter civilians!”

St. Vincent watched the carnage, unsure. His first thought was to tell the men to hold their fire. Stop shooting people who were obviously escaped prisoners. But there was something very wrong with these people, and Big Tony felt some instinctive relief every time one went down.

And, shit, they weren't *always* going down. And sometimes the fuckers got back up. It was the strangest damn thing he had ever seen. And the fear was still there, raging in his mind.

Someone screamed, drawing Tony's attention to a private on the far end of the line who had been snatched by one of the prisoners. The thing dragged him down, and then there were four of them on him. Blood was spraying from his wounds, and the kid was screaming again, and Tony still didn't know what the hell to do.

Then the screaming died and the gunshots kept pace and Tony knew that the private—Joseph Boone—was dead. And Tony knew that these *things* had killed him. And that meant they were hostiles. And that was all Big Tony St. Vincent needed to know.

“Defensive parameter!” he boomed. “Create a firing line. Complete circle. We're surrounded.”

The men fell in. Rifles running dry and reloading. Tony shot a long, lean man who looked to be a hundred but moved like a cat. It didn't stop him. Tony shot him again—in the head this time—and he rolled to a still. There was a child right behind him. Tony swallowed some bile and shot the youngster next. Blood spurted from the hole in his head and then he went down.

Tony tracked right. Shot a woman and then another man. All of them so desperately thin. So malnourished. He almost felt for them. But no matter how hungry they were, he couldn't let them eat his men. Human beings were *not* food. And why in the name of hell wouldn't they die? The Germans were known to give their men drugs to increase awareness, dull the effects of exhaustion, but nothing like this. The goddamned things just wouldn't fucking die.

It didn't make sense. None of it made any sense at all. Tony glanced beside him. To the tree where Jerry Breeze had been propped up. He was dead. His eyes closed. Blood dribbling from his mouth. Jesus, Tony thought, maybe Breeze was the lucky one.

TWENTY-NINE

The town was awash in sounds. Sounds of violence, of terror, of death. Samantha huddled in the corner of her bedroom, Agnes now screaming in her arms. Gunshots cracked fast and furious around her home. Someone shouted in German and then more gunshots.

All around the town: screams coming from homes. Doors being shattered. Someone was scraping fingernails against the glass of Samantha's window. She didn't stand to see who, she just stayed there, Agnes screaming, a tear running down Samantha's cheek.

What was happening? What were those things? She had heard someone scream "Sondie!" but that didn't make any sense to her. She had never heard that word before. Maybe it was Russian. Were the Russians here, then? And if they were, and this was what the Russians did —*eat* people —then she wished the Nazis had succeeded in wiping them off the face of the earth.

Down the street, something exploded. Not a bomb, more like gasoline or maybe an oil lamp. It didn't matter what. Samantha was staying put. She wasn't going to leave that spot until Hans came and got her. Absolutely not.

Hans would come. He had to.

THIRTY

Dallas held the Browning Automatic Rifle to his shoulder and poured out murderous fire. The massive thirty-aught-six bullets shredding the prisoners as they tried to get close. They were so fast, he thought. Checked that. There were so fucking *many* of them. If it had

just been a few, there wouldn't have been a problem. But no matter how many they shot, more took their place.

But there had to be an end to them, he told himself. Everywhere he looked: carnage. Splintered bodies and bones, and bodies torn and shredded and dead. And blood—everywhere blood. On the trees, pockmarked with bullet holes. On the ground. Everywhere.

Dallas mowed down three of them, the bullet taking the torsos apart in massive explosions of blood and shattered bone. Then tracked left and put two rounds into another, shorter version of the three he had just killed.

Stopped for a moment, struck by something odd—odder than the rest of the shit going on, anyway. Looked down. The head of one of them was still alive, looking up at him with black eyes. Its jaw working, trying to bite his foot. He stomped on it, popping it with the sole of his boot, brains haloing out around it from the motion. Said, “To hell with this,” and took out a grenade.

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