

FIRE ORDER

by

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CHAPTER I

To his right, Garth saw a column of gray smoke. It was several miles away and hung in the clear air without movement.

"What's that?" he asked.

"I dunno for sure, lieutenant," answered the driver. He put the gearshift in neutral and let the jeep roll under its momentum. "Able Company is out that way. We heard it was some kind of ammunition dump."

The road began to descend and the valley lay before them. The fields on each side of the black surface were faintly green with spring. The town lay in the center of the valley, thin, bordering the road. Garth caught the glint of reflected sunlight on the surface of a small stream which cut the town in two. On each side of the stream there was a fat cluster of buildings as though the stream had blocked advance from both directions.

"Battalion is in this town," said the driver.

"What town is it?" Garth asked.

"It's got a big long German name," said the driver. "Two words. Steinsomething. Steinback Hollenberg, I think."

Garth did not speak. They went past an outlying house and approached the solid line of houses fronting the street. The houses seemed to be made of a stucco-like white material which was broken

into rough triangles and rectangles by heavy wooden beams interlaced in the walls. An old man, dressed in shabby, colorless gray clothing stepped before a church and turned to watch their vehicle approach. A middle-aged woman stopped beside the man and spoke and the old man replied. His wrinkled white face pointed toward Garth and the old man's lips moved. Then the woman turned her gaze toward the Americans. The lieutenant deliberately forced himself to disregard the two and to look at the houses facing the street. The structures showed no signs of fighting; they formed a solid rank against the street. He thought about the little town where Lieutenant Paine had set up his company maintenance shop. The shop was only a squad tent erected on a dry piece of ground with a tarpaulin spread for tools while the tanks were driven up on each side and the crews began the maintenance work. But the town was just like this one. It had a name, or the driver couldn't have found him with the order from the adjutant to accompany the driver back to Battalion Headquarters. He had hoped that the three remaining tank crews of his platoon would get a good night's rest back with Company Headquarters. But the order taking him from one nameless German town to another nameless German town must only mean that more fighting lay ahead.

Before they came to the stream the driver made a left turn and brought the vehicle to a stop in front of a stone house. The small stream formed the rear boundary of the triangular plot of ground which the house occupied. A short distance away a bridge spanned the stream and beyond the bridge the wall of a warehouse rose from the far bank. The grounds surrounding the house were well kept.

"Battalion is here," said the driver.

Garth got out of the vehicle and stood looking at the stone wall which bounded the sidewalk. He reached back on the floor between the seats and grasped the circular metallic body of his submachine gun. The entrance to the grounds was a driveway leading downward and back to a garage. A guard stood inside the opening. As Garth approached the guard stiffened and saluted. Garth returned the salute, noticing as he did so the fresh chips of wood scattered about on the ground. Looking upward he saw that each side of the entranceway had been built up into a column which was several feet high. From the column on the right the splintered ends of freshly cut timbers projected. The rest of the timbers, twisted and torn from the column, hung from the other side, forced back so that the driveway was cleared. The vines of a thorny rosebush, on which tiny green buds were beginning to appear, were entangled in the splintered mass. Beyond he could see one of the headquarters tanks parked near the garage. A half-track, with its canvas cover thrown back and its antenna projected full length, stood near the house. The house was built of the same kind of gray stone as the wall and was apparently new.

"Have trouble getting in?" Garth asked, facing the guard.

"Yeah," said the guard, grinning and glancing at the trellis.

"Had to use an axe. Couldn't quite get the tanks under."

Garth shifted the submachine gun so that it rode more comfortably at his side. He climbed the concrete steps to the porch and entered the house. The interior was cool and dark and he saw that the house was organized around a hallway which led directly to the rear. The message center sergeant, a tall blond man, sat behind a small table.

He had several yellow message blanks spread out before him and was recording each in a column in his journal. He glanced up at Garth.

"Is the colonel here?" asked Garth.

"Operations is in the second room on the right," answered the sergeant. "You'll probably find him there."

A full length mirror was embedded in the wall opposite the sergeant. Garth glanced at his own image curiously. He needed a shave, but that, he thought, rubbing his chin, was a normal condition. He removed his helmet and his scalp began to itch. His close cut hair was still pressed flat against his skull where the weight of the helmet had been. The effect was to give his face a flattened appearance.

"How soon will the war be over?" he asked, glancing back toward the sergeant.

The sergeant laughed. "I dunno," he said. "These bastards don't know when they're licked. G-2 says they're trying to hole up down south, around Berchtesgaden."

"We ought to meet the Russians any day now," Garth said. "It can't last much longer."

Garth scratched his head.

"No," said the sergeant. "I hope not. I'd like to get home someday."

"You're practically on the way," said Garth. "Just don't get killed now."

The sergeant grinned. "If you ever saw anyone who's careful," he said, "it's me. It'll take a hell of a lot to kill me."

Garth looked at his image again and then walked down the hall. The floor was of a highly polished hardwood covered in the middle with

a thick carpet. The first door on the right was closed and had a cardboard sign which read: "Adjutant, S-1", held by thumbtacks pushed into the dark paneling. The second door was open and he saw first the mapboard on the table, leaning against the wall. The operations sergeant was standing, marking on the transparent cover with a blue pencil. The S-2 sergeant sat at the table reading map coordinate figures to him. The drapes were pulled away from the windows and the room was well lighted. To the left the room extended into a glass-enclosed patio which was two steps above the rest of the room. A glass partition, with the door closed, divided the patio from the room in which the two sergeants worked. Through the glass wall Garth saw the colonel and the major sitting at a table with a bottle between them. The major spoke and the colonel glanced around. The colonel motioned to Garth, then stood up and swung the door open.

"Well, Garth," he said. "Glad to see you. Come in and have a small charge."

Garth saw that the colonel, a heavy, squat man, was slightly unsteady as he walked to a glass-fronted cabinet and selected a tumbler. He wore paratrooper boots with his trousers tucked into the tops of the boots. His shirt hung over the back of a chair and his white T-shirt contrasted with the ugly, red, swollen flesh. Garth had often been amazed at the amount of liquor which the man consumed. He was a steady, consistent alcoholic as compared to the major, who either drank a great deal in a short time and suffered severe hangovers or toyed with a glass to humor the colonel. The major was a small thin man from Boston, a Republican--could you be anything else in Boston? he

asked—and thoroughly competent in his job as executive officer, just as the colonel was in his, although the two would have been complete misfits had their roles been reversed. The colonel set the glass on the table and pointed to a chair. Garth dropped his helmet and sub-machine gun onto the floor and sat down.

"Fine Rhine wine," said the colonel, picking up the bottle and looking at it. "Fine Rhine wine. The old Kraut who owned this place was a colonel in the last war, disabled. Some sort of a small big shot in the party now. Quite a place here. We found about forty bottles in the cellar."

He poured the tumbler three-fourths full and set it before Garth, then refilled his own glass after offering the bottle to the major. Garth drank. It was a dry, pale wine.

"This is the way to fight a war," said the colonel. He stretched and yawned. "I might have to go take a nap any minute now."

Garth glanced around the clean pleasant interior of the room. Against the wall which was opposite the wide expanse of windows the glass-fronted cabinet stood. Placed on a shelf so that it occupied the center of interest was a strange statuette. A bull stood eternally pawing the ground, muscles taut and straining in the twisted neck that was bent so that the bull could look over his left shoulder at the voluptuous female figure, naked, which reclined on his back, smiling, taunting, teasing the bull with a bouquet of violets.

"Europa and the bull," said the colonel. "The way it looks there that bull is just being frustrated. But he knew what he was about. He finally got himself a piece of that."

"Europa and the bull?" repeated Garth. "How did you ever identify it?"

"The major dug it up from somewhere," said the colonel. He drank.

"The evils of a liberal arts education," said the major. "It enables you to identify things like this as well as to remember other bits of useless information."

"Europa," said the colonel. "We looked her up. Mythological dictionary in the library. In German, but we got a translation with a thick German accent through thick American Jewish lenses and lips."

Garth drained his glass and leaned back in the chair. The colonel stood up and circled the table and filled the glass.

"Did anyone tell you why you're here?" he asked.

Garth shook his head. "No," he said. "I just got orders to report here. Three of my tanks are back with company maintenance getting a grease job and checking ammunition."

"Good," said the colonel. "They've got a long ride ahead." He stood up and opened the door. "Sergeant," he called, "bring me those maps for the bridgehead."

The operations sergeant selected two map sheets and brought them into the room. When the maps were on the table between them Garth saw that one was a road map and the other was a tactical map. The colonel drew the road map toward himself, and Garth stood up, carrying his glass, and moved so that he could see the map over the colonel's shoulder. A blue line cut diagonally across the map.

"See this river?" said the colonel. "Your objective is to secure a bridgehead across this river at Neustadt. We've got air photos of

it dated yesterday. You can look at them if you like. There was no traffic reported at that time. So far as we know, there's not a German or a gun between us and the bridge."

The colonel leaned back and drank. Automatically, Garth raised his glass to his lips and sipped. He had been surprised at the agreeableness of the wine on his first swallow but he had drunk it too quickly because he was thirsty. The major raised his glass and wet his lips.

"How far out is the bridge?" Garth asked.

"About thirty-eight or forty miles," said the colonel. "That's as near as we can figure. Usually these maps are pretty accurate."

"I suppose I'll be all alone?"

"Yes," said the colonel. "All by yourself. Not even a German, I hope."

"A platoon of infantry is reporting to your company maintenance," said the major. "They're a little under strength, about thirty men. We're giving you a half-track with a 506 radio and two operators. Try to keep in contact with us. We're also sending a medical jeep and two corpamen. When you get back to your tanks the infantry should be waiting for you."

"You'll have to leave tonight," said the colonel. "You ought to be able to make it by noon tomorrow. You don't have to do anything except hold the bridge. If you don't run into anything, fine. If you do, it's up to you."

Fine, thought Garth. That covers all situations. It also means no sleep tonight.

"We're sending three days' rations with the headquarters men," said the major. "You'd better take about fifty gallons of gas per tank. You probably won't need it, but just in case. We're also giving you an interpreter."

The colonel picked up the bottle and looked at Garth's glass. It was empty and Garth extended it to be refilled. The colonel filled Garth's glass and then his and drank deeply and set the glass down half empty.

"By God," he said, his head twisted around so that he could see Garth, "that's good wine. Fine Rhine wine. You know, liquor is the school of hard knocks, and it's self-perpetuating. You drink to rub off the rough edges, and you do rub them off, but you acquire more while you do it, so you drink more. An endless chain." He scratched his left armpit. "God damn scabies," he said. "Comes from sleeping in these Kraut beds."

Garth moved around and bent over the other map. It was a one over 50,000 tactical map. The river came diagonally over this sheet also but it was much more intricate and seemed more like a river. The town was spread along the bank of the river, and a main street led from the highway to the bridge. It would be named Adolph Hitler Strasse, he knew. Every town had an Adolph Hitler Strasse. The major was at his side, bending over the map. He traced an almost straight red line--the highway--which paralleled the river until it bent to go through the town and cross the bridge. Before it entered the town, another red line joined it at right angles, so that the two lines formed a T, with the top of the T parallel to the river and the leg perpendicular to it.

"This is the way you come in," said the major, his finger on the line of the road which was perpendicular to the river. "As you can see, it's in a valley. This looks like fairly high ground on each side of the river. The bridge itself has three spans and is made of stone with steel reinforcements. This is the local rainy season. There may be high water now, from what we can learn from G-2, but I don't think it's flooding."

Garth studied the map.

"How many copies of this map can you give me?" he asked.

The major seemed slightly offended.

"As many as you want," he said, stiffly.

Garth counted. One for each tank commander, one for himself. One for each squad leader, one for the infantry sergeant.

"Let me have eight," he said.

The major turned and went down the two steps into the other room. The colonel drained his glass and refilled it.

"Better have a short one," he said.

Garth glanced at the liquid still in his glass.

"It's not every day that you get wine like this," urged the colonel. Garth drank and the colonel filled his glass for the fourth time. Now that he thought about it, he could feel the effect of the wine. He sat down.

"That's good wine," he said. "You couldn't spare a bottle of it?"

"Right," said the colonel. "We're going to eat in about half an hour. Why don't you stay and eat? The half-track won't be ready until then."

Garth, concentrating on the map, heard the words as though they came from a distance. The colonel drained his glass and set it on the table.

"We've got a fine bathroom upstairs," he said. "You could take a bath before chow."

Garth, interrupted in his thoughts, laughed. He moved to one of the open windows and looked out. The ground was lower at this end of the house. Below them another of the headquarters tanks was parked in a space free from trees. He saw the tracks that the tank had made in going to the position. The grass had been crudely torn and thrown aside as though two large plows had passed through the yard. A tree stump, splintered, further indicated the path of the tank. Two men sat behind the turret. One of the men adjusted a pouring nozzle to the spigot of a five gallon gasoline can while the other balanced another can upside down over the gasoline tank. Garth drained his glass.

"Have another?" asked the colonel.

"Thanks," he said. "I think I'll investigate the bathroom."

The colonel extended the almost empty bottle.

"No, thanks," Garth said. "I'd better eat before I drink any more."

The colonel filled his own glass and sat staring out the window.

Garth looked carefully at the two steps before entering the other room. He stepped down and walked toward the door. The wine had made the house familiar.

"Oh, lieutenant," called the operations sergeant. "These maps are for you. There are eight of them."

He stopped and turned.

"Fine," he said. "Would you have them put in the half-track which is going with me?"

"Yes, sir," said the operations sergeant, a short man who wore thick glasses. The maps were rolled into a long cylinder held together by a rubber band. "I'll send them out right now," he said.

"Good," said Garth. He went into the hall and knocked on the adjutant's door, and when the voice bellowed he turned the knob and stepped inside the room.

"Well," said the adjutant, surprised. "Look who's here. You're supposed to be out fighting."

Garth stood before the table which was covered with papers, looking down at him.

"How's the rear echelon?" he asked. "Still dealing in figures?"

"You damn right," said the adjutant. "You see 'em get killed, we make the totals. You," he said, enunciating the words carefully, politely, imitating Garth, "deal in human values and I deal in statistics, but without me you couldn't operate. What do you want now, a drink?"

"Just had one," said Garth, imitating the adjutant.

"I might have known," said the adjutant. "I don't know why I'm not an alcoholic, too. But what are you doing here?"

"I've been assigned a short mission," said Garth. "I'm going out to find a bridge."

"Oh," said the adjutant. He laughed. "That's right. You did draw that. I guess that'll keep you busy for a couple of days."

"Do you have a clean pair of shorts I could borrow?"

"Why?" asked the adjutant. "Are you dirty? Or does the bridge look that tough?"

"I'm going to take a bath."

"What?" said the adjutant. "And use all of my hot water? I had a fire started in the furnace just so I could have a hot bath. Now you want to use it."

"It'll get hot again," Garth said. The adjutant stood up and walked around his desk.

"My duffle bag is upstairs," he said. "Come on. I'll show you where the bathroom is."

"This is quite a shack you have here."

"We like it," said the adjutant. "I've got something upstairs I want to show you."

They walked over the thick carpet to the stairway. Garth ran his hand along the heavy bannister and guessed that the dark wood was walnut. Some potted plants sat on the first landing. He saw a painting hung over the open first flight of steps and leaned over to try to read the painter's name, but the distance was too great. He followed the adjutant to his room which had huge windows, a double bed, a dressing table and a mirror. The walls were covered with a light blue figured wallpaper. Garth sat on the bed and began to unbuckle his boots.

"Look," said the adjutant. He gave Garth a shiny, molded figure about fifteen inches high. It was a tall, blonde woman. "The only virgin in Germany," said the adjutant. "Modern Aryan womanhood."

Garth laid the figure on the bed and looked at it while he continued taking off his boots.

"I could use a clean pair of socks," he said.

"Oh, hell," said the adjutant. "Is that all you can think of? Any normal person would at least act natural about her. But not you." He threw a pair of white shorts on the bed and then came up with a pair of socks. "Here," he said. "The bathroom is straight across the hall. I hope you appreciate this. I wouldn't do this for everyone."

"I will name all my children after you."

"Good," said the adjutant. "Maybe they will be intelligent."

Garth picked up the statuette.

"I like the colonel's better," he said.

The bathtub was long enough for him to stretch out full length. The ceiling of the bathroom was an endless maze of ivory squares. Paregoric. That was it. The battalion doctor had given him a shot glass full of paregoric for his dysentery and then told him to lie down. It was the same contented feeling which he had now and the doctor had said, "Sure, it's got opium in it. Not enough to give you the habit, but enough to make you relax." Now it was the wine and the warm water. Perhaps he should let the War Department in on this. An army of contented soldiers, like a herd of contented cows, ought to be as great an asset to a nation as the cows were to whoever or whomever owned the little cans of milk, only, of course, the contented soldiers would all be constipated, probably an item to which the people in the Pentagon would object, but at least it was better than thinking about the bridge. The message center sergeant had the right idea. It'll take a hell of a lot to kill me now. If a man could only live until

the next day, now that the end was in sight, he might yet return home, which, after all, he thought, is the ambition of all men. Before the Rhine crossing it was different. They had known the war would not end. It had been going on forever and had never ended and never would end. Then the breakthrough and assault bridges floating on the Rhine and the quickly come change. The quickly come change. A strange combination of words, yet they were all right, weren't they? There had been the usual unnamed town and unnamed street with a sharp turn and just beyond the turn the suddenly clattering machine gun which winked yellowly at them and the quick, efficient practice with which the gun, the turret gun, was loaded with high explosive set to detonate upon impact sliding smoothly into the breech and the block snapping shut behind the casing while MacMorris turned the turret by hand and brought the window into the sights and the gun ramming backward and blotting from sight the entire street for a second and the machine gun snapping viciously at the place where the window had been while the gun had been reloaded and again and again until there was nothing which could possibly have lived in that particular corner and finally advancing to the house and beyond it a clear view of three men running toward a stone fence while the machine gun in the turret moved quickly from one to the next before they could surrender. That was a part of the change: could they surrender? The question was a part of the change and the answer, No, not if they show even one iota of resistance, was another part of the change and a part which transformed the whole relationship to a matter of certain and quick death from which there was no appeal. Death was recognized as such only when it threatened and it was not death which

they promulgated in wholesale lots but only the elimination of the threat which existed across a military and political barrier, which barrier could be crossed only by submission and which aforesaid barrier carried the condition of open season on those who sought refuge behind it. They had fought men before; now they were exterminating animals.

And the word Berchtesgaden. The speaking of the word had been a junction, a place to halt and make a choice because, he realized, it had caused the pieces to fall into place; the things he had seen and felt before acquired meaning--it was the time and place when the quickly come change became apparent to him. Berchtesgaden was now a reality, not a summer home perched high in unbelievable mountains. Its vulnerability made the toppling of the German army and state a reality. The Rhine crossing had not really done this, although in itself the crossing was of much greater importance. Perhaps, as a result of the mechanization of warfare, they were literally going too fast to notice it. He thought about the fact that he had not been able to recall anything familiar about the town. It appeared to fit the circumstances. But, of military necessity, they would drive on and on until the whole structure had fallen. Would they then have time to pause and survey the wreckage?

He began to soap himself vigorously.

CHAPTER II

The curtain lifted and the man was conscious of himself and his existence. His first impulse was to move, for he knew that he was lying on his back and helpless, but he forced himself to remain motionless. He must have water. Without moving his head, he opened his eyes. He seemed to be looking down upon several bright, rectangular figures. They were of unequal length, but the pattern was symmetrical. The rectangles were parallel, and the ends were cut off all at the same angle and along a single line. They were like this at both ends, but the angle at each end was different. He raised his glance upward, and his eyes, becoming accustomed to the different shades of light, followed a wooden beam across the roof.

He tried to vomit. The painful muscular contraction caused him to rise halfway into a sitting position, pressing his hands into his abdomen. He had a sour, sickly taste in his throat and on his tongue. When the cramps subsided, he fell back wearily, breathing heavily. For a few moments he lay still. He could remember a blinding blast of light. He tried to think of what he had been doing when he saw the light, but only vaguely could he recall the light. Nothing happened before or after that, but he sensed that he was in danger. He noticed that he wore a gray uniform and he thought about this for a moment.

He decided that it was a part of himself.

A thick, dry cloud of dust had billowed up when he fell back. The dust entered his nostrils and eyes. He sneezed, and his eyes burned. He felt the stringy material on which he lay. Turning his head, he could see that it was straw. The dust made his throat and mouth dry and he swallowed and realized how very thirsty he was. He swallowed again, although he did not wish to, and the second time it was easier.

The muscles of his abdomen sent harsh spasms of pain through his body as he struggled into a sitting position. The long, bright rectangles became narrower and more elongated. For a moment he stared at this change; then he saw that he was in a box stall and that the front of the stall was boarded crossways with a space between each board. He got to his feet and managed to stagger to the front of the stall. Holding to one of the crosspieces, he looked out between two of the boards. To his right a wide door stood open. Into this opening sunlight made a parallelogram on the floor. From the angle at which he looked at the door, he could see nothing except a patch of barren, rocky ground.

Toward the left, the harsh outlines of the building became softer. There appeared to be more light from some source which he could not locate. Down the middle of the stable an alleyway extended with open stalls opposite him. Near the door was an open space with several pieces of harness hung on pegs. The door of the stall was slightly ajar. His stomach seemed more relaxed now, and he walked without too much trouble. He pushed the door outward. It swung on strong, well-oiled hinges. Slowly he leaned forward, his head turned to the left,

until he could see the rear of the barn. The upper half of a split door stood open, forming a square of light. He turned to the other doorway. It was a wide, square opening through which he could see the heavy stone wall of a house. There were two windows in the part of the wall which he could observe. He watched the windows for any movement which would indicate life, but saw nothing. He left the support of the door and began walking unsteadily toward the rear of the stable, away from the house. He arrived at the door exhausted and fell forward over the bottom half of the door and looked out into the barnyard. The water tank had been constructed alongside the wall of the stable, and the water sparkled in the sunlight. He could feel his heart beating, throbbing painfully with excitement. He looked down at the door. It was fastened with a slide bolt. His hand shook so much that he had difficulty in sliding the bolt free. The door swung inward and he stumbled toward the water.

He lay vomiting beside the water tank. Bits of straw clung to the gray uniform. He had scooped water into his cupped hands and drunk as fast and as greedily as possible. Then, finally quenching his thirst, he threw the cool water on his face and hair, and moved his hands backwards and forward in the water as though astonished at its goodness and the natural wonder of it. He felt the cramps returning, but this time, he knew, they would be more painful than before, because now his stomach was revolting at the sudden intrusion of the water into its shrunken interior. It was uncontrollable. Then his stomach was empty, but still he continued to vomit. Helplessly, he lay on his left

side, his body shuddering with pain. Slowly the reactions lessened their intensity and he lay gasping for air. He lay still, eyes closed, for several moments. He was still thirsty.

The ground was cold to his back, but he could feel the sunlight on his face and hands. It was the first pleasant experience he could remember. He felt that he could lie there, indolent, satisfied, forever. Then the feeling of apprehension came back, stronger than before. He was in danger, and the danger took the form of his own person. He opened his eyes and the sunlight blinded him. With his hands he pushed himself up into a sitting position and opened his eyes again, careful not to look toward the sun. To one side stood a small wooded area. Long, narrow fields bounded by stone walls stretched away from the barn. He surveyed all the ground in the half circle he could see and relaxed. There had been no movement in the surrounding fields. Even the air was still.

Steadying himself on the side of the water tank, he raised himself erect again. The water looked cool and inviting, but this time he was more careful. Somewhere, at some time, he had been told to take a small mouthful of water and to hold it in his mouth without swallowing. Cautiously he did this. After a moment the water began to be distasteful. He spat it onto the ground and ran his tongue around his teeth. He took another mouthful and stood looking at the wooded area. Tiny leaves were folded clusters of green about the branches. He wondered whether the leaves would be edible, whether they would be soft and tender and whether they would taste good. Some of the fields lay in pasturage, while others had been plowed and young plants thrust their sprouts above the ground. He swallowed a tiny bit of the water and spat

the rest out. He felt immeasurably better.

He became tense, listening. He was conscious that he was being watched. His back was toward the barn and he stood for a moment deciding his course of action. The stone wall was too far, no matter what route he might choose, for him to be able to run to it and climb over. It was too far even if he had not been as weak as he was. He had no weapon with which to defend himself. He tried to whirl quickly about to confront this threat, but the effort was too great. He recovered his balance by reaching for the edge of the water tank, and he managed to stay on his feet.

She stood, staring silently, in the open doorway of the stable. Her dress was shapeless with an appearance of solidity. Her face was square framed by blonde hair, and the sharp lines of her nose and mouth seemed to disapprove. She watched him silently and steadily. The sense of danger coiled upon itself and became still. He straightened slowly.

"German?" she asked, her voice hesitant, as though she wished to say more.

He glanced at the uniform he wore.

"Yes," he said.

"Shutz-staffeln?" she asked.

He felt his sleeve.

"Yes."

"Where are you from?"

"I can't remember," he said. The flash of light was the end of memory. It was an incident, alone, the full extent of his past. For a brief moment he had existed, and now he existed again.

"What is your name?" she asked.

The threat which another human being represented was gone when he talked to her.

"I don't know," he answered. "Perhaps I have papers on me."

"Look," she said, as though his identity was important.

He raised his hand from where it was supported by the edge of the tank and began to feel his pockets. He staggered against the tank and almost fell. Grasping the edge of the tank with both hands, he stared desperately at her.

"Are you ill?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"What is the cause?"

"I do not know. I need help."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he said. "Very hungry. But I do not know if I will be able to eat."

"You are lucky," she said. "We who know we will be able to eat often cannot find anything."

She stared at him, estimating him.

"Were you fighting?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I do not know. A city."

"A city? When?"

"I do not know."

"Are you very hungry?"

"Yes. I am starving."

"Where are your weapons? Your rifle?"

"I do not know."

"Do you wish to fight again?"

"Yes," he said. "But first I want to eat. Can you give me anything to eat?"

"You must not expect too much," she said. "I do not have very much."

She walked toward him. He put his arm around her shoulder and, supported by her, entered the barn.

He ate the soft-boiled egg very slowly, tasting the bad coffee occasionally. They had found no papers on his person. He made an effort to pierce the wall of memory, but the effort only made him weary.

"Perhaps," she said, "with a little rest and sleep you will be able to remember better."

"Perhaps," he said, unwilling to commit himself.

"It does not matter," she said. "Your memory will return in time. This is not unusual."

She sat silent, estimating him again.

"The last German troops," she said, "crossed the bridge three days ago."

"Bridge?"

"Over the river. They left a supply of explosives to destroy the bridge. The explosives are at Frau Englehart's next to the bridge, and no one in town knows how to use them."

"Town?"

"Neustadt," she said impatiently. "Do you know how to use explosives?"

"Yes." He did not know why he knew, but he was confident that he could use the explosives.

"Can you destroy the bridge?"

"Yes," he said. "I can destroy the bridge. That is, if the explosives are powerful enough. Is it a very strong bridge?"

"Yes," she answered. "Very strong. But there are large supplies of explosives."

"Good," he said. "I can destroy the bridge. But why should we do that?"

"To stop the Americans," she said. "We must stop them."

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Putzi," she said.

"No," he said. "I want to know your real name."

"I do not know your name," she said. "So that is what you must call me."

"What will you call me?" he asked.

"Eric," she said, without hesitation.

"Who was Eric?"

"My husband," she said. "He was killed in France. How did you know?"

"Your manner," he said.

He had almost gone to sleep in the warm water of the bath. He stood while she took the towel and dried his back. She started at the

back of his neck and applied the towel tenderly and caressingly to his back. Then she stood in front of him, but instead of using the towel she stood looking at him.

"You are Eric."

Her eyes now reminded him of when she had asked him where his weapons were, and then they were together. He kissed her, and the smooth skin was a strange sensation to his lips. She drew back.

"Your dress," he said. "Look. It's wet."

She glanced down at the front of her dress. He took the towel and began to dry himself as she loosened the fastenings of her dress and slipped out of it. Her eyes had challenged him twice now and he began to doubt that he could meet the second challenge better than he had met the first. She turned away from him as she removed the rest of her clothing and then, completely naked, she came into his arms.

"This way," she said, after a moment. "Come with me."

She led him to a bedroom and turned the covers down. As he stretched out on the white sheets she walked to the window and began to pull the blinds. She is proud of her figure, he thought. She returned to the bed and came violently into the circle of his arms.

. . . he had been searching everywhere for her and then he saw her. She was holding an American tank stationary with her left hand while the tank impotently ground its tracks into the dirt. Behind her at a great distance he could see a fitful glow of flames which seemed to grow brighter. She drew from her belt a gleaming knife and plunged it into the front of the tank. The tank drew back convulsively, weakly,

and began to converge upon itself. She turned and began to run toward the distant flames and he followed, shouting . . .

The warm sunshine gave him an unexpected feeling of pleasure. He was lying on his stomach facing the square, which opened about fifty yards ahead of him. He glanced toward the machine gun to his rear and shook his head negatively to the questioning gaze of the sergeant. Behind the machine gun the German tank waited patiently. He relaxed and shifted his body so that he was more comfortable on the hard stones.

. . . but she ran swiftly, the knife still held in her right hand. He shouted her name but she ran faster still. He could not overtake her. He began to see small shafts of flame . . .

The American tank came foolishly into the square and halted. The infantrymen stayed close to the shelter of the buildings. The flame from the high velocity gun on the tank behind him spat out towards him and he felt the concussion rip at his uniform. The shot penetrated the American tank at the base of the turret, causing the turret to leap upward and sideways and to drop back in place tilted at an angle. The machine gun fired rapid bursts past him at the men outlined against the buildings and he calmly lined his sights on the man who slid down the front of the tank and fired as he touched the pavement.

. . . which detached themselves and sprang upward and consumed their energy. He was not following her now. He did not trust the flames, but he could not . . .

He looked quickly at each of the three street openings which lay within his line of vision and then back at the burning tank. There

was no movement except for the curling upward of the black, oily coils of smoke from the tank. The dead man lay in front of the left track of the hollow shell. As he brushed the pebble from under his hip he heard the firing from the rear. There were friendly and enemy sounds mixed. At the machine gun the sergeant was kneeling with his head turned toward the sound of the firing. He turned toward the square as the volume of the firing died. There was a moment of complete silence and he heard the sound of the enemy tank as the driver shifted gears. The German tank came to life with a heavy growl and he saw the sergeant running to the rear and motioning for the tank to follow him. The turret gun began to swing around before the driver put the tank into motion.

. . . stop. He shouted her name, warning her of the danger and telling her to stop, but she did not notice him. There was an even wall of flame now. . .

The German tank was awkward in the narrow street. It backed and went forward, turning a few degrees with each movement. At last it was completely turned and, like a huge, well-trained dog, it began to follow the sergeant. An American tank entered the square and came to a screeching halt shielded by the blistered hull of the dead tank. The second American tank passed the first and went out of his line of vision. The halted tank fired and the shell, passing within a few feet of him, caused a wave of air to hammer at his back and stir dust from the loosely piled rocks. He heard the shell strike the rear of the tank.

. . . and he began to feel the heat. He tried to stop, but a strong wind pushed him onward and he ran effortlessly. The flames were

blue at the base and gradually became yellow and red. She saluted the flames with the knife as she ran. He made a last effort to catch her and then he tried to stop himself . . .

The machine gun began to fire at the enemy tank which stood still. The second tank came into view again. It stood partly exposed in the entrance of the street. The turret gun exploded in a yellow flash. As the smoke drifted away he could see the flashes of the machine gun which was mounted on the sloping front of the tank. The gun was trained on the barricade which protected the German machine gun and kept firing after the wounded gunner had stood up and tried to run. Evidently they had not seen him. He looked back at the German tank and saw that it was halted and beginning to burn. As the men climbed out the machine gun swung to them.

. . . but he could neither gain on her nor fall behind. The speed with which he was traveling increased and the heat became unbearable and with a scream he plunged . . .

She stood in the open doorway, watching him.

"You were moaning," she said. "Were you dreaming?"

He stared at her, recalling her.

"Do you remember what you were dreaming about?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No," he said.

He watched her as the memory of their being in bed together returned to him. She smiled as she saw the change.

"Do you feel better?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Are you hungry now?"

"Yes."

She smiled as she came toward him.

"Good," she said. "I have a meal prepared for you. And you will go to look at the bridge and the explosives?"

"Yes," he answered.

CHAPTER III

Garth pushed the elastic cuff of his combat jacket up and over the obstacle which was his watch, slipping his right forefinger under the material and holding it slightly away from his wrist so that neither the winding stem nor the metal buckle of the leather strap caught among the threads. The radiant glow of the dial was too dim to read. He took the flashlight from its metal clip on the inside wall of the turret and, pressing the button, held the reflector against the dial of the watch. The reflected glow spilled around his wrist, bringing into sharp outline the short brown hairs which sprang outward from the leather strap, shading the pale skin, and dimly lighting the inside of the turret. He could see the steel bulk of the gun and, below, the heap of blankets and men. When he removed the flashlight the dial glowed brightly. It was 0255. A rubber covered cord, the connection between his earphones and the radio control box, hung over his chest, and it was through this that he heard his voice as he pressed the button of his microphone and ordered the driver to stop. The voice which came into his ears was flat and impersonal, a result, he thought, of the technique of the designers of the radio who, having the entire range of sound frequencies at their disposal which the development of frequency modulation had given them, limited the

military voice to a narrow band which took all personality out of the voice, rendering the syllables accurately and neatly, clipped and precise, so that the enemy listening, would not be able to attribute individual traits to any given one of them. And what was the effect of this impersonalizing on him? Did it make him any more able to kill or to try to kill or to be killed? Was the act of war ethically and morally easier because of this barrier of anonymity? He climbed out of the turret and braced his foot on the headlight guard and asked the driver to check the mileage as the vibration of the engine ceased. The driver bent forward a moment and then his head reappeared, outlined by the glow from the dash lights.

"Allittle over eleven miles," he said.

A dark figure came down from the top of the turret.

"MacMorris?" Garth asked.

"Yes," the other man answered.

"I thought you were asleep."

"I was," said MacMorris. "I guess when the engine stopped it woke me."

Garth felt and heard the second tank as it closed the space between the two, finally feeling the tracks cease grinding on the highway surface as the driver brought it to a stop behind them, but looking back past the turret, he could not place the tank in a definite spot, imagining a line here to be the curve of the turret but having the line move to one side and shimmer into darker darkness.

"Pass the word back," said Garth. "Tell 'em to cut engines."

MacMorris slid down the front slope plate and disappeared.

"Let's take a smoke," Garth said to the driver.

The surface of the road was strange beneath his feet. He looked up into the moonless, starless night and made out the outlines of tall trees which lined the road. Garth found his cigarettes and offered one to the driver as he appeared out of the darkness.

Garth lit a match and said: "To hell with the blackout. With all the noise we make, we'd be dead if there were any Germans around."

The driver, Murrey, laughed shortly.

"Yeah," he said. "Come drive. Blackout into darkest Germany."

"Eleven miles," said Garth. "That's almost a mile and a half an hour. Not bad."

The driver inhaled.

"Can't see a damned thing," he said. "Don't know how I ever stayed on the road."

"Can you stay awake?"

"I can make it."

"I could take it for an hour or so. Or Mac could drive."

"I can make it."

"Okay, but if you get sleepy, you'd damn well better trade."

A cigarette came around the tank.

"Could anybody use a drink?" asked MacMorris.

"What have you got?" asked Murrey.

"Just plain water," said MacMorris. He climbed up the front of the tank. "You'll have to be satisfied with plain water tonight."

He stood behind the turret and reached inside the open hatch, his cigarette glowing, then dropped onto the road and unscrewed the

canteen top and offered it to Garth. Garth drank, recalling the musette bag which hung from the handle of one of the turret locks and which contained a double-edged razor and packages of razor blades and a small jar of shaving soap and a toothbrush and toothpowder and a plastic container with milky soap and mashed cigarettes and matches and a towel and in all this, forced in without regard for anything at all, two bottles of the fine Rhine wine which had belonged to the old Kraut who had been a colonel in the last war, disabled. MacMorris and Kelly and Murrey and Harper--Harper, the short, indestructible, catlike, quick, silent man, who stood crouched on the floor of the basket, knowing where each round of ammunition was placed around and below him, loading the gun without waste effort, who, when Garth estimated the probabilities of a situation, was never considered because he was indestructible and always reliable, the opposite of Kelly--all were probably aware of the presence of the wine, aware through that strange seepage or osmosis of knowledge by which the enlisted men knew, without being told or without telling each other, the activities of their officers, were aware of and would gladly have drunk the two bottles of wine. Of this, obviously, MacMorris had been telling him with his words; but the wine was meant to be drunk leisurely and so he would leave it in the musette bag, ignoring the matter for the present, ignoring the wine's existence, retreating behind the privilege which had been conferred upon him when the two gold bars had been pinned upon his shoulders at Fort Knox.

Vaguely in the darkness he was aware that the infantrymen who had been riding on the rear deck of the tank were dismounting and stretching cramped muscles. The sound of urine splashing in the ditch was

loud. Rustling under a cold poncho a dark figure approached the tank men. A cigarette glowed as the man inhaled.

"Is the lieutenant here?" asked the voice.

"Here," said Garth.

"Is there any way of putting this off till daylight?"

"I'm afraid not," said Garth. "We're not going very fast, but we've got to keep moving."

"Damn," said the infantryman, "I sure would like to be somewhere else."

"That makes three of us," said another voice. Garth recognized it as Kelly's.

The dial of his wristwatch, when he looked at it, still glowed with absorbed energy from the flashlight. He dropped his cigarette to the hard surface of the roadway and ground it out.

"Well," he said. "Time to turn 'em over."

When they were halted, there had been no wind, but when they were moving again he felt the cold air. He could make out the huddled mass of infantrymen behind the turret. While they were wrapped in blankets and raincoats, trying to escape the cold which crept in among them, he found it necessary in order to stay awake to expose himself, his face at least, to the onrushing darkness plunging ever deeper into the cave of the night. By looking upward he could distinguish the darker mass of the trees from the sky. It was a ragged continuous line which jumped up and down. He leaned over the edge of the turret and looked downward, trying to separate the edge of the road from the ditch, but could not, yet Murrey drove at a steady pace, apparently confident that

they were on the road, occasionally altering slightly the direction of the tank. Murrey was six or seven feet closer to the roadway than he was, and he wondered whether being closer to the surface of the road would make that much difference; then he decided that Murrey must have a sort of instinct which guided him.

He felt naked. If he had placed the jeep at the head of the column it would warn against any mines which might be placed in the road without the destruction of a tank, but it would be vulnerable to small arms fire, and, of course, to use the medical jeep for that purpose would be ethically and militarily wrong, according to the international rules of land warfare. On the other hand, in his tank he had a five man crew and on the rear deck were seven infantrymen. With the tank in front there would, however, probably be less loss of life from possible mines because the mine would be detonated by one of the tracks of the tank and the shock would be partly absorbed by the track. . . . Moving to the attack on a snowy, muddy trail in the Hurtgen Forest, the engine and the tracks drowning out the noise of the battle except the heavy thumps of the artillery but not the knowledge of it, there had been a terrible blow on the left side with concussion driving away memory of sound and the left side of the tank rose sluggishly and dropped back to the trail while he and MacMorris and Harper sprawled on the floor of the basket smelling strange dust which had been uprooted by the blast of the mine, mixed with the choking odor of the smoke. Then the knowledge that the engine was still running feebly while the odor of gasoline overpowered the other smells, made it imperative that they get themselves out of the tank. Finally

outside, realizing that the driver was unconscious, MacMorris and he crouched over the driver's hatch and pulled him out, each with a hand under his armpits. The driver became limp and they propped him against the turret and pulled his legs out of the hatch and placed them, side by side, on the front slope plate and then he saw that both the driver's legs were broken. Garth jumped to the ground and MacMorris let the driver slide down the metal front on his back. Garth caught him by his hips, holding him off the ground and Harper silently took a limp arm and pulled the unconscious man onto his shoulder and began carrying him into the quiet forest. The left track was a tangled mass of wreckage upon which the frame of the tank leaned lopsidedly, and then with a triumphant whoop a puff of smoke jumped from the turret hatch and orange flames leaped after the smoke, caressing it and finally releasing it and spreading to the driver's hatch and below the driver's hatch so that he saw that the blast from the mine had blown the floor of the tank loose and driven it upward. This opening gave an additional place for the flame to find air and had been what had produced the open fracture on the driver's left leg and the queer crumpled twist to his right ankle. As he backed away from the tank the small arms ammunition was beginning to pop above the rasp of the flames. When he turned he saw that Harper had laid the driver on his back in the snow and that a medical aidman was hurrying toward the group. The following tanks were backing awkwardly away from the burning tank. Knowing that the effort was hopeless, he tried to visualize the detail map of the area in his mind, trying to remember alternate routes by which he could take the remaining tanks to

their proper position. The aidman, opening his medical kit, selected a morphine syringette and twisted the stopper from the needle and inserted the blunt needle into the flesh, squeezing half of the contents into one leg and half into the other . . .

Garth's head, dropping forward, awakened him. He looked at his watch and was surprised at the amount of time which had passed since the halt. His eyes burned from the constant flow of cold air. He slipped from the stool and stood on the tiny platform, leaning forward over the front edge of the hatch. MacMorris and Harper were probably stretched side by side on the floor of the basket which hung suspended from the bottom edge of the turret. They would have two or three blankets under them and would be using musette bags for pillows. He wished he could change places but here at least he was safer. He could be the first person out of the tank, in case it hit a mine, but he would be forced to look first to see that the two below could get out safely. He found himself leaning back against the seat and his legs were beginning to ache. He sat back and then fell against the edge of the hatch opening and realized that he had been asleep. He stood up and began to pound his chest.

"Looks like some buildings ahead."

Murrey's voice came over the interphone. He stared into the black but could see nothing. Then ahead and to the right he saw a straight line above the level of the tank. They must have entered a town.

"Stop here," he ordered. "I'll walk with the flashlight. You follow me."

Walking, he could see the tops of the buildings on each side of the street. He looked at the vague outlines of the houses and wondered how many hastily awakened hostile eyes were staring at them. He walked in the middle of the street and the tank followed in low gear, making ugly snarling screeches when Murrey braked one track and caused it to pivot on the hard surface. The town was utterly dark except for the ghostly blackout lights on the front of each vehicle. They came to what appeared to be a square and Garth signalled to Murrey to stop by moving the flashlight in flat arcs, back and forth. He walked to the middle of the square and found a concrete post with arms pointing in three directions. One arm read: Neustadt, 43 km. Neustadt would be on the signpost even though it was a small town because it marked a river crossing. He faced to the rear and drew large circles in the dark and the tanks began moving toward him. He walked rapidly in the direction which the arrow pointed and found a wide street extending away from the square. As soon as he had checked the following vehicles, he regained his turret and the column ground forward again. He was not certain when they were clear of the town.

The road went upward at a steady grade, but it was no longer straight. It curved in and out and he supposed that in places it doubled back upon itself, but he could not tell. Murrey was forced to drive more slowly. He made abrupt, grinding turns so that Garth could tell that he was no longer as confident as he had been. Twice he felt the right track begin to slip downward and the tank begin to tilt, but with a loud roar of the engine, as though the tank had been hurt or frightened, Murrey pulled it back on the road. According to

the map they were crossing a ridgeline, a divide, which separated the main valley from the lowlands which they had just left. After a time he saw that the darkness was less intense.

He stood up because he was sleepy. He sang. He shouted wild, irresponsible songs because he knew that no one could hear above the roar of the engine. The night air was heavily damp with a trace of fog and he began to believe that nothing existed except his tank and the men on it and in it and the earth which had a band around it holding it together which was the highway. The tank was stationary and the earth rotated because the tank tracks pressed against it and made it turn.

When there was sufficient light for him to distinguish everything clearly, he saw that they were traveling over a series of hills which were perpendicular to the road. Flanked on both sides by either high banks or small depressions and beyond these by a thick curtain of trees, the road appeared to run endlessly without a goal. Once he saw, after reaching the peak of one of the hills, a fairly large town located in a green, treesless valley. He halted the column and, standing on the top of the turret, studied the town through his binoculars. On the map the highway entered the town and made a sudden, sharp left turn. MacMorris stood beside the turret. Garth leaned toward him.

"Out the engines," he shouted.

He put the folded map on the top of the turret, placed the binoculars on it and stepped down to the deck and slid to the ground.

"Chow up," he called to MacMorris. His voice was too loud in the silence. The ground beyond the ditch was almost the same level

as the road. "Wake me in twenty minutes," he said, looking at MacMorris. "I don't want anything to eat."

He jumped the ditch and his heel landed and slid in soggy mud. Near a tree he found solid, almost dry ground. He stretched out, his head still in the crash helmet and felt the damp chill from the ground come through his jacket and shirt into his shoulders and then MacMorris was shaking him gently.

"Twenty minutes," he said. "Here's some hot coffee."

Garth took his helmet off and scratched his head.

"What time is it?"

"Six forty," MacMorris said. "Drink this hot coffee."

He took the canteen cup and touched his lips to it, testing. The coffee was not too hot. He felt in his jacket pocket and found his cigarettes. MacMorris struck a match and he inhaled and then drank. He listened to the silence of the forest.

"Time to get started," he said. "Turn 'em over."

MacMorris turned and whistled and made a whirling motion with his arm.

"I'm going to drive for a couple of hours," he said.

"Okay."

Garth drank the rest of the coffee and got to his feet. He wondered how so many men could go through such a night and still be so active, and then he realized that the sleep and the coffee had greatly refreshed him.

He had decided before going to sleep to take a chance and speed through the town without stopping. During the darkest part of the

night they had been held to a speed of a mile and a half an hour; now they could force the tanks up to twenty or twenty-five miles per hour on a straightaway road. At the outskirts they saw a few startled inhabitants scurrying for shelter. Then, turning a corner, he was confronted by a gray frame building which had wide screened porches and red crosses painted on it. Before the main entrance to the hospital, standing at attention, was a completely uniformed German officer. Garth halted the column, and, as the surprised tankers began to swing the turret guns toward the German, Garth slid to the ground and walked toward the man. He turned and waited until the half-track had stopped behind the third tank.

"Hoff," he shouted.

A man detached himself from the half-track and trotted toward him. The German saluted stiffly, and Garth returned the gesture.

"Ask him if this is a Wehrmacht hospital," he said to the interpreter. Hoff spoke, and the German answered.

"It belongs to the army," said Hoff. "All convalescent cases. All the weapons are stored in a locked room."

Garth turned to MacMorris who had approached.

"Get a couple of men and take care of the weapons," he said. Then, to the interpreter, "Tell him to have someone show MacMorris where the arms are stored."

With the officer leading and Hoff following he made a hurried inspection of the hospital. The convalescent men were all awake. They followed his progress with hostile eyes, but the uniformed nurses appeared not to see him. When he was again outside he instructed the

interpreter to tell the German that his unit would not be molested so long as there were no arms or ammunition within the hospital. Several rifles now were in the gutter, propped with the butts in the street and the muzzles over the curb. MacMorris was directing the tank forward and as the track passed over the weapons they became a twisted mass. The German spoke to the interpreter.

"He wants to know whether or not you are leaving," Hoff spoke.

"Don't answer."

Garth began walking toward his tank. The German spoke again.

"He wants to know when the next Americans will be here."

Garth halted and faced the German.

"Tell him to hang out some white sheets," he said.

Hoff spoke to the German and then hurried toward the half-track.

The German clicked his heels audibly and saluted. Garth saluted again, and, climbing back up to the turret, he saw that a few persons had ventured to look out of open windows. He set the column in motion and proceeded through the town.

When they were again in the open country he bent down and found the road map where it was folded and pushed between the wall of the turret and the binocular case. The town was named Schleusingen and as nearly as he could judge by comparing the distance to Neustadt from Schleusingen, they had about twenty-six miles to go. They should drive that distance easily in two hours or less if there were no delays. He looked at his watch again. It had taken longer than he thought to go through the hospital—almost twenty minutes to get through the town. Such delays were unavoidable—his inspection of the hospital

was pointless—but there should not be any more before Neustadt. At least the map showed that the rest of the route led through open countryside with only a few villages, none of them directly on the road, in their path.

The clouds hung heavily in the dark sky, covering the horizon on all sides. When the rain came, it was without warning. They had to reduce their speed as the large drops clouded the driver's goggles, and he was forced to drive with his eyes exposed to the cold rain. The infantrymen drew on their issue raincoats and tried to protect themselves, but all became soaked before the rain gradually lessened its intensity and finally ceased altogether. Later in the morning the road began to follow a well-defined valley, the walls of which, as they progressed, rose steadily higher on each side. The ditch alongside the road grew grassy banks and later there was a continuous stream of running water which grew greater in volume with each mile. It was carrying more than its usual amount of water, he guessed, since the grass extended into the water and he supposed that the river was at flood stage. That wouldn't make any difference about the bridge, he thought, because European bridges were built to withstand floods. He began to watch ahead for sight of the river which would mean that they were close to Neustadt.

They passed a village which was located on the opposite side of the stream. A stone bridge spanned the creek, leading to a square around which the buildings of the town were clustered. German civilians, surprised into inaction at first, stared openmouthed at them as the column went past without stopping. The lieutenant looked back and saw

a dog run onto the bridge, disappear and then reappear on the road, pursuing them and probably barking. How far now to the river? The valley floor had flattened and occasionally a smaller stream joined the creek. He judged the valley to be about a quarter of a mile wide as they turned into the curve and at last he saw the river. It did not appear to be out of its banks.

Garth pressed the button of his microphone and ordered Murray to stop. The three tanks and the half-track and the jeep came to a halt without closing the interval which separated them. Garth glanced to the rear and verified this standardized procedure before climbing out of the turret and dropping onto the hard surfaced road. When he looked again toward the river, he could see only the outline of the creek which paralleled the road, the high bluff on the far side of the river, and the road and its junction where it split into diverging paths. He followed the right extension of the road with his eye, but the black line disappeared under the rising ground. He looked up at the higher ground on the right, estimating the difference in elevation between the top and the floor of the valley. At least two hundred feet, he guessed.

He walked some distance from the leading tank and when he looked back he saw Sergeant Barnes, the infantry platoon commander, standing beside the tank watching him. Garth motioned the sergeant to join him. Barnes walked stiffly, as though the hard surface was painful to his feet.

"Yes, sir?" Barnes asked.

"We'll need an outpost up there," Garth said. He pointed toward

the forested top of the hill on the right. "You'd better make it two men, with a radio. Have them take chow for two days."

A tall man with the twin stripes of a corporal on his sleeves stood behind the turret of the tank gazing at the river. Barnes signalled to him by holding his right hand along his jaw as though he held a telephone handset. The tall corporal bent over and spoke to another man on the rear deck of the tank. The radio operator nodded in reply and looked for a place to leave the tank. Finally he jumped, landing heavily on the asphalt and sprawling to his knees. He regained his feet, wiping his hands clean upon his trousers. The tall corporal set a pack radio on the edge of the tank and the radio operator came up to it backward and put his arms through the straps. He was a broad shouldered, compact man and he had to struggle into the harness. The corporal gave him his rifle and then dropped off the tank and the two began walking toward them along the road.

"This is Corporal Kirby," said Barnes, as the two men halted.

"He'll be in charge of the outpost."

"Do you have a map?" asked Garth.

"Yes," answered Kirby.

Garth held his map so that the three men could see it.

"We should be here," he said, his finger on the red line. "This is the river and this is that hill. We've got to have observation from that hill. Take a pair of glasses with you. See if the bridge is still in. Report as soon as you can. See if the road is clear."

Corporal Kirby studied the map.

"Neustadt is about two kilometers?" he asked.

"A little less," Garth said. "You ought to have a good view of it. The bridge is in the center of town. If the buildings cut off your line of sight, move along the front of the heights. You will maintain contact with the half-track, which will stay at the junction, and the half-track will relay to the tanks. Don't get out of radio contact."

Garth turned to Barnes.

"Send five men to outpost the road junction," he said. "Tell them to break out a ration as soon as they're in position. Have them dig in."

Barnes walked back to the assembled platoon. MacMorris slid down the front slope plate.

"Dry cigarette?" he asked, offering the package to Garth.

The infantry squad walked forward in column of twos, one column on each side of the road. Garth took a cigarette and inhaled as MacMorris offered a light.

"Thanks," he said, his eyes on the two columns of soldiers. He turned and looked up to the right and located Corporal Kirby and the radio operator who were beginning the climb up to the heights. Garth glanced toward the rear of the column where the half-track stood.

"Get on the radio," he said. "Tell the half-track to pull up here behind my tank. Tell the tank crews to show up. We'll take a twenty-minute break."

MacMorris climbed into the open hatch of the turret and connected his earphones to the radio control box. He spoke into the microphone. In a few seconds the tank engines began to die, and the half-track moved forward.

"Which do you want, lieutenant?" asked Kelly. He was standing erect in the assistant driver's hatch of the tank. His bulky body filled the opening completely, so that he appeared to have been cut in half and the top half planted on the steel surface of the tank. He had a ration box in each hand. "Steak or pork chops?" he asked.

"Steak," Garth said.

"Steak must be your favorite food," said Kelly. "Man! Think about it—one great big steak smothered in little steaks."

The driver, Murrey, came sleepily out of the turret and dropped to the ground. He leaned wearily against the front of the tank.

"Some drive," he said, lighting a cigarette. "I don't know how we ever stayed on the road."

Garth felt his weariness rush over him. The effect of the sleep and the coffee had been temporary. Kelly tossed Garth a ration box and handed the other box to the driver and then disappeared into the tank. A tall, thin man, Allen, the commander of the half-track, approached from the parked vehicle. He appeared unaccountably clean.

"No contact with battalion," he said. "We tried, but I guess we'll have to go up on the hill before we do any good."

Kirby and the radio operator were not in sight.

"Are you in with the outpost?" Garth asked.

"Not yet," said Allen. "They haven't come on yet. We've got a man watching."

"Okay," said Garth. "Tell your crew to chow up."

CHAPTER IV

Eric, the German soldier, heard the sound of Putzi's footsteps and the grinding, whirring sound of the mechanical flashlight which she carried. They walked without speaking and occasionally he saw her figure dimly as she squeezed the generator handle of the flashlight. Accompanying the sound of the gears, a weak orange glow appeared which became yellow and stronger. The beam was always directed at the street beneath them. To the side he saw the shadows cast by his legs. A long, hinged shaft swung forward, halted, and became hinged on the other end.

Despite the uniform, he was cold. He swung his arms vigorously across his chest. He sensed that Putzi was watching him.

"It is cold," she said.

"It is really nothing," he answered. "After we get to work we will not notice it."

Although she said nothing, he knew that she agreed. They continued, walking faster, toward the bridge. Once Putzi told him that they were in the square. She stopped, and the flashlight beam brightened. She directed the light toward what he saw was a statue. It was surrounded by a low stone wall which was surmounted by a light iron grill fence. Beyond was a pool of water and in the middle stood

a huge figure. It was a man, metallic, gleaming darkly in the light, aware of danger and challenging a monster with the club which he held behind his head. A short distance in front of the man across the still water the scaly head of a dragon thrust itself into the weak circle of light. Its mouth gaped open and its eyes appeared to sparkle evilly while it crouched close to the ground, stalking, not daring the bulging muscles which could wield the club with deadly force and accuracy. A slow dripping came from the dragon's mouth, and Eric realized with a start that the liquid was water and not blood. The glow died and the two creatures stood locked in darkness and eternal combat.

"This is our local claim to art," said Putzi. "It is our distinguishing landmark."

She moved restlessly.

"Did you see it all?" she asked. "Well, no matter. You can see it in daylight tomorrow."

She started quickly forward, and he followed. They approached an opening which led away from the square.

"Halt," the challenge came from the dark wall of buildings. They stopped.

"Who is it?" came the voice.

"Frau Kloster," said Putzi.

So, he thought, that is her name.

"Is that Stohr?" asked Putzi.

"Yes."

A dark figure came toward them. Eric saw the dark glint of a police helmet.

"Who is with you?" asked Stohr.

"A friend," said Putzi. "A German soldier."

"A soldier?" Stohr stood a few feet away, apparently trying to see him clearly in the dark. He waited for an answer.

"Yes," said Eric.

"He knows how to use explosives," said Putzi. A tone of annoyance came into her voice. "He is lost from his unit. He is going to destroy the bridge."

"Destroy the bridge?" asked Stohr.

"Oh, not tonight. We only intend to put the explosives in place. We won't destroy it until there is no other choice."

It appeared to be a time of decision. Stohr stood without speaking. Eric wished that he had a weapon. He watched Stohr for any movement.

"Do you need help?"

Stohr had made his choice. He heard Putzi sigh.

"Yes," she said. "Have you seen the explosives?"

"They are captured American supplies," said Stohr. "There are small blocks of explosive and two different types of cord. Also explosive caps."

"How many blocks of explosives?" asked Eric.

"More than a hundred."

"That should be enough. Where are they?"

"I know," said Putzi. "I can take you to them."

"I'll get the burgomaster," said Stohr.

"No."

They faced Putzi.

"Why not?" asked Stohr. "He is responsible for the explosives. And he will help. We can do it much quicker."

They watched her, trying to detect expression in the darkness. Her voice was reluctant.

"I do not want him," she said. "If you think he will help and we need the time, I suppose we will have to ask him." She spoke to Eric. "What do you think?"

"I haven't seen the explosives or the bridge. Another person to help might be necessary. I think we might need him."

"We will meet you at Englehart's," she said to Stohr. Stohr turned and vanished in the darkness.

"Englehart's?"

"The explosives are there. It is a Kneipe."

They left the square and walked downhill. She turned into a dark entrance and gestured.

"The river is only a few feet away. We will look at the explosives."

The door was unlocked. Inside it was warmer, and he took the flashlight and squeezed the lever rapidly, making a continuous beam of light. They were in a large room which had tables and chairs located at neat intervals. Toward the rear a bar covered part of the wall. Just beside the door he saw the explosives. Two camouflage raincoats covered the pile.

He knelt and picked up one of the yellow cubes. It had rounded edges and on one side there was a small, round hole pressed into the

block. Something stirred in his memory. He saw a flat wooden box which had a hinged top. The tiny latch opened and the yellow, copper tubes gleamed in the light. He remembered then that the percussion caps were attached to the fuse, then the cap was inserted in the well in the block.

There was a noise from the rear, and he let the light go out. A door opened and they saw an old woman enter the room. She held a candle before her. In the yellow light her gray hair and wrinkled face had an unhealthy appearance. She strained her eyes to look at them. Putzi stepped toward her.

"Oh, it's you," the old woman said. Her voice was flat with age.

"Frau Englehart," said Putzi.

"What are you doing here?"

"We've come after the explosives."

"Only Herr Behrens can take them," said the old woman.

"He's coming."

"What do you intend to do with them?"

"We are going to destroy the bridge."

"No!" She was furious. "That will do no good. Germany is lost. You cannot help that way."

Putzi did not answer.

"Who is that with you?"

"A loyal soldier. He is going to place the explosives on the bridge."

"You must not do it."

"We cannot do anything less."

"It will not help."

"You ought to go back to bed," Putzi's tone was that of a mother talking to a child. "Go back to bed. The burgomaster will be here soon. He is going to help."

"My building will be safe?"

"Yes. Nothing will hurt your house."

The old woman stared at them.

"Can you leave your candle?" asked Eric.

She placed the candle on a table and turned silently and walked from the room. Her slippers scuffed on the floor. Eric saw two rifles leaning against the wall. On the floor beneath them were several clips of ammunition. He opened the bolt of one of the rifles and saw that the magazine was empty. Automatically he pressed a clip into the chamber and felt the last round slip into place. He slid the bolt forward and felt it lock. He put the safety on. They heard three taps on the door, and it swung inward.

A short, heavy man limped into the room. His jacket had not been adequate for the chill of the night. The collar was turned up and the front of the jacket was buttoned tight beneath his chin. He swung his whole body at each step and Eric saw that his crippled foot was shod in a heavy, thick-soled shoe. He kept his attention on Eric, and then Eric realized that the rifle in his hands pointed toward the man. He had forgotten the rifle. He shifted his position.

"Well?" asked the crippled man.

Eric had a brief glimpse of Stohr as he closed the door behind the burgomaster. The man's thin hollow cheeks were a pale contrast to the black police uniform.

"Herr Behrens," said Putzi. "This is Eric. Eric---"

"Eric who?"

The burgomaster was heavy, but not fat. His large, capable hands hung at his sides. His narrowed eyes seemed to be estimating Eric.

"It doesn't matter. He knows how to use explosives. He is going to destroy the bridge."

"I am the only one who can order the bridge destroyed."

"Is there any question of that?"

Behrens' eyes dropped to the rifle as Eric spoke.

"I've changed my mind," he said. "The bridge will not be destroyed."

Stohr moved away from the burgomaster.

"You intend to surrender the town without fighting?" Putzi spoke.

"Yes."

Putzi spat at him. Eric swung the rifle toward Herr Behrens and slipped the safety off.

"Search him," he said.

Putzi stepped behind the burgomaster and felt his body. Eric watched Stohr.

"He's not armed," she said. She looked at Stohr. "Who are you with?"

"Germany," said Stohr. "I do not regard Herr Behrens as still holding an official position in this community."

"Good. You'll help."

"Yes."

"I'm not sure I can trust you," she said. "You won't mind if I take your pistol."

She stepped behind Stohr and, careful not to get between him and Eric, opened the flap of his holster and took out the pistol. Stohr did not move.

"We have two enemies," she said. "The invaders, and those Germans who will be the tools of the invaders. They hope to buy freedom by servility. Freedom isn't bought that way."

"Nor is it sold at a butcher shop," said Behrens.

Putzi elaborately ignored the answer. She moved toward Eric.

"Let me have the rifle," she said. "I will guard our gallant burgomaster. You and Stohr will have to do the work. I think Stohr is with us, but do not trust him altogether."

Eric gave her the rifle.

"It is not on safe," he said. "It will fire when you pull the trigger."

"I expect it to," she turned her anger on him, then it died. Her smile to him was an apology.

He put Stohr's pistol in his pocket. Stohr walked toward him.

"You can sit down," Putzi spoke to Behrens. "At this table."

She took the candle and moved to another table. The light was sufficient for Eric to work by. On the floor beside the blocks of explosives he saw several small cardboard boxes. Each contained a roll of black tape. He took four of the yellow blocks and taped them together so that they formed a square. Stohr, following his example, began making more of the multiple charges.

Two rolls of heavy, shiny cord lay to one side. He picked up one of the rolls and glanced at the end. Under the heavy cover he saw

that the cord was filled with a yellow substance. He scratched the end with his thumbnail and some of the substance broke away in small pieces. It did not make dust. He picked up the other roll and saw that it was filled with a moist, black powder. That was the fuse cord. Laying this aside, he picked up the first roll of cord. There was about twice as much of this as the other. Somewhere he had known what this cord was for, and he searched his memory. He scratched a little more of the yellow substance onto his finger. He watched Stohr taping the yellow blocks---that was it! This was an explosive cord which was used to detonate several blocks of the explosive at once. It was only necessary to make a loop of the cord around each block, or charge, and the explosive cord would detonate all at the same time. Only one cap was necessary to set off an entire series of charges.

He had noticed that the box of caps was not full. Opening the cover again, he counted eight of the copper tubes. A curious instrument resembling a dentist's forceps lay in a groove in the box. He picked it up and examined it. Looking at the caps, he saw the use of the tool. The jaws of the instrument were formed so that they would crush the hollow end of the cap around the fuse cord.

Stohr now had several squares of explosive assembled. Eric broke the string which held the fuse cord coiled and stretched it out on the floor. There was far more of the cord than he needed.

"Do you have a knife?" he asked Stohr.

Stohr stood up and felt in his pocket and then gave Eric a two bladed pocketknife. Eric measured a short piece of the cord and cut it. The fuse box had a number of small cardboard cylinders in a

compartment. He took one of these and fitted the hollow end onto the fuse cord and put a layer of the black tape over it, so that the cylinder was fastened to the cord.

"Do you have a watch?"

Stohr unfastened the leather band of his wristwatch. Eric looked at Putzi.

"This is only fuse," he said. "I want to time it to see how fast it burns."

The cardboard cylinder had a small shaft projecting from its end. Eric gave the handle of the shaft a sharp pull, and a small coil of smoke appeared from under the tape. He watched it idly until the acrid fumes penetrated to his nose and then he dropped the fuse to the floor. The minute hand moved slowly around as the fuse silently smoked. The surface of the cord became blackened as the ignition progressed. The penetrating, repugnant odor became heavier in the room. He moved the cord with his foot, and saw that it had marked the floor.

The cord burned a few seconds more than two minutes. That was more time than the person igniting the charge would need. He cut a length of the cord which would burn slightly more than one minute. To the end of the cord he fastened an igniter and to the other he crimped a copper cap with the forceps-like tool. He put the cap in the hollowed well in one of the blocks, and bent the cord around the cube and taped it securely to the explosive. Handling it carefully, he laid it aside and made a second charge exactly like the first.

Stohr had not yet finished.

"I'm going out to look at the bridge," Eric said.

Behrens had sat looking at the candle while Eric and Stohr worked. He glanced at Eric and started to speak and then remained silent.

"It's only a few feet," said Putzi. "You can't miss it."

Eric took the flashlight and opened the door. Immediately he felt the sweat which had collected under his jacket turn from warm to cold. After a few steps he saw the railings appear in the glow of light. He crouched down and turned the beam of light on the floor of the bridge. It was covered with an asphalt surface. When he held the light over the railing, he saw that the bridge was made of stone but was not arched. That meant that it had steel girders holding the weight of the floor. The water glistened in the light.

He walked out onto the bridge and again flashed the light over the side. A few feet away he saw a vertical stone support which rested on a pier in the water. Small waves rippled away from the pier. He walked along the bridge, flashing the light over the railing. There were only two supports for the entire bridge. He measured the segment between the supports. It was almost half the length of the bridge.

Just beyond the first support they had arranged the squares of explosive in three separate charges. In the center, arranged in a flat mound so that a vehicle would not interfere with it, was the smallest. On each side, just above the two main steel supports, they had concentrated the explosive. After he had connected each separate charge with the detonating cord, the two blocks with the caps and fuses were

laid in place. Then he and Stohr had carried mud from the river bank. Since they had only one bucket and shovel, it had been a long process. At first, Eric forced Stohr to carry all the mud from the bank onto the bridge. After he had completely covered the charge which had the fuses, he traded with Stohr. The task seemed endless; it appeared they would never have enough mud to finish. He would carry a bucket of mud up the steep bank, pour it out, and watch Stohr begin to pack it in place with his bare hands. Always the bucketful of mud seemed to cover much less of the charge than it should. They traded tasks again, and Stohr carried the mud. His hands became numb. At last they were finished, and the two walked back into the building.

"Is it finished?" asked Putzi.

"Yes."

She gestured toward the darkened corner of the room.

"There is something over there which might help us," she said.

"It is a panzerfaust. I think that is what it is called."

The weapon lay on the floor behind one of the tables. He picked up the long tube and carried it into the light. The trigger mechanism was folded into the safe position.

"Is this the only one?"

"It is the only one I saw. There are no more in this room."

He looked at Behrens.

"Are there any more?"

Behrens considered for a moment.

"That is the only one I have seen."

"What will we do with him?" asked Putzi. She indicated Behrens.

Eric looked at Stohr.

"We'll have to leave someone on guard here," he said. He took Stohr's pistol from his pocket and gave it to Stohr. Stohr received it silently.

"Will you stay here?" he asked.

"Certainly."

"You know how to set off the charge. Either of the fuses ought to work. The second is to be used in case of failure of the first. You will have one minute to get off the bridge after the fuse is ignited. I think you will be safe here."

"I will stay," said Stohr.

"We can trust him," he said to Putzi.

"And Herr Behrens?"

"I think we had better take him to your house. We can keep him there."

The candle was nearly consumed. Putzi blew the flame out and followed them onto the bridge. Eric gave Stohr one of the camouflaged ponchos.

"It might rain," he said.

Stohr took the coat and arranged it over the projecting fuses.

"Good," said Eric. He gestured with the light, and Behrens began his cumbersome stride off the bridge. Daylight was just beginning to lighten the night.

Putzi was shaking him.

"Stohr is here," she said. "He has a friend guarding the bridge. The telephone operator is looking for Herr Behrens. An American tank

force is coming toward us."

"Who is guarding Behrens now?"

"Stohr."

"What time is it?"

"About nine-thirty."

"When will the tanks get here?"

"They guessed at noon."

He began to put on his uniform.

"Do you know how they are coming?"

"Yes. From Mittelburg. That's southeast. A hospital is located here. The doctor warned us."

"How many tanks?"

"Three, and another vehicle. And a little one."

He smiled at her terminology.

"There are also infantrymen. About thirty."

He thought about the panzerfaust.

"It is not a large force, but too large for us. We might delay them, but I am afraid that we will be forced to destroy the bridge. Is there any news from the east?"

"None."

"Could you make some coffee?"

"It is ready now."

"Good. You and I will go out and look over the terrain. Has anyone else been searching for the burgomaster?"

"Only the telephone operator."

"Perhaps we can keep him hidden until noon."

He stood up and took her into his arms. She pressed against him for a moment, and then broke away. He followed her from the room.

Putzi did an exaggerated shoulder arms with the shovel and then marched stiffly along the black macadam for several steps.

"Halt," she commanded.

Her heels came together and she burst out laughing. Eric watched her, pleased that her mood was one of happiness, but mystified as to the cause of it. It was as though the impending action had released the tension from her and she faced the prospect gladly.

They were outside the limits of the town. Ahead of them the river valley formed a winding, sloping V. Across the river the hills tumbled abruptly down toward the valley. What he could do with an anti-tank gun on the far side of the river!

The rifle sling was beginning to slip down from his shoulder. He shifted the panzerfaust to his right hand and pushed the leather strap of the rifle securely against his neck.

"Where is the next bridge?" he asked.

"At Emsburg," she said. "That's twenty-three kilometers up the river. The highway follows the river, but they are undoubtedly after this bridge."

He thought about that.

"Yes."

"And they won't have it," she laughed.

The valley was capped with low clouds. He felt a sense of restriction but resisted the impulse to tell Putzi about it. To do so would probably destroy the mood which carried her along. It was

better to let her remain as she was, unaware of the consequences.

"Is there any danger of a flood?" he asked.

She looked at the river a moment.

"Not immediately," she answered. "The water is not very high yet. It seldom gets higher than it is."

"Has it rained much here?"

She turned and glanced appraisingly at him.

"Yes," she said. "But that is the usual thing for this season. There will not be a flood."

He was silent for a moment, trying to remember a vague something.

"A flood would help us," he said finally, abandoning the effort.

She did not reply. As they walked along he looked first at the hills across the river and then at the higher ground on the left, then back across the river. On the far side the hills were dark and overbearing. On this side they were green with new life. He continued to compare the two sides, fascinated by the one, attracted by the other.

At the junction, with his back to the river, the highway extended away on each side of him. Directly ahead the road which formed the junction twisted slightly and then lost itself.

"This is the road the Americans are on?" he asked.

"Yes."

He listened, half expecting to hear the roar of the tank engines or the screech of metal tracks. The Americans would leave the shelter of the narrower valley and be exposed for about 200 meters before turning to the right. A small cluster of trees lay between them and

the river. For a moment he considered the trees as a possible ambush. He would have an excellent position from which to fire, but the only escape was the river. He would be forced to swim the river and the far bank was without cover. Since the Americans had infantrymen with them, there would be little possibility of escaping.

Between the junction and the town lay a small grove of trees which he had noticed when they were on the road. It was a short distance from the highway and about 400 meters from the junction. Immediately behind the trees a stone fence extended at an angle toward the higher ground. The fence would be excellent protection for his escape. The distance from the trees to the highway appeared to be ideal for the panzerfaust.

"Panzerfaust," said Putzi, as though it were the first time she had seen the weapon. "Iron fist."

"Yes?"

She stared at it in silence.

"Yes?" he said again.

She had become serious, her face slightly pale and set.

"I . . . I . . . nothing," she said. "I just thought it curious that we make the best machines and that we also make the best way to destroy them."

"What does that mean?"

"We are destroying them," she said, impatiently, as though he ought to understand.

"So?"

"Nothing."

She would not look at him.

"What is your plan?" she asked.

He pointed toward the grove of trees.

"That looks like the best place," he said. "I can destroy one vehicle from there."

"Can you escape?"

"With luck."

They began to walk back toward the town. When they came even with the trees, he stopped.

"Go back—"

"No," she said. "I'll walk over with you."

"The ground is muddy. You'll get your feet wet."

"It doesn't matter."

They walked on patches of grass, picking their ^{way} carefully to avoid the mud, but the grass was also wet. He leaned the rifle against a tree and laid the panzerfaust on the poncho, then moved along the edge of the grove selecting a firing position. Two trees a slight distance apart gave, from between them, a clear field of fire to the highway and also would allow him to observe the junction. When it became necessary for him to escape, he could go directly to the rear a few paces and then be shielded by a thicker portion of the grove.

He spread the poncho on the ground and began to dig the hole, placing each shovelful of dirt on the poncho. When several shovelful were on the garment, he dragged the dirt back into the grove where the fresh earth would not be seen from the highway.

"You'd better go back to town," he said, returning to the girl.

"Someone will have to be there to set off the charge."

"All right," she said. Her gay mood had not returned.

"You may be able to hear the tanks from the junction," he said.

"At least, you'll hear them when they come into the town. Don't wait any longer than that."

She nodded.

"I'll try to destroy a tank from here. If there's any firing you should hear it."

"Be careful," she said.

"I'll meet you at your house," he said. "Keep Behrens a prisoner if you can. He would probably help the Americans if he could."

She stared at him.

"Do you know what they will do if you are caught? You are not a member of the armed forces."

"Yes," she said.

When the rain started, Eric pulled the varicolored poncho over his head and spread it so that the hole was completely covered. The garment was old, but it still kept the rain from flowing into his foxhole. He felt the rifle to see if it was dry. The metallic barrel was cold to his fingers. He should have oiled the rifle before having come to the grove, but he could do that later. The panzerfaust did not require such care. It could get wet and it would not matter.

He wished he had a helmet. Not only would a helmet keep his head dry, but it would add to his camouflage. His blond hair would reveal him to an observer who came close, but from the road, he judged, they would not see him. If they should happen to send men to investigate

the tiny grove of trees, he would have to surrender or escape. His only chance to inflict damage was the surprise of an ambush.

When the rain was most intense he felt a stream of water trickle down behind his left ear and under the poncho. The water ran down his neck and spread over his shoulder. He pulled the drawstring tighter around his neck. By leaning his head forward he induced the water to drop off his hair. Some of the water ran down to his nose and dropped off there, and some of it dropped off his chin. He was amused at this, and began to laugh.

The image of the bridge with the three explosive charges came to him. He had done a good job on the bridge. The American explosives had been easy to work with. It was fortunate that he had known that the cord with the clay-like substance was not fuse cord, but an explosive cord. It made possible the use of only one cap for all the separate charges he had placed on the floor of the bridge. The mud would not dry out, either, in the rain, but there was the danger that it might wash away. He hoped Putzi would realize that the mud must be there and would replace it if too much washed away. He was sure she would.

After a time the rain ceased and he did not worry about the mud. Time passed slowly. Putzi was a strange person, but a nice person, physically. If he could inflict some damage on the Americans and escape, perhaps he could induce her to cross the river. There they might find a place to stay, a place where he could get rid of his uniform and they could live together. But would she live with him? Or they might live in her house—but not if Behrens lived. And if

they should stay on this side of the river, Putsi would insist that he fight the Americans.

Would she live with him? What did it involve? Twice she had challenged him and he had accepted the challenge. The first time had been when she asked him where his weapons were and the second time was in bed. But the second time was not a challenge. She had made that plain when she asked him if he would continue to fight. But in bed she had been surprisingly vicious, as though she had been so long without a man that she could no longer deny herself. And yet, that morning she had broken away from him with a promise. It was a thought which he did not like. Not only did he not like being used, but sex was something different than that. Two persons brought together something which was lacking in either alone and which made them complete. That was the way it should be. If the bridge was successfully destroyed and he escaped from the ambush, would she be willing to cross the river and make the attempt to lose themselves in a seething, unsettled society?

He wished he knew more about himself. Sometimes he felt that, if given a start, a push, the past would rush upon him like a racing river, but the thing which could start it would not enter his mind. The evening before when he was asleep she had awakened him from a dream. Somehow or somewhere he related the dream to the flash of light which was the only thing he could remember from the past. He concentrated, trying to recall the dream. If he could only remember the dream, he might start the past into motion and find for himself a personality which would make him a more interesting person to Putsi. Her husband

was dead. She would need a man to help her through the days ahead-- a man who believed in their faith. And she had a home, a place of security even though making it secure would involve murder. Would Stohr go that far? If he wouldn't, he could become another Behrens. But, even with that, everything was favorable to their continued association. Nothing was lacking but love, and that could be bought. But would she live with him?

CHAPTER V

MacMorris

Sergeant MacMorris, the commander of Garth's tank, took a ration box from Kelly and began to tear the cardboard cover. As he did he watched Garth, who had walked to the junction to check the infantry position and to look at the town through his glasses. I'm getting better, MacMorris thought. Just a minute ago I almost followed Garth's thoughts. And as Garth turned and started back to the tanks MacMorris thought: close to six feet tall, a little too thin, needs a shave, never any expression on his face, never without a gun when he leaves the tank, never without his helmet, habit. What's the lieutenant thinking now? Bet he looks up toward the outpost. No? There, that's it. He finally looked.

The infantry corporal who had been put in charge of the five men who were posted at the junction had left the position and was following Garth. What could that mean? Perhaps the men had forgotten his map. Not likely. Probably Garth had wanted him back at the tank for something.

"Kelly," called Garth, when he was still some distance from the tank. "Get Bedford and Merrill. Have them bring their rations."

Bedford and Merrill were the commanders of the other two tanks.

Kelly set his ration can carefully on the fender of the tank and turned to obey the order. Garth looked at Sergeant Barnes.

"I want you and your squad leaders," he said. "We'll go over the plan."

"Yes, sir," said Barnes.

Yes, thought MacMorris, I'm getting better. He watched Garth as Garth began to open the meat can which his ration contained. He remembered the first time that he had seen Garth. He had been impressed by the man's cold blue eyes and reserved impersonal manner.

"He has an epithelial layer of reserve," he had once said to Kelly.

"He what?" asked Kelly, amazed.

"Epithelial," said MacMorris, at a loss to explain. "It's a shell. It's outside of him. It's not that he's an officer. Officers don't get through it, either. Nobody can get through the shell. He talks to you, and laughs, and gives orders, but you never really know what he's thinking. He's . . . well, he's just hard to explain."

Kelly had turned and frowned at Garth who stood some distance away.

"Rats," he said. "You've had too much schooling, or not enough. He's just a man, wishing he had a drink or a woman, or both."

To Kelly, he thought, the problem was simple. It was not even a problem. To Kelly, Garth was another man who received more money than he did, who could go to a more exclusive bar than he could, and who had more authority than he did, but who couldn't possibly have gotten any more satisfaction from a woman or a drink than he could.

Perhaps this simplification of Kelly's had been a factor in MacMorris's attitude, for the understanding of Lieutenant Garth had become a subject of some importance to him. He ceased to discuss the man with his friends, for there were none who were able to carry on a conversation about Garth, or, if they were able, were willing to. He thought that Murrey, the driver, might have an opinion, but Murrey was not given to expressing himself except in short, closely guarded sentences concerning the mechanical reality.

Garth had apparently put off the issuance of orders until they had finished the meal. The lieutenant leaned against the tank, puffing a cigarette and watching Kelly as the assistant driver heated a small can of water over the gasoline stove. Before the water came to a boil, Kelly carried the can around and poured some in each canteen cup. MacMorris broke the tinfoil packet of soluble coffee and watched the water become brown.

Garth had taken command of the tank platoon following an action in France when the original commander had been killed. They were engaged with the enemy at the time, and there had been a certain amount of resentment on the part of the older members of the platoon toward the new commander. Garth had apparently been unaware of this trouble, or, if he was aware of it, he ignored it. That's the trouble, MacMorris thought, you never know.

He recalled the day in Hurtgen Forest. Vossenack, that was the town. Garth had by then been accepted by the platoon. How he had overcome this resentment MacMorris did not understand. It was somehow a part of the mystery of the man, a part that needed explanation, a

part of the magnetism that drew MacMorris's almost resentful attention. Or perhaps it was not so much a cause of resentment as of frustration. How had he done it? Bit by bit, by refusing to involve himself, by speaking only impersonally and bluntly, by making every move count in the fight to survive, the man had established himself as the leader. When he came to the platoon he was disliked; six weeks later he was, if not liked or admired, respected and accepted on his own terms

"Hey, Mac," Gordon had called, coming out of the building which housed company headquarters. "Better alert your platoon. You and Bedford better come inside. Garth'll probably want to see you."

Standing alongside the tank, where he had been passing rounds of heavy ammunition to MacMorris, Kelly had turned and faced Gordon.

"What's up?" he had asked.

"I dunno."

Kelly's face turned up to MacMorris. They were loading the tank for further fighting, but neither soldier wanted to face the reality that the time was at hand.

"God damn," said Kelly. "Aren't three days enough? Don't we ever get any rest?"

"That's the way it is," said Gordon. "Garth'll probably want you right away, Mac. Be sure to alert your platoon."

MacMorris glanced back toward Bedford's tank.

"Hell," he said. "The whole platoon's alerted. Bedford can hear you."

MacMorris dropped off the tank and Murray replaced him beside the turret and stood waiting to receive the next round.

"Speed it up," he said to Murrey.

Bedford came through the mud and they walked toward the building. The low clouds threatened rain or snow. MacMorris had been trying to suppress for some time the fact that he was a coward. It was a hard thing for a man to face, especially after he had come such a long way, but it was true and it was better to admit it. Now he wanted to tell Garth that he could not go on, but his mind refused to face even that. He simply wanted to quit where he was and face whatever punishment was inflicted.

They entered the room where Garth sat at a table and MacMorris felt a moment of panic when Garth looked at them. Garth stared at them silently, seemingly speculating on their willingness to return to the fight. Then he spoke, and MacMorris sensed that the wall around Garth was not entirely of reserve. Partly, it was Garth's calm appraisal and assumption that they were ready to return to combat, but it went deeper than that. A mysterious area of reserve and strength surrounded Garth, an area, a source, from which MacMorris could draw as well as Garth. This was the sort of experience at which his logical mind rebelled. Later, he promised himself, he would determine exactly what had happened, what the exact conditions were which had produced this feeling.

Outside, the temperature was not yet low enough to freeze the ground. The tanks were sunk deep into the mud. Low lying clouds, gray and impenetrable to the eye, hung over the battlefield. Inside the turret MacMorris adjusted the contact microphone around his throat. He picked up the crash helmet and checked the connections for the

microphone and earphones. Garth's legs came down into the turret behind him and after a moment he heard through the earphones, Trident Two, over. That would be Garth's voice. There was a moment of hissing silence, then the answer, Trident Two, over. That would be Bedford's voice. Are you ready? Yes. Follow me, out. During the short pause Garth must have changed the control switch to Interphone. Driver—that would be Garth's voice again—move out. The roar of the engine grew louder and the front end of the tank rose in the air and the tracks broke from the grip of the mud and the steel mass lurched forward.

They followed the road to the junction of the main road to Voessenack and turned left. The first few scattered, shell-marked houses of the town appeared in the periscope through which he watched their progress. Ahead of the tank eight or ten bareheaded German prisoners appeared. They moved at a trot, hands clasped behind their heads. Two Americans followed the Germans at the same pace.

The explosions of the artillery were becoming more distinct. Except for the prisoners and the two Americans he had seen no signs of life along the street. Then they came to a bend in the street and Murree edged the tank around the corner, squeezing it against the houses, almost, for protection. Then the fire order from Garth. Target—enemy tank. Range—300. Traverse right. MacMorris saw the enemy tank then. It was almost broadside to them and it stood motionless. Steady . . . on, came Garth's voice. Armor piercing. Then the long pause. He had the tank so clearly in view that he could almost pick the point, at the joining of the turret and the hull, at which the projectile would strike. But there was only silence. It required only one word more to complete the fire order, one additional word to

send the round on its way. But still Garth said nothing. Then MacMorris saw that the turret of the German tank had begun to turn toward them. In a moment of panic he twisted his head to the rear and looked up at Garth. The man's motionless body was upright in the turret. MacMorris turned back to the sight and saw that the gun was still correctly aimed. He seized the trigger grip firmly and squeezed and saw a small silvery flash appear on the side of the German tank before the smoke from the gun drifted down and obscured the target.

Then Garth's voice came. Target hit. Repeat range. Fire. When Harper tapped him on the shoulder to indicate that the gun was again loaded he could see the enemy tank again. The turret had ceased to move but the tank was moving backward toward cover. He fired the gun and saw the enemy tank reel under the impact

He suddenly realized that he had been eating mechanically, that his ration was almost consumed. He glanced down at the men in front of the tank. What had been the cause of Garth's delay in giving the final word of the fire order? MacMorris could suspect that he knew but he could never be certain. He felt that he should consider Garth without emotion and, he added with a smile, reflectively. It was all very well for a textbook to outline the scientific method, but to practice the method on human material was a different matter. The observer must not only, must not only . . . he searched his mind, the observer must not only observe and experiment and analyze, he must pick his time. The proper time and place. But that, he thought, fits into the scientific method. A controlled experiment. Kelly could be the control.

Kirby

When the two men who were to be the outpost had climbed to the top of the ridge line, Kirby, the infantry corporal, could feel the moisture from the wet grass in his boots. A rough outcropping of stone jutted out of the black earth and then fell away abruptly so that a cliff was formed from which they could look up and down the valley. They were breathing heavily from the exertion of the climb. Scott placed the radio on a large stone and began to open the zippers on the canvas cover.

Kirby wiggled his toes in his wet socks and watched Scott. His toes seemed to stick together. Scott screwed the flexible antenna into its socket and then plugged the handset into its proper socket. Kirby laid the two rifles alongside the radio.

"Do you have any dry socks?" he asked.

"No," said Scott. "Mine are all in my pack."

"So are mine. I guess we're out of luck."

"We should get to change before the day is over," said Scott. He twisted the volume control knob and a frying sound was heard in the earphone. Holding the handset against his ear, he pressed the switch with his thumb and blew into the microphone. He moved the tuning control slightly and said, "Trident Two. Trident Two."

Looking through the field glasses, Kirby felt that he was suspended in space above the valley. The buildings of the town were clustered in a group at a slight bend in the river. From the point at which the highway entered the town, houses outlined the course of the street, although he could not see the street itself. Looking at the town as a whole, it seemed a huge comma. The river was a placid

barrier. He could not see the flow of the current, nor could he see the bridge. The valley floor was green with new plant growth and was divided into long, narrow fields which lay parallel to the river and followed the contours of the valley walls. Across the river he saw a road which went directly into the far slope of the valley wall, disappearing into a depression similar to the one through which they had approached the river. He wiggled his toes again and looked at Scott.

"They're chowing up," said Scott. "They'll probably be ten or fifteen minutes longer."

"Tell them we can't see the bridge," said Kirby.

Scott spoke into the microphone.

"It's the lieutenant," he said, looking up. "He wants to speak to you."

"Damn," said Kirby. He took the handset and said, "Hello."

"Kirby?" came Garth's voice.

"Yes, sir."

"What about the bridge?"

"We can't see it. It's hidden by houses and trees."

"Could you see it if you moved along the ridge?"

"I don't think so. We'd have to go an awful long way. Probably several miles."

"Where are you?"

"About half-way from you to the town."

"Stay where you are then. What can you see?"

Kirby described the town. It was without any sign of life.

Bloom

Sergeant Bloom reached inside the glove compartment of the medical jeep and found a package of cigarettes. He opened the package and extended it toward Perkins, the driver. Perkins, who was leaning on the steel frame over the hood of the jeep to which the two litters were strapped, took a cigarette and bent over to get a light.

He glanced up questioningly.

"No thought for the day?" he asked.

Bloom inhaled and then studied his cigarette.

"I've got one," he said. "But it's still dim. I can't seem to get it clear."

"Don't spoil it," said Perkins.

Bloom glanced quickly at Perkins. He tried to determine whether or not the tone had been sarcastic. Perkins was in many ways, he thought, a sly sort of person. He laughed at Bloom's jokes, but Bloom could not think that he was trying to flatter him. Perkins picked up the canteen cup and hid his face.

"I'm working on it," Bloom said. "I'll get it."

Perkins set the cup on the hood of the jeep and stretched.

"Oh, hell," he said. "Why did I ever get assigned to the medics? I'd have been a helluva good mail clerk in some division headquarters."

"You?" said Bloom. "Look at me, just ready to go into medical school. I get jerked out and end up here." He saw Perkins glance at him, estimating him.

"That's tough."

"I suppose because you're older than the rest of us you represent the wisdom of old age? You know that ten years from now it won't matter."

"That's right," said Perkins. "If you live, that's enough."

"Oh, balls," said Bloom. "I've been in the army three years and I'm still a lousy sergeant. Stuck with it, too. I couldn't go a grade higher if I stayed in a thousand years."

He felt that his emotions had been pent up within himself for such a long time they were overflowing, and then he thought: Let's not go Hollywood. He did not want to say any more, but it came out.

"Do you know why?" he asked. "Do you know why I can't go any higher? It's because I'm a god damn kike."

Perkins looked as though he had found someone performing an act of which he was ashamed.

"It's the truth," Bloom insisted. "Do you know there's not a single Jewish officer in this battalion? The colonel kicked two of them out."

"Let's be reasonable," Perkins said. "There just aren't as many Jewish officers in the army."

"Is that any reason?"

"There have been a number of Protestant and Catholic officers leave the battalion."

"How about you?" Bloom tried to penetrate the complacency. "You seem to be pretty smart. Don't you think you should be something more than a private? A lieutenant, maybe?"

"Sure."

"What's your reason? Is your wife proud of you?"

Perkins laughed at him.

"Not too much," he said. "I killed a man because of her. I think she loved him. In her own way, of course."

Perkins's face, still grinning, seemed to be framed by the upright windshield behind him.

"Bloom," he said, breaking the picture by seizing the empty ration box and twisting it viciously, "you seem to be having a bad day. I'll tell you something. The Doc knows, and I suppose some of the staff officers. I came into the army from doing a life sentence for murder. I'm not going to tell you where or when, but that's it."

Bloom stared at the strained face.

"Did your mother know her son would associate with murderers?" Perkins asked. "Would she have let you go if she had?"

He spoke hesitatingly, lamely, apparently searching for something. He glanced toward the tanks and the grin reappeared.

"Murderers," he said. "Most everyone you can see has had a try at it."

Bloom drank from the canteen cup. The coffee was now cold.

"Well, my kike friend," said Perkins. "That's it. I don't give a damn whether you tell anyone."

He slipped his cigarette into the ditch, and began stuffing his empty meat cans into the cardboard containers.

"And if you think I wasn't glad to get into the army," he continued, "well, you've never been in prison. I'm damn glad to be in the army, but I'm not taking any chances on getting killed. I'd still like to be a mail clerk in some division headquarters."

Bloom decided that his own feeling was irrational. He wished that he had known this about Perkins before. For some reason he felt more secure. Here was a man who actually knew what killing was. A

tank engine backfired twice, and then the noise became a steady roar.

Perkins threw the ration boxes into the ditch.

"Well?" he asked. "No thought for the day?"

CHAPTER VI

As he stuffed the empty tin from the ration back into the ration box and then forced in upon the tin the remnants of paper and the hard crackers which were supposed to satisfy his hunger, Garth made a mental checklist for the plan of attack and the order he had formulated.

Item: the small grove of trees about two hundred yards from the junction on the right side of the highway leading to town. The trees were about one hundred yards from the highway and were the most likely spot for an ambush. He did not think that there was really any possibility of an ambush from the grove but it was habit to suspect such a good position. There were two courses: he could order Barnes to send infantrymen to clear the grove or he could fire on it with machine guns. Actually, of course, there was a third course--to ignore the threat. But since he had defined the threat he could not ignore it. And, since the possibility of ambush was next to nothing, he would fire on the grove and continue without the delay. It was, as Ike had said of the Ardennes, a calculated risk.

Item: after firing the turret machine gun at the grove of trees he would order the tank gun--the 76--fired up on the slope to the right of the town. The exploding shells would warn the German populace that the enemy had arrived--would warn them that the Americans were there

and would be at the same time a demand to surrender, a command to hang out white flags and to submit to the conqueror.

Item: the plan to move on the bridge. Enemy information: none. Disposition of friendly troops: one squad of infantry, dismounted, loading. The tanks. CP location: Garth's tank. Medic: last vehicle in column. The second squad of infantry, dismounted, bringing up the rear.

Garth tossed the ration box into the ditch. Looking about, he saw that Sergeant Barnes was lighting a cigarette and that the infantry squad leaders appeared to have completed their meals.

"Tank commanders," Garth called. "Over here. Infantry too."

He knelt before the tank and spread his map on the macadam surface of the highway. Glancing up, he verified that the men were all in positions where they could see his map. He looked around until he located the corporal who had been placed in charge of the men at the junction.

"This junction," Garth said to the man, "must be held. We don't know what's on our left. But if there is anything, it'll be German."

He paused and glanced at the circle of faces.

"This road which we have just come over is our only sure way out if we run into anything. If the junction is attacked it takes priority over everything else. If you're driven off the junction, retreat toward the town. If that happens, we'll hole up there."

Garth turned to Allen, the half-track commander.

"Keep the half-track at the junction. You'll provide the radio link with the outpost. Okay?"

Allen nodded silently.

"Now, about going into town. One squad of infantry will lead, Sergeant Barnes in command. Then the tanks, then the medics' jeep. Finally, the second squad of infantry as the rear guard. Any questions?"

The circle of faces remained expressionless.

"No questions," said Garth. "I'll go on. As soon as my tank turns at the junction Sergeant MacMorris will fire his turret machine gun at a grove of trees about two hundred yards from the junction."

MacMorris stood erect and tried to locate the grove.

"You can't see it from here," said Garth. "But it's no problem from the junction."

Garth considered the advisability of giving his reasons for firing on the grove. He decided against the idea.

"After firing on the grove MacMorris will fire two rounds of 76 up on the high ground just to the right of the town," he said. "This is to warn them that we're coming and to get some white flags out. We lose surprise but it should help them to surrender peacefully."

The faces were still impassive.

"The infantry will stay about two hundred yards ahead of the tanks until we get into town. Then we'll pull up with you. Stay on the main street in town. The way to the bridge ought to be clear. If there's any fighting—well, we'll deal with that when it comes. Any questions?"

Sergeant Barnes was frowning at his map. Finally the infantryman shook his head and folded the map and thrust it into his jacket pocket. Garth stood erect and folded his map.

"No questions?" he asked again and paused. "We have almost completed our mission," he continued. "There is nothing I know of which can stop us now. But I'll wish you all the best of luck."

Sergeant Barnes saluted and then the other infantrymen made the gesture. Garth returned the salute. Bedford and Merrill turned and moved to the rear toward their tanks. Garth saw MacMorris signal to Murrey to start the engine. Then MacMorris climbed up the front slope plate and on into the turret. Kelly's hatch was already closed and fastened. The top of Murrey's crash helmet was still visible in the driver's hatch. Murrey's face was peering out at him and then the hatch cover began to swing shut and after a moment the periscope was moved. Garth pulled himself up the front of the tank and stood beside the turret.

Inside the turret he could see Harper sitting beneath and to the left of the 76. MacMorris was in the gunner's position with his face pressed against the gunner's periscope. Garth stood on the tank commander's step and plugged his earphones into the communication system. Ahead, the infantrymen were beginning to assemble in two columns, one on each side of the road. Sergeant Barnes walked along in the center of the road, looking at each man in turn. Garth found the microphone and, disentangling it from the hook, brought it to his lips. He pressed the button and said: Okay, let's go. He did not want to say the words because up to now there always had seemed to be a choice which he as the leader had, a time in which he could pause to assess events, but now he had said the words and the tank was moving between the two lines of infantrymen who stood staring up at it and there was

no turning back. Now they were caught up in a chain of events which might lead inevitably anywhere and if he could think fast enough he could retain control but if he once lost control then events regulated themselves and there was only Fate left.

Murrey slowed at the junction and made the turn to the right. Garth ordered him to halt and then told MacMorris to fire on the grove of trees. The gun moved to the right and the sharp crackle of the machine gun came to him from inside the turret. He watched the tracers plunge into the young trees. MacMorris fired short bursts, traversing and elevating the gun expertly as he ranged the bullets through the area. Then the firing ceased. Garth began his fire order.

"Target," he said, "open ground to right of town. Range one two-hundred. Traverse left. HE. Fire."

He heard faintly the clang of the block as it snapped shut behind the round of 76 ammunition. Then there was a pause and suddenly, expected and unexpected too, the gun was fired. The turret shook with the recoil. The sound was always louder, the first round, than he expected it to be. The smoke drifted away and he watched the impact area. When he thought he had lost it, he saw a yellow explosion on the ground short of where he had wanted the round to land.

"Up four hundred," he spoke into the microphone. "Fire."

The muzzle of the gun moved upward and then the second round was fired. This time the impact was in the area he wanted.

"Target," he said. "Cease firing."

The infantrymen who were to lead had moved off the road and were squatting and watching the gun. Garth raised his right hand high above

his head and signalled Sergeant Barnes to move forward. Quickly the infantrymen assembled back on the road and began, still in two columns, to march toward the town. Sergeant Barnes walked in the middle of the road, slightly behind the two leading men. It was not, Garth thought, a good position for the infantry commander, but he could not do anything about it now. When the infantrymen were even with the grove of trees he ordered Murrey to move forward at the same pace the marching men used.

He found his binoculars and slipped the leather strap around his neck. Ahead, the buildings of the town which he could see were gray outlines. He tried to steady himself enough in the turret so that he could see more clearly through the binoculars but someone had changed the focus and by the time he had reset it for each eye he was even with the grove of trees. He tried again to look at the town but decided it was easier to see without the glasses.

The noise, at first, was weak. Eric concentrated his attention on it. The distant, continuous thunder grew louder and he identified it definitely as the sound of tanks. He watched the opening between the hills for a moment and then nervously took the rifle and the panzerfaust from the hole beside him and laid them on the ground before him. The noise changed its pitch and its intensity. It had lost its grating quality and was now a steady roar and he realized the vehicles had stopped. The metallic tracks of the tanks were no longer screeching against the road surface, but the engines continued to run.

Six men walked toward the road junction. They walked stiffly, as though their legs were numb, and small spurts of gray smoke came from

some of the men. He watched for the tanks but they did not appear. The men stopped at the road junction and one of them began pointing to various locations. Each time he pointed a man walked to the spot and laid his rifle and pack on his raincoat. They took shovels from their packs and began to dig holes.

When the noise from the tank engines ceased the day hung quiet and heavy. There was no movement other than the men digging at the junction. Occasionally he heard an indistinct word which carried to him from the men. Then he thought: They should have an outpost, a lookout. Turning toward the rear he strained his eyes to see through the branches of the trees. There, nearing the top of the ridge, were two men. One of the two carried two rifles and the other had a large pack on his back. An outpost, undoubtedly. The pack was a radio. He watched until they disappeared. If he escaped he must remember that he would probably be under observation from the hill.

He waited impatiently. The rifle lay pointed toward the junction. He considered the possibility of hitting one of the men, although he had no intention of firing. The range was too great to expect other than a chance hit. There were probably currents of air flowing into or out of the mouth of the valley in which the tanks were concealed which would throw the bullet off. He tried to recall whether or not there had been a breeze in his face when he had stood at the junction. When the men had finished digging their holes they began opening what he thought must be ration boxes. They tried to build a fire but evidently the twigs and tree branches were too wet, for after a short time they abandoned the effort. Then, before the men at the junction had finished eating, he heard a tank engine start.

The sound was a welcome relief. After a moment two single-file columns of infantrymen, one column on each side of the highway, approached the road junction. A tank appeared, and, after short intervals, two more tanks came into sight. Bringing up the rear of the vehicles was a jeep with red crosses painted on the sides. Following the last vehicle two more columns of infantry walked. Both columns of infantrymen carried their rifles slung over their shoulders. Eric decided that this was a good sign.

The first tank made the turn at the junction and faced toward the town. After moving a few feet past the junction the tank stopped. For a moment nothing happened except that one of the infantrymen motioned for the men on the near side of the road to cross over so that the two columns became one. Then Eric saw that the turret of the tank was turning toward him. Quickly he lifted the rifle from where it lay pointed toward the junction and set it beside the panzerfaust, resting on the bottom of the hole. He watched the tank until the gun in the turret flashed and almost instantly he heard the sharp crack of a bullet ricocheting above him. He crouched down in the hole, not panic stricken, but wondering if he should have waited behind the stone fence behind the grove. The firing on the grove could mean that the infantrymen were moving toward him under cover of the fire. But why should they attack the grove? If he had been seen--perhaps by the outpost--then all was lost regardless. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the firing stopped. Slowly he raised his head just in time to see a blast of white smoke appear in front of the tank gun. The sound was loud, even at the distance he was from the tanks. A few seconds later another round was

fired from the gun. Eric turned toward the town and saw the yellow flash of the exploding round up on the high ground to the right of it. For a moment he puzzled over this. Surely they could not be such poor gunners. Then he realized that the Americans were offering a chance to surrender.

The man in the turret of the tank whose gun had been fired leaned over and shouted at the infantrymen. The man who had given orders before began to walk toward the town. The column split into two parts and resumed their former positions. When they were about even on the highway with Eric, the first tank began to move. Eric raised the panzerfaust from its position on the bottom of the hole and laid it on the ground pointing toward the highway. After the men had passed him, he slowly picked up the panzerfaust and slid the tail of the rocket over his right shoulder. He aligned the first tank in the sight and followed its approach.

As soon as the first tank was even with him he shifted to the second and followed it. Then he moved slightly and found the third tank in the sights. When it was even with him he squeezed the trigger bar and felt the rocket fire. He closed his eyes and felt a blast of hot dust on his face and then opened his eyes as a reddish yellow rosette of flame budded on the side of the third tank.

When the sound of the explosion came to him, Garth was watching the squad of infantrymen which marched at the head of the column. He twisted about and looked at the two tanks and then back at the half-track, which had remained at the junction. When he looked at the tanks

again a lump of white smoke appeared to be stuck in the hatch of the third tank and the tank had stopped. Merrill, the tank commander, came out of the smoke and fell onto the rear platform. Another man came out of the smoke which billowed now from the hatch. The second man fell forward on his hands and knees, shaking his head and coughing. Bits of smoke fell out of the folds of his clothing and floated away. Garth saw him turn around and saw his head and shoulders disappear in the smoke. After an interminably long time he reappeared, pulling a squirming bundle which turned into a man. The tank commander, who had jumped off the rear of the tank and now stood alongside it, caught the third man as the gunner lowered him by his shoulders. The gunner crouched over the driver's hatch and tried to lift it, but the cover was securely locked. The green paint on the hull of the tank was turning black and huge bubbles formed and broke like boils.

Garth saw that he was facing the grove of trees and knew that the turret of his tank must have moved around to the right. Then he realized that he had ordered the movement.

"Target," he spoke into the microphone. "Grove of trees. Machine guns."

MacMorris fired a burst which went high. He lowered the gun and sent tracers darting at the bases of the trees. The gun from the second tank picked up the target. Garth looked again at the burning tank. The tank commander and the gunner crouched over the outstretched form of the loader. The smoke had changed from white to gray and small shoots of flame appeared in the mass. The driver's and assistant driver's hatches were still closed.

The two machine guns raked the grove. Tracers seemed to float for a distance and then, sensing their target, to acquire a new impetus and splat savagely into the wet earth, digging up tiny pieces of mud and deflecting among the trees. Garth ordered a round of high explosive into the gun. Both of the infantry squads had left the road and were running toward the grove. The men carried their rifles at a ready position. Garth ordered MacMorris to fire the gun. He felt the jar of the recoil shake the tank as the muzzle blast obscured the target. The grove disappeared in sound and then he saw the shell explode. A small tree, uprooted by the impact, flew into the air. Shrapnel whistled through the trees. The range was too short. He moved the switch to radio and said: "No more guns. Use only machine guns."

A jarring explosion shook the burning tank. The heavy ammunition was beginning to explode. He hoped there was no ammunition in the big gun of the burning tank, but there was a chance that there might be.

"Pull over to the left side," he ordered Murrey. The tank began to move as Murrey braked the left track. He motioned to the second tank to follow. Garth brought the microphone to his lips. The infantry squad from the rear was nearing the grove.

"Cease firing," he ordered.

When fire from the machine guns had ceased, Garth waved to the men to attack the grove. To his right, like popcorn popping, he could hear the crackle of exploding small arms ammunition in the burning tank. The rounds of 76 millimeter exploded with a hoarse rumble, and at each explosion flame shot from the open hatch. The upper half of the tank was obscured in the black smoke.

Garth disconnected his earphones, lifted himself outside the turret, and then dropped off the side of the tank. Above him MacMorris's face appeared over the edge of the turret. Garth waved to MacMorris to move the tank forward and then he ran toward the two men who now, with the loader supported between them, retreated from the burning tank. The medical jeep skidded to a halt beside them. Bloom was out of the jeep and expertly loosening the litter from its position on the hood. Just as Garth arrived they stretched the loader on the litter and lifted it onto the steel rack. Garth looked at the tank commander.

"Go back to the junction," he ordered. "Stay there."

"Did anyone else get out?" asked Merrill. The question was more a request for reassurance than for information, but there was no time for feelings.

"No. What was it?"

"Bazooka or panzerfaust. It hit just behind the assistant driver."

"Go back with Bloom."

It was necessary to shout above the noise of the exploding ammunition. Black acrid smoke drifted over them. Garth watched the tank commander and the gunner climb into the rear of the medical jeep. Bloom was examining the man on the litter.

"Get back," Garth shouted. "You're too close. Get back."

Bloom's white face peered at him through the smoke. He motioned to the driver and jumped into the jeep as it began to move. Garth turned and ran toward the grove of trees. The infantrymen from the rear had already entered the area. Sergeant Barnes and his squad appeared on the left. He entered the grove and an infantryman called to him.

"Here it is, lieutenant," said the man. He stood over a foxhole, pointing the muzzle of his rifle uselessly into the empty hole. "Only one hole," he said. "Must have been only one man."

On the bottom of the hole Garth saw a metal tube. Without considering his action, he dropped into the hole and picked it up. Sergeant Barnes approached and stood looking down at him. He offered the hollow tube to Barnes who took it and looked at it questioningly.

"Panzerfaust," said Garth, irritated that Barnes should not seem to comprehend what had happened.

Looking toward the road he saw that the site had been well chosen. He placed his hands on the surface of the ground and hoisted himself out of the hole. He saw that the dirt from the hole had been carried some distance to the rear and scattered in a thicket of bushes. The ambush had been prepared by a highly trained soldier; consequently he would have some planned route of escape. Infantrymen moved about aimlessly in the grove. Trying to control his anger he glanced about for the escape route. By now the infantrymen would have destroyed any tracks which might have been an indication. It had been necessary for them to enter the grove, and yet he could not dismiss his anger with that excuse. To the left, at the far corner of the grove, he saw a stone fence. As he walked toward it Barnes came running after him. Garth stopped and waited.

"It looks like whoever did it escaped," Garth said when Barnes had halted before him. "I want you to get your men back on the road and take them on in to town as quickly as you can. Sieze the bridge and wait there."

"Yes, sir," Barnes said. He saluted and then turned to the infantrymen.

Garth looked toward his tank. MacMorris, he could see, was watching him. Garth pointed at MacMorris's tank and then raised his hand in a gesture drawing the tank to him. MacMorris's helmeted head nodded. Garth then pointed toward Bedford's tank and made several pushing movements while shaking his head negatively. He pointed toward Sergeant Barnes and then made a sweeping movement with his hand, indicating the course of the highway into town. He could not see that Bedford made any sign that he understood, but the second tank was motionless as MacMorris's tank moved ahead and then tilted diagonally, rocking from a right to left axis as it moved across the ditch which bordered the road. The tank picked up speed as it came rocking across the field toward him like some mongrel monster whose breeding had left it without complete coordination and control of its movements. The infantry squad, led by Sergeant Barnes, broke into a jog trot to move out of the tank's course as the paths of the tank and the squad intersected. Garth felt a slight ground tremor as the tank ground to a halt beside him. Murrey, the driver, had not had time to close his hatch. Garth swung himself up the front slope plate and knelt beside Murrey's head.

"I want to follow this fence toward town," Garth was forced to shout to be heard. "There's at least one man somewhere around here. I want to catch him. Drive at the best speed you can make. Keep your head out so you can see."

Murrey nodded. Garth turned to the other side and saw Kelly's face staring at him. He stepped over the 76 and squatted beside Kelly.

"Get your gun ready," he shouted. "If you see anyone, shoot."

The barrel of the machine gun which projected from the front slope plate in front of Kelly moved up and down. Kelly nodded and shouted something in reply. Garth turned and mounted the turret and dropped into the open hatch. As he did so the tank moved forward and then pivoted to face the stone wall directly. Without pausing Murrey drove the tank into the stone and then thrust the accelerator to the floor. The front of the tank rose up and up and then finally dropped as the weight of the tank broke the wall structure. Then the tracks protested as the barrier was ground under and the front of the tank dropped to the earth again. With a triumphant roar the tank burst through the wall and Murrey braked the left track and swung the tank to a course parallel to the wall.

Glancing back, Garth saw that the burning tank was a furnace. Flames poured from the grill over the engine and out of the open hatch. The blistered paint had dropped off the hull, exposing the bare metal in irregular patches. The white star just under the turret had changed to a dirty gray. Back at the junction the medical jeep was halted in front of the half-track and a small group of men were gathered about the vehicle. Bedford's tank was moving toward town and Sergeant Barnes's squad was half walking, half trotting to stay in front.

Ahead of the tank the gently rolling hills stretched toward the town with the stone fence a jagged line which ran to the right of the edge of the town. Garth could see no movement ahead or to the sides. He leaned down and felt for the communication junction box and seized the microphone cord, pulling the microphone up to his hands. He found the cord for his earphones and connected it to the cord which hung down from his tank helmet.

"Trident Four," he spoke into the microphone.

"Trident Four."

"This is Trident Six, he said. "Call the outpost. See if they saw anyone leave the grove. It might be one or more. Probably one."

"Roger."

Up to this point he had been able to set aside his seething anger, but now, as the speed of the tank increased he began to wish savagely that they would flush some frightened human who, panic stricken by the metal monster, would attempt to run across the open fields. Then, when the machine guns had done their job of crippling the fugitive so that he was helplessly prone in the path of the tank, he would run the track over the person and exact revenge for the two men in the still burning tank. He thought of this with desire rather than revulsion and in one corner of his mind he was able to retreat slightly from himself and wonder. But now, suddenly, he was fighting a shadow, a shadow who struck and vanished without trace, and there was only frustration.

Higher up the slope another stone fence ran parallel to the one the tank followed. Ahead, nothing moved and he looked in despair at the far fence, knowing that if the person who had successfully performed the ambush had succeeded in getting to that fence, he would in all probability succeed in escaping. But he had to make a decision; he would stay with the first stone fence as the most likely course for the man to try for escape. It was no more logical to follow the first fence than the second—but now he felt an urgency to get on to the bridge. To go up to the far fence would take time and if the person was actually seeking cover behind that fence he would undoubtedly be warned by the noise of the tank's approach and have ample time to seek better cover.

A tank was probably the worst way to pursue a man. He, high up in the turret, was the only person in the tank who could actually see without hindrance. Murrey and Kelly could see to the front, but being closer to the ground their field of view was limited. Suddenly he realized that the wild pursuit of the shadow by the tank had its ridiculous side. But it was war; he had been sent here seriously to do this and he would do it faithfully and seriously, though not willingly, because now he had been caught up by that stream, that force, which he had set in motion but could not control. Then, in a moment of insight, he saw that the only way to break out of the stream was to fight harder, ruthlessly, mercilessly, without pity or regret until he had reasserted his superiority, his control. When he had done this he could bend reality to his will.

They were approaching a cross fence which connected the two parallel fences. Murrey was driving in fourth gear now, sending a stream of mud arching back behind each track. Garth bent his knees slightly and began to wedge his stiffened arms against the front edge of the hatch, pushing his body back against the rear edge. He knew that it was a mistake to hit the stone wall at full speed but he was ready to let Murrey gamble on getting through without breaking a track. But at the last possible moment the engine roared and went silent and roared again as Murrey double-clutched expertly, putting the transmission back into third gear. The tank slowed, rocking forward as it lost speed. Murrey repeated the process, slowing the tank almost to a stop but easing it gently against the wall and then as the tracks touched he loosed a tremendous surge of power from the engine and the tank climbed and rocked forward and fell toward the earth and finally broke free.

Garth turned to the rear to look at the side of the cross fence which had been hidden. There was nothing large enough to be a man on the side he could see. The tank was picking up speed again.

"Trident Six."

The words came to him through his earphones. He found his microphone and brought it up.

"This is Six," he said.

"This is Four."

It was the half-track.

"Go ahead," Garth answered.

"The outpost didn't see anything. They're watching all the area surrounding the town."

"Roger. How is the loader?"

"He's got a couple of bad burns."

"Tell Bloom to follow us as soon as he can."

"Yes, sir."

"That's all. Out."

Damn the outpost. They were probably watching the shadow he had created, rather than trying to locate him. The tank had regained its speed and there was a long level stretch immediately ahead. He raised his binoculars, which still hung from the strap around his neck, and, bracing himself on his elbows, tried to look at the edge of the town. The jouncing platform allowed him to see the houses only in jagged gaps which bobbed about erratically.

He turned his head and looked toward the highway. He was much closer to town than the infantry and the lone tank, who were limited to a man's walking pace. Farther to the rear he could still see the

burning tank but beyond it the half-track and the junction had been masked by a small ground elevation. Directly across the river the heights rose darkly. Night would fall quickly when the time came. It would be day and then without giving a man time to adjust, it would be night and the threatening heights would close in even more than they did in the daytime, more threatening because they could only be seen in the imagination.

He looked back toward the town just in time to see a cloud of gray smoke shoot upward from over the roof of a house. He could see black objects in the smoke. The objects tumbled lazily end over end in an arc and then began to fall downward.

"Call the outpost," he spoke into the microphone. "Ask them if that was the bridge."

"Yes, sir."

He knew the call was useless. It could be nothing other than the bridge and the outpost probably could not see the exact location of the explosion much better than he could. But he had to make the call. The formalities of the situation required it.

Ahead there was a break in the fence which was closed by a wooden gate. He moved the radio switch to interphone.

"Slow down," he said. "Go through this gate and then head for the edge of the town and the highway."

The tank slowed and then swung to the left and they were through the gate with a tearing sound as the gate collapsed before them. Murrey swung the tank again and then increased the speed. Garth turned and searched the expanse of open fields to the right and to the rear. He could see no sign of life. The tank gained speed across the open field,

once more flinging two streams of mud behind it. Then they were crossing the ditch at a reduced speed and Garth directed Murrey toward the town. They entered a square and Garth picked the widest street leading away from the far side. They moved past a statue of a man and a dragon which stood in the center of the square. The two stood facing each other, obviously pitted in mortal combat. Then, as the tank entered the street he had selected, he could see the bridge approach. Finally he saw that the center span of the bridge hung from the far support. It bent down and entered the water about midway in the stream. Murrey halted the tank on the approach.

The slow current carried a muddy film downstream.

CHAPTER VII

MacMorris followed Garth onto the bridge ramp. Together they stood looking at the center section of the bridge where it entered the water. Muddy sediment rose to the surface slowly and floated downstream. To the left the water was dark green with a glossy, glass surface; to the right it appeared rough and abrasive as the sediment moved with the current. From the end of the section on which they stood a steel I-beam hung twisted downward.

Garth looked across the river. The road ran straight for about two hundred yards and then turned and lost itself behind a row of houses. Above, on the right side of the road, Garth saw a church steeple. Beyond the houses the roadway reappeared and ascended the hill. It followed an extensive ravine on the right side and then, after a hairpin turn, climbed back toward the river on the left side of the ravine before sweeping in a gentle curve up the high brow of the opposing valley wall.

"It might as well be the Rhine," said MacMorris.

The implication in MacMorris's words—that the river Garth faced was as great an obstacle as the Rhine had seemed to the advancing armies—brought to Garth's mind the vague threat which he had felt in the tank before coming into the town and for a moment he examined the thought.

True, while he kept his small force in the town the higher ground beyond the river gave an advantage to any force which might attempt to prevent his crossing the river or remaining in the town. There was, of course, no opposing force in command of the high ground overlooking the town. But the military threat was not all. The dark appearance of the hills and the sudden ascension to what seemed to be cloudlike heights was in itself threatening. Perhaps MacMorris had sensed something similar to this to inspire his comparison of the small river to the Rhine.

"Yes," he agreed. "Mission not accomplished. One tank lost. Two men killed."

Back at the tank, Harper, the loader, stood with his head out of the turret watching them. Garth saw that MacMorris was offering a cigarette. He took it and accepted a light.

"We won't get across today," said Garth, "so we might as well see what's going on here."

He turned and walked toward the tank. At his signal Murrey nodded and the engine died with a rasping cough. The three men still in the tank began to dismount together. The tank was parked before a two-story building. Garth looked at it speculatively. They would need quarters for the night.

"Looks like a bar or pub," said MacMorris. "I saw some tables inside."

"Tell the half-track to come in. We'll need an interpreter."

"Yes, sir." MacMorris began to climb up to the turret.

It was an ugly, square stone building which had exposed cross beams visible in the ends. The stones were worn smooth by the action of time

and the elements. In a few places the mortar between the stones had dropped out and left cracks. Before the door, a huge black painted barrier which had a darkened brass doorknob, he paused and turned to face MacMorris, who stood behind the turret.

"Have the half-track call the outpost. Find out if they've seen anything. Tell them to stay up there until they're relieved. And find out if they can contact headquarters."

MacMorris nodded and bent over the turret. Garth tried the doorknob and felt it open beneath his hand. He swung the door inward and walked into the room. The dimly lighted interior was deserted. He glanced around the room at the tables and the bar. Behind the bar the wall was made of dark paneling which had landscapes and hunting scenes painted on it. To the left of the door near the wall he saw a flat wooden box with U. S. Army stenciled on the green paint. He opened it and saw some brass exploding caps, a coil of fuse cord, and several rolls of black friction tape. The bridge must have been destroyed with American explosives.

Behind him the door opened and MacMorris entered. He glanced about the room for a moment, blinking, and then saw Garth kneeling beside the things on the floor.

"The other tank is coming," he said. "The half-track is behind, just leaving the junction."

Garth heard the noise of the tank engine becoming louder. He pointed toward the wooden case.

"Take a look," he said.

MacMorris walked over and stood silently. He inhaled deeply from the cigarette and then ground the stub into the floor.

"American?" he asked finally.

"Yes."

"Well," MacMorris said. "That's really rubbing it in."

Garth stood up and walked toward the bar. He studied the landscapes for a moment and then turned to MacMorris.

"See if Bloom came in with the tank," he said.

MacMorris went outside. A moment later Bloom entered and approached the table where now Garth sat with his helmet and submachine gun before him on the blue and white checked tablecloth. The medical sergeant removed his helmet and set it on the table. Garth was fascinated by the red crosses on the white circle which were painted on the helmet as he had been attracted by the painted landscapes behind the bar. Garth looked up at Bloom.

"How is Jordan?" he asked. Jordan was the third man who had gotten out of the burning tank.

"He was burned pretty badly around his face."

"Badly?"

"He must have taken his helmet off or not have had it on. He hasn't got any hair or eyebrows or ears."

"Can he see?"

"I don't know. We've shot him with morphine. I ought to get back out there."

"I had to have you come in with the column in case we got any more wounded."

"Oh, sure, lieutenant. I understand that. But Perkins is using sulfadiazine ointment on him. It's a hard job, especially for one man. I ought to help."

"You go back out then. Notify me by radio when you're finished. We'll find you a place for your aid station as soon as we find a place to stay tonight."

"Yes, sir."

Bloom placed his helmet on his head and walked toward the door. Garth saw that the door in the rear of the room was partly open; he considered investigating but decided that the effort was too great. He sat quietly for a moment and then lit a cigarette and puffed slowly on it before he heard footsteps. He ground the cigarette out on the floor. An old woman came into the room with MacMorris behind her. She seemed frightened of any movement, but more frightened of MacMorris. She saw Garth sitting at the table and stopped. Watching her, Garth felt in his pocket and found his cigarettes and deliberately shook another out of the package and lit it.

"I found her back in the kitchen," said MacMorris.

The sound of MacMorris's voice released a torrent of words from the old woman. Garth waved his hand.

"Hein," said Garth. "Nichts. Nichts sprechen sie Deutsch. Wo ist der Bürgermeister?"

The question had been a mistake. She gestured excitedly, toward the bridge and in other directions, but Garth could make no sense from the rapid flow of words. He tried to silence the woman and finally succeeded in inducing her to sit at one of the tables. She first stared suspiciously at MacMorris and then at Garth before turning half way from them and staring at the wall. Garth sat impatiently waiting for Hoff, who would arrive with the half-track.

Hoff, the interpreter, was a short, thick man with blunt features who peered about the dim interior of the room for a moment before he identified Garth and acknowledged him with a swallowing movement and a quick bow. At Garth's motion he approached.

"Ask her her name," Garth nodded toward the woman.

"Englehart," said Hoff, after she had answered. "Frau Englehart."

"Where is the burgomaster?"

Hoff wilted under the rush of words which the question brought. The woman sprang to her feet and advanced toward Hoff, who stood stolidly, bent forward, his gaze fastened on the floor and seemingly without the power of movement in his body. Garth watched the two figures, the one active, the other immobile. He wished that Hoff would act more like the orthodox conception of the conquering soldier. Hoff appeared humble in a silent protest before the woman.

"Shut up!"

He had half shouted the words at the woman before he made a determined effort to control his temper. The woman stared at him surprised. Garth looked at MacMorris who, standing near the door, appeared not to notice anything. He sat back in the chair from which he had half-risen. Hoff had not moved.

"Tell her to answer one question at a time," said Garth. He inhaled deeply. "Now. Ask her what the burgomaster's name is."

The passing of syllables through the air.

"Herr Behrens."

"Where is he?"

Again the vacant syllables.

"She doesn't know."

A pause. She spoke again.

"He has been missing since last night. He has not been home."

"What are those American explosives doing here?"

The syllables, sometimes words. Amerikaner.

"They were left here by a unit of the Wehrmacht."

"When?"

"About three or four days ago. They were retreating over the bridge."

"Are there any German soldiers here?"

"She says that last night one was here. He was with a Frau Kloster."

"Frau Kloster?"

The question. The answer.

"One of the married women of the town. Her husband was killed in France."

"What happened last night?"

"Frau Kloster and the soldier came here. They prepared the explosives for the bridge. The burgomaster came in and refused to help. A man named Stohr, a policeman, helped them. They put the explosives on the bridge and Frau Kloster and the soldier took the burgomaster with them. He was a prisoner. Stohr stayed on guard at the bridge."

"Ask her if she's told anyone of this. Did she try to help the burgomaster?"

"No."

"Why not?"

The answer seemed to embarrass Hoff.

"She did not know who would help the burgomaster and who would help the soldier."

"What did the soldier look like?"

"Blond. Nordic. Six feet. 33."

"33?"

"Yes."

Now, at least, he knew who the shadows were. The question of whether, in the face of the smallness of their number, they--the soldier and the girl and the policeman--would continue to oppose the Americans after the damage they had already done remained to be answered.

"Does she know whether they are still in town?"

Hoff spoke, was answered, and spoke again.

"No. The woman exploded the charge on the bridge. She ran toward the square after the explosion. That is the last this woman saw of her."

"The soldier?"

"He was here last night, but hasn't been back since. Stohr went away this morning. There was a telephone call. He said he would deliver the message to Herr Behrens."

"Was the bridge guarded?"

"Yes. Someone whom Stohr left there. She did not know him."

"What does this . . . Frau Kloster look like?"

The woman measured a height against herself.

"Young. Blonde. About twenty-five years old."

"Where does she live?"

"On the edge of town. She has her own house. I think it is on that street we came in on, or close to it."

"Ask her if she will go along with us to show us Frau Kloster's

house. If she can't go, have her get someone who can."

The door opened and Kelly stood in the opening. He stood blinking for a moment; then he saw Garth.

"Lieutenant," he said. "The half-track just got here. Sergeant Allen said to tell you that he can't pick up battalion on the radio."

Garth nodded.

"Tell Sergeant Barnes to load four of his men in the half-track," Garth said to Kelly. Kelly turned and pulled the door shut behind him. Garth turned to Hoff.

"Take Frau Englehart out to the half-track," he said. "We're going visiting."

Riding through the square Garth saw a number of white flags hanging from window sills. He could not recall having seen the symbols of surrender before. The Germans must have surrendered only after defeat was certain. The woman directed them back through town on the road by which they had gone to the bridge. Then, as they approached the last of the scattered houses, she pointed toward a house. Garth recognized it as the house which he had approached after his ride along the fence-line. He crouched down beside the driver and pointed toward the house.

Frau Kloster's house, being on the edge of the town, was not crowded against adjacent houses as those in the older part of the town were. Around the corner Garth saw a barnlike structure which was separated from the house. Between the barn and the house he saw open fields which climbed step by step to a certain height and then abandoned the encroachment effort to the rising slope. He told the half-track driver to halt and, when the vehicle had stopped, dismounted with the four infantrymen. A corporal stood facing him.

"Leave one man here to watch the front," said Garth. "Take the other two around behind to see that no one gets away. Hurry up."

The three men trotted around the house. Garth looked up at Hoff, who stood in the half-track.

"You come with me," he said. "Tell the old woman to stay where she is."

Hoff spoke to someone Garth could not see. The infantryman who had been left in front had entered the yard and stood lighting a cigarette. Garth opened the rounded flap of the submachine gun and pulled the bolt back into firing position. When Hoff was standing beside him he approached the front door of the house. Behind him he could hear, for a moment, the throbbing of the engine of the half-track but, almost instantly, as it always did, it blended with the rest of existence and he was unaware of it.

Heavy blackout shutters covered the windows. The door and door-frame were black with old paint which had drawn up into tiny irregular figures in which channels ran aimlessly. He tried the door knob and when it turned easily, he motioned Hoff to one side and pushed the door inward. It opened silently, slowly, so that he saw a gradually enlarging portion of the hardwood floor and a dark interior. The door stopped with a slight jarring sound.

"Come out," Garth shouted. "Come out with your hands up."

There was only silence after his shout. He glanced at Hoff, and Hoff repeated the words in German. Still there was only silence. Garth stood frozen. The infantryman stood to one side away from the door and watched the two men on the porch. Garth took a deep breath, exhaled,

and motioned to Hoff to stay where he was. He took a step forward, toward the doorway and then through it, and threw himself into the darkness of the interior. He could see nothing clearly except the small square of light which fell inside from the open door. He listened, trying to stop breathing, but there was nothing. After a moment he saw another door on the opposite side of the room. He was certain that the house was empty, that the shadows he sought had fled.

The next room, he saw when he opened the door, was a dining room and behind it was a small kitchen. He heard a sound and, turning, saw that Hoff had cautiously entered the living room. Garth went through the dining room into the kitchen. Through a window which did not have the blackout curtains closed he saw the infantry corporal standing near the corner of the barn. The other two men were not in sight.

Hoff stood silently in the center of the living room, his head tilted upward and his glance moving slowly along the ceiling. Garth stopped and listened and then heard a thumping sound.

"There's someone here after all," he said.

A door opened from the dining room into a hallway. Garth saw a staircase a few feet from the doorway. He motioned for Hoff to follow and began to climb the stairs. Behind him, as he checked the submachine gun, he heard Hoff's heavy steps. Overhead the noise continued. He reached the head of the staircase and gained the upper hallway. The hallway was dark and narrow with doors opening on both sides. The noise came from farther along the hallway, and it was harder to hear. He moved slowly along, pausing before each door. When he was certain that he had located the room from which the noise came, he pushed Hoff against the wall and flattened himself beside the door. He extended

his arm and rapped on the panel.

The thumping noise ceased. Garth ran his hand along the door jamb and found the doorknob. It was locked. He listened to silence again.

"Ask who's there," he spoke to Hoff.

The German words filled the hallway. A harsh answer came.

"He says he is Herr Behrens. The burgomaster."

"Is he armed?"

"No. He is a prisoner."

"Is anyone else there?"

"No."

"Tell him to stand back from the door."

Garth raised his heavy boot and brought it down against the door. After a few more attempts he felt it begin to give.

"Give the door a try," he said to Hoff. The bottom of his foot was aching. Under Hoff's boot the lock tore out of the splintered wood and with a protesting squeal the door opened.

When the man standing at the foot of the unmade bed began to move forward, Garth saw that he limped. The window was open, and when Garth walked to it and looked out he saw the half-track parked before the house. The burgomaster had known when they had arrived and had wisely not exposed himself. He had chosen the peculiar method of letting the Americans know that he was upstairs in order to protect himself.

"Ask him where Frau Kloster is," Garth said.

A part of the irritation he felt was the fact that he was forced to use another person in order to communicate with the burgomaster. It was not that he did not trust Hoff to translate accurately, but sometimes it seemed impossible that the information he needed should require

so many words and so much time.

"She left the house this morning," Hoff spoke. "He does not know exactly what time, but he thinks that it was between 8:30 and 9:00 o'clock."

"She hasn't been back?"

"No."

"How about the SS man?"

"He never saw him before last night. Frau Kloster and the soldier went away together. They went toward the junction. He had a shovel and an anti-tank weapon."

"Don't tell him that we had a tank knocked out."

"Yes, sir."

The German spoke.

"He was a prisoner since last night. The girl guarded him with a rifle while the SS man and Stohr put the explosives in place on the bridge. Then they brought him here until this morning. When the girl and the SS man went away, Stohr guarded him."

"Where is Stohr?"

"He stayed in this room until the explosion. Then he looked the door and Herr Behrens heard him go down the stairs. That is all he knows."

The German spoke again.

"Herr Behrens says that he tried to break the door open but could not. He could not kick it."

The German pointed to a broken chair which lay in a corner.

"He broke that chair, but the door was too strong. He could not get out the window. It is too high."

Garth thought a moment. The story told by Behrens and Frau Englehart was essentially the same. He decided to accept it as true.

"Tell him that as an occupying military commander I have put this town and the surrounding territory under martial law. That means that none of their local or national laws are in effect. I shall hold him responsible for the behavior of the inhabitants."

Garth watched the German as Hoff translated. Behrens listened attentively and then spoke.

"He says that he will give his complete cooperation to the occupying forces. He does not think that any other of his people will resist. He will give any aid he can in capturing Frau Kloster, Stohr, and the SS man."

"Good," said Garth. "Ask him if he is a Nazi."

"He says he is not."

"How did he become burgomaster?"

The German's face became slightly flushed.

"He says he was elected. One does not have to be a Nazi to be elected to public office in rural areas."

"Ask him if it helps?"

The German stared at him a moment before answering. Then he spoke one word.

"Undoubtedly, he says," said Hoff.

"Tell him we are going back to Frau Englehart's," Garth said, motioning toward the door.

Behrens asked Hoff a question.

"He asks if it was from Frau Englehart that you learned about Frau Kloster and the SS man."

"You can tell him yes," said Garth. "Also tell him that he'll have to come with us for a while. Perhaps we can let him go home before long."

"He says to thank you very much for releasing him. He says you can depend on him."

Garth led the way out of the room and down the stairs. Outside the house he sent the infantryman for the corporal while Behrens climbed awkwardly into the half-track. The corporal came around the side of the house and saluted.

"Keep two men here," said Garth. "Stay inside the house. There are rations inside the half-track. Get enough for the night. If anyone, no matter who, comes to this house, take them prisoner and hold them."

"Yes, sir."

"Be careful. There is an SS man loose. Don't take any chances."

"No, sir, we won't."

Garth turned to the half-track. Behrens watched him without expression as he got into the vehicle. Behind Behrens Frau Englehart sat leaning against the rear armor. Between the two the .30 caliber gunner leaned against his weapon smoking a cigarette. The old woman stared at the gun, fascinated. Garth nodded to the driver.

CHAPTER VIII

Sitting beside the driver in the half-track on the way back to Frau Englehart's tavern, Garth tried to make sense of the situation. He had given the order which set the stream in motion and now it was out of control. The SS man, Frau Kloster and Stohr, the policeman, were free and a threat. To regain control required that he overcome this threat. So the first problem was to locate the three. But the first problem was the long step--after it had been taken the rest would be easy. He faced to the rear and saw the radio operator.

"Have you been able to get battalion yet?" he asked.

The operator shook his head. "No, sir," he said. "I tried while you were in the house, but nothing doing."

The military situation required that Garth report the loss of the bridge to the next higher level of command. By organization this would be the company of which his platoon was a part, but in practice this next higher level was battalion headquarters. The company, as such, had only a supply and administrative function. Only once in Europe had Garth taken part in battle with the company unit. Other than that brief interlude the platoon had always worked with infantry. And ordinarily there would be a battalion or at least a company of infantry, and with them officers who ranked a lieutenant, so that Garth often found himself a subordinate under officers who were changed

frequently and displayed abilities which ranged all the way from excellent to poor. But now he was in command and standard operating procedures required that he report that the bridge was destroyed--that his mission was a failure. With that knowledge a new plan would be made. The direction of advance might be shifted so that a different bridge crossing would be made or, if whatever engineers were in the immediate area were equipped with sufficient bridging materials, a temporary bridge might be constructed on the old bridge site. But until he could report, the colonel and the battalion would follow him, confidently expecting to find the bridge intact. His force was at least thirty miles ahead of the battalion and, although that distance was not too great for radio contact, the deep valley of the river was sufficient to prevent communication. He could, if only the bridge were intact, send the half-track up to the top of the valley wall on the far side of the river and probably they would get contact without any trouble. On this side there was no route by which he could get back up on the hill mass except by retracing his course over the highway on which they had advanced. That might require a trip of ten or fifteen miles. He glanced at his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. If there was no contact by midafternoon he would be forced to make a decision--to send a vehicle back or to keep on waiting. Other than this that first long step was still in front of him.

The statue of the dragon and the man in the square drew his attention as they passed it. It was done in a heavy handed fashion with knotted bulging muscles on the man's thighs and biceps. The man's ribs flared out straining the rippling skin while the dragon watched him

from under heavy eyelids, indolently waiting for the man to expose himself, to strike and miss or to have the blow fended off harmlessly. Garth looked around the square at the four flat rows of houses. He could see several white flags displayed from windows but there were no faces peering out from the windows--at least, he thought, none that he could see.

They turned into the street which led to Frau Englehart's and the bridge approach. Small groups of infantrymen were scattered along the street from the exit from the square to the bridge approach. They stood about or lounged sleepily against doorjambs, legs stretched out on the cobblestones while helmets were slid down over eyes to cut off the daylight. Bedford's tank was parked about fifty feet from MacMorris's tank, which was still faced out toward the destroyed bridge. The driver brought the half-track to a creaking halt in front of Frau Englehart's tavern. Garth unlatched the heavy sheet iron door of the vehicle and pushed it open with his foot. On the ground he looked back up at Sergeant Allen who stood in the vehicle.

"Take the burgomaster and the woman inside," he said. "Don't let either of them leave the building."

"Yes, sir," said Allen.

Garth looked toward his tank. Murrey was on the rear deck with a five-gallon gasoline can ready to pour into the gas tank. He paused as Garth approached.

"Where's MacMorris?" asked Garth.

"Inside," answered Murrey. He straightened and leaned over the top of the turret. "The lieutenant wants you," he said.

MacMorris's head appeared above the turret.

"Did you want me, lieutenant?" he called.

The question meant that MacMorris was doing something, some maintenance task about the gun, probably, and that he was annoyed at being interrupted since Murrey had told him plainly and succinctly that the lieutenant wanted him. Well, Garth decided, MacMorris would have to be annoyed.

"Yes," he said.

MacMorris lifted himself out of the turret and slid down on the rear deck of the hull. He dropped off the tank and caught his balance as he hit the cobblestones. He stood erect and faced Garth.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Without speaking Garth turned toward the front of the tavern. To the left of the building there was a covered opening which had cart tracks worn in the stones. Garth turned into this passageway. At the far end he could see the open sky over a wall which enclosed a courtyard. Garth turned and saw that MacMorris had followed him.

"See if this is wide enough for the tanks to get through," he called.

"Yes, sir."

MacMorris was still annoyed but he began to pace from one side of the passageway to the other. Garth continued and came out into the courtyard. On the left was an open-fronted stable which appeared to have been unused for several years. Across the rear and on the right side, the wall which he had seen enclosed an area about sixty feet square. A wooden gate was set in the wall. The courtyard offered protection to his tanks and the other vehicles in that after dark—and they would

undoubtedly still be on this side of the river that night--it would be much easier to prevent any further attack on the vehicles there. But even as it offered this protection the courtyard effectively prevented any quick movement, at least through the front entrance. So it was a tossup. For a limited amount of protection he would lose a limited amount of mobility. He walked to the gate and, opening the latch, pulled the gate inward and saw a well-tended orchard. The trees, evenly spaced, had tiny leaves beginning to sprout, but it was too early for even the minutest blossoms. Beyond the orchard he could see, through the trees, the surface of the river. A stone wall extended toward the river from left of the gate.

"The tanks will just make it."

MacMorris had called to him from the passageway. Garth pulled the gate shut and turned back toward the building. MacMorris spoke again.

"The antennas will have to be taken down," he said, "but the turrets will clear without any trouble."

"Bring them in then," said Garth. "Back them into those empty stalls. Tell the crews to get some rest, but you come inside when you're finished."

"Yes, sir." MacMorris turned away. He's still annoyed, Garth thought. Well, he'll just have to get over it without my help.

Garth turned toward a door which opened from the rear of the building into the courtyard. Inside he saw a poorly lighted hallway which apparently led into the large drinking room. Just inside the outer door there were two opposing doors. Garth opened the one on the left and saw that it led down a stairway to a cellar. If there were any alcoholic beverages to be had, he thought, they were probably down

there and, that being the case, Kelly was probably down there too. On the other side of the hallway the door opened into a stairway leading up to a second floor.

A few steps farther on in the hallway Garth found two more opposing doors. On the left there was a small room which might have been a storeroom in better days; now it was bare with a row of dusty shelves on each side. The other door opened into a kitchen which also appeared unused, although the customary utensils hung along the walls ready for use.

At the end of the hallway a final door remained to be investigated. Garth opened it and looked out into the barroom. Kelly sat at a table in the center of the room with his submachine gun lying before him. The burgomaster sat stolidly at another table staring fixedly at the wall. Kelly looked up.

"That old woman was here," he said. "She tried to talk to the old man but I ran her out."

"How did you get in here?" Garth asked.

"Sergeant Allen had to go out to move his half-track," said Kelly. "Mac sent me in to watch the burgomaster."

"Where did the woman go?"

"I dunno. Out that door that you just came in."

Unless a third entrance to the house existed Frau Englehart must still be in the building. Upstairs, probably. Kelly had called Herr Behrens old. Garth looked more closely at the man. His hair was gray and wrinkles lined his face, but Garth had a feeling that the man was younger than he appeared.

"Find Barnes," he said to Kelly. "Tell him I want to see him and his squad leaders here."

"Yes, sir." Kelly stood up. As he slung the gun strap over his shoulder Hoff came in the door. Through the open doorway the sound of a tank engine could be heard. MacMorris was moving the tanks into the courtyard. Behrens glanced up at Hoff and made a short stiff bow with his head and shoulders. Then, at Garth's direction, Hoff questioned the burgomaster. There was nothing new in the story, but told more deliberately it seemed to have more details, to be more alive and more believable. Then Garth repeated his statement of the imposition of martial law on the town. This time he added that any person, especially a person not in military uniform, who opposed the entry and movements of the occupying forces, was subject to a death penalty. If Frau Kloster and the man Stohr were captured they would be held for trial by a military court. The SS man would also be tried, but since he was still in uniform his actions might be justified--a soldier's orders were to fight to the last for his country and the SS man was doing that, even though it was a lost cause. But the others had not the protection of a uniform to legalize their resistance. Their actions were equated in the Rules for Land Warfare with death (he did not say this aloud) and so it was just another phase of the human drive to divide and conquer in the sense that it was a complicated reasoning process to set up differences between the members of a group of people--the Germans, in this case, being the group--and to make these differences felt and used as an excuse to justify some injustice in the name of God--some injustice which could not wait for settlement. But in any case--this--to Herr Behrens--the town was under martial law and he as commander of the occupying forces was also in command of the town. As his first order the citizens were to bring all firearms and cutting weapons (aside from cooking aids) to the

open space in the center of the square. A guard would be there to accept the weapons. The owners might tag each piece so that it could be reclaimed; it would not be destroyed. He would delegate to Behrens the authority to appoint such members of a provisional government as would not oppose the occupying force and such as would be necessary to keep the townspeople supplied with food and shelter. Behrens would be expected to notify the citizens of these things. Would he need any help to do so? No? Very well then. He was free to perform his duties, except that Hoff would accompany him to observe and represent the United States. Behrens was to accept any order from Hoff as if Garth had given it. The old-young man stood up, bowed, and turned around and walked from the room. Hoff followed him.

Midway in Garth's conversation with the burgomaster, Sergeant Barnes, followed by two other men, had entered the room. Garth had pointed to a table and the three had sat silently, listening to the three speakers. Now Garth turned to them.

"Would one of you call Sergeant MacMorris and Sergeant Bedford in?" he asked. "They should be in the courtyard by now."

He could no longer hear the tank engines, so the vehicles must have completed the move into the courtyard. One of the sergeants, a tall, lean, slouching man, stood up and walked toward the rear door.

"Have MacMorris bring my map," Garth called.

"Yes, sir," the man nodded.

"Did you get any sleep last night, lieutenant?"

The question came from Sergeant Barnes. It meant that others could see that he, Garth, had been staring fixedly at things without really seeing them and that he had to force himself to think of the things

words represented when words were addressed to him.

"No," he answered. Then, curiously, he asked, "Did you?"

"An hour or two, maybe, if you could call it that," said Barnes.

"I was in the half-track. We had a pile of blankets to stretch out on only it was too crowded to stretch out. But I did sleep an hour or two."

"You're fortunate," said Garth.

MacMorris and Bodford and the tall, lean sergeant came into the room. MacMorris set his submachine gun on one of the tables and then took off his helmet. He ran his fingers through his tangled hair and then began scratching his chin through the two or three day beard.

"Why don't you find a bed?" Barnes spoke. Garth looked at him, startled. "The bridge is gone," Barnes continued quickly. "We've lost a tank, but there's nothing we can do about it. We can't cross and there's no reason to go back so we might as well get some rest."

Garth considered. It was a reasonable suggestion, except for that first long step.

"I'm afraid I'll have to put that off," he said. "It's a good idea, though." He turned to MacMorris. "Did you bring the map?"

"Yes, sir." MacMorris produced Garth's map from his pocket. The map, clean and new less than twenty-four hours ago, was creased and dirty. Garth took the map and, unfolding it, placed it on the table before him. The five men gathered around the map.

"We're going to search the town," Garth said. "We'll divide the town into three parts. It'll be like half a pie cut into three pieces. This part between the river and the road we came over will be the first are a to be searched."

Garth paused and looked around. The five men studied the map intently.

"Sergeant Barnes will be in direct charge of the search," Garth continued. "I want you to divide your men into two groups. One group will cut the area off from the rest of the town. No German will enter or leave the area being searched. Take only enough men for this so that each can see the next man and be able to call for help. The rest of your men will be divided into groups of three."

"What are we looking for?" asked Barnes.

"An SS man first," said Garth. "After that a woman, a Frau Kloster, and a policeman named Stohr. The SS man was still in uniform when last seen. The others you won't be able to identify unless they make another attack. Warn everybody that these people are at large and ready to kill. If any of the three are located he or she is to be captured or killed."

"Yes, sir," said Barnes.

"I've given the burgomaster an order that the town is under martial law," Garth continued. "All guns, knives, swords, bayonets, anything like that, are to be turned in. If any of your search parties see any weapons they are to confiscate them."

"What should we do with them?"

"Pile them in the center of the square near the statue. One of your men can be posted there to guard the weapons."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"Yes. Sergeant MacMorris will be in charge of the tankmen who are here. They will be doing maintenance, but are to be alerted for immediate action in case there is a call. If there is any trouble pass the word back along the guard line. MacMorris will bring six or seven

men on the double. Sergeant Bedford and one man will stay behind with the tanks. Any questions?"

"Now?" asked Barnes.

"Now," said Garth. Sergeant Barnes straightened and saluted.

"Let's get with it," he said to his two men. The three men walked hurriedly out the front entrance. MacMorris looked tentatively at Garth.

"Anything else?" MacMorris asked.

"There's only one more thing I can think of," said Garth. "Tell Sergeant Allen to keep a constant radio watch on the battalion channel. I want to know immediately when we have contact."

"Yes, sir," said MacMorris.

It had not been a good day, Garth thought. The advance to the junction had been carried off quite well in the face of the obstacles they had overcome. But after that everything had gone wrong. First, the loss of the tank and two men, with a third man injured. The escape of the ambusher. The move on the town and the destruction of the bridge. The knowledge of the presence of the three who would fight and the necessity to make an awkward search for them. The lack of communication with battalion. The fact that he had been without sleep for nearly forty hours and had had only a few hours sleep before that.

MacMorris stood in the rear doorway.

"Where will you be, lieutenant?" he asked.

Garth considered.

"I'm going out to see how Barnes is doing," he said. "See if you can make some coffee. I'll be back shortly."

"Yes, sir." MacMorris was gone.

Outside in the sunlight, Garth walked toward the square. Two infantrymen were stationed in the street between the bridge approach and the square. Garth entered the square and saw a man just inside the entrance which led to the river. Another man stood near the statue while a third leaned against a house front at the opposite side of the square near the street which led to the junction. The men had fixed their bayonets to their rifles and carried their weapons in a ready position. Wearily, Garth walked on through the square.

Near the edge of town Garth found Barnes assigning the three-man search teams to specific houses. When this task was completed the two walked back to the square and Garth pointed out the third street which led from the square and which was to be the next boundary for the search party.

Garth turned to Sergeant Barnes.

"I'm going back to the CP," he said. "I think I'll get a little sleep."

"Yes, sir," Barnes said. "If we turn anything up we'll wake you."

Garth walked back toward the river. It was nearly 10:30 a.m. and he could sleep an hour and a half or perhaps two hours. He would be forced to have MacMorris awaken him at about 1:00 p.m. because the decision of whether he should move out of town in order to communicate with battalion would have to be made before midafternoon. He did not want to leave the search area while the search was in progress but in all probability, if the three Germans were located, the action would occur and be over before he could be on the scene even though he might have been awake. MacMorris stood in the entrance of the covered driveway which led to the rear of the house.

Garth stopped wearily and stood looking at MacMorris. He felt that he was smiling rather vacantly.

"Are there any beds around?" Garth asked.

"Yes, sir," MacMorris answered. "Upstairs there are half a dozen. I'll show you."

They entered the building and went through the large room and the hallway and turned up the stairs at the rear. When they arrived at the top of the stairs Garth allowed himself to be led along the hallway to an open door.

"I'll put Kelly on guard out here," said MacMorris.

Garth entered the room and stood looking around. He dropped his helmet and submachine gun and sat down on the bed.

"Wake me about 1:30," he said.

He began to unlace his boots and finally the boots were off and his trousers and shirt were thrown on the floor and he turned back the covers and lay down.

The door was closed. He had not been aware of MacMorris's departure. He remembered that he had asked MacMorris to make some coffee.

He had been awakened so often by artillery explosions that it seemed at first only just and natural that this time again, the present, he should be awakened by an explosion. His mind automatically noted the sound of the explosion, relegated it to a minor place in his consciousness, and then attempted to smooth over, to patch, the break in the shell which obscured him from the living so that he could return to pleasant nothingness. But some small tentacle of awareness seized on

the memory of the sound of the exploding projectile and insisted on dragging it out again into the open. It had occurred at some distance because the feel of the explosion had missed him, but it was close enough to retain the deadly crack that told a man that there was nothing he could do except wait.

He pushed the pillow aside and, lying flat on his back, stretched his muscles until a sudden warning caused him to relax and curve his back before a muscle spasm threatened his spine. The sound of footsteps on the stairs came to him and then heavy boots plodded along the narrow hallway. Before the door the sounds stopped. Garth heard indistinct words and then there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Garth called. He looked at his watch. It was nearly one o'clock. Light through the window told him that it was noon rather than midnight. He had slept about two and a half hours. The door opened and MacMorris came into the room.

"Mortar," said MacMorris. "It hit somewhere out behind the orchard. Four or five hundred yards away as near as we could tell."

"Do you know where it came from?"

"Yes. There've been about a dozen homeguard or something like that digging in across the river for the last hour. The outpost reported them setting it up. Right out in the open on the face of the slope. Even their loader can see the target."

"What is the target?"

"Us, I suppose. We've got two tanks and the half-track here. And Bloom set up his medical station in that back room so his jeep is parked out there too."

"How is Jordan?"

"Sleeping. Bloom's had him out ever since it happened."

"Has Allen had any luck getting battalion?"

"The operator still says he can't get out of this valley."

"You say this homeguard is out in the open?"

"Yes. You can even see the tube of the mortar with glasses. The infantrymen are dug in, but they didn't appear to know too much about doing it, according to the outpost."

"Could we fire on them with the tank guns?"

"If we can get enough elevation on the guns we can. They're about 1200 yards, I'd say. Too far for rifles."

"Okay." He had been mechanically pulling on his trousers and lacing his boots. He buttoned his shirt and looked around for his jacket.

"We've got some coffee downstairs," said MacMorris.

"I'll be right down. Where's the latrine?"

"There's two. One inside, without plumbing. One outside, without plumbing. The outside one smells about 100 percent better than the inside one."

"Where is it?"

"In the orchard. The infantry dug it."

Outside he poured cold water into his helmet and doused his face and then took soap and cold water and worked up a lather and washed his face, rubbing the soap into his day old beard and dousing his face again to wash off the soap. It would be an ironic fate to have survived almost a year of fighting and then to have his dream of returning home ended by an untrained group of men who were too old or too physically unfit to be allowed to participate in warfare except on the extreme fringe.

What was it that the sergeant back at battalion headquarters had said: It'll take a hell of a lot to kill me now. That was fine, except that it could be done almost accidentally at a time like this. The greatest paradox of any battlefield was the way in which it seemed almost physically impossible to kill a man—life could survive shelling, bombing, small arms, flame throwers, grenades, and everything else which could be dreamed of by man—while at the same time each man felt that his own life was a fragile flower.

The coffee was real. At his surprised look MacMorris chuckled and then admitted that the old fox hadn't lost all his tricks. Of course, the old fox continued, he hadn't seen any of those steaks that the magazine advertisements showed the front line soldiers eating, but he had found some coffee. Garth poured until his canteen cup was half full and then carefully tried the edge of the cup against his lip. It was too hot, but the aluminum cup would quickly transfer the heat from the coffee. He set the cup down on a table, as MacMorris stood watching him.

"Have someone call Sergeant Barnes back," he said.

Garth looked at his watch and noted the time carefully. It was 1:15. He stood up and moved to a window. To the left the bridge approach ended in nothing. Across the street he saw the front of a residence. Back toward the square the opposite side of the street was fronted by a solid wall of houses. Except for a guard near the front entrance of the inn the street was deserted. He tried the coffee again and found it cool enough to drink.

"Yes, sir," said a voice.

Garth looked up. Barnes stood a few feet away, saluting. Garth returned the salute and motioned toward a chair. Barnes sat down silently.

"How is the search going?"

"We haven't found what we're looking for."

"We'll have to call it off, I think. At least for a while."

"Yes, sir."

"We've got to get that mortar out of the way. Did you have a look at it?"

"Yes, sir. It's right out in the open."

"How would you attack?"

"There's a draw going up about a quarter mile west of them. We can follow that and then attack from their rear. I don't think they've got any outposts out."

"How many men will you need?"

"I think ten could do it."

"Okay. Pick yourself a squad leader and eight men who can swim. By the way--can you swim?"

"Yes, sir," Barnes said.

"Fine," said Garth. "MacMorris will take both tanks back up on the higher ground until he's got a good shot at the mortar. From there he'll lay down a limited barrage to cover your crossing. You'll cross from the junction. If you can, Mac, put the mortar out of commission. If you can't do that at least keep their heads down."

MacMorris nodded agreement.

"Use high explosive with a delay fuse. That gives an air burst," he explained to Barnes.

"If we can get a ricochet off the ground," said MacMorris. "If it digs in it's just plain high explosive."

"That's a chance we'll have to take," said Garth. "At any rate we ought to be able to scare them. Can you cross and keep enough of your gear dry to keep going?"

"We haven't done it before in combat but we've done several crossings in practice. This ought to be easy enough."

"Fine. Can you be prepared to move in ten minutes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you'd better alert your men. Who is your second in command?"

"Sergeant Leonard."

"Send him in. While you're crossing, the rest of the platoon will continue the search."

"Yes, sir."

"Your men have been a long time without rest," Garth said. "I know that and I hate to order them on without a break. But there's no choice. Perhaps they'll get to sleep tonight."

"They'll be all right," Barnes answered.

He stood up and saluted, then turned and walked from the room. Garth found his map and spread it on the table before him. The coffee was cool now and he drank until brown sediment was left in the cup.

"More?" asked MacMorris.

Garth extended his cup to MacMorris and watched the steaming liquid pour into the cup. A shell exploded and Garth stood looking down at the dark surface of the coffee. Slight ripples chased each other. MacMorris stood listening. Garth set his coffee down and looked at his watch. It was nearly 1:30. Evidently the enemy force had so little ammunition for their mortar that they were saving what they had for

harassing effect. But from the sound of the explosion it hadn't been much closer than the first round.

Sergeant Leonard was the tall, spare man with the lantern jaw who had been sent after MacMorris and Bedford when Garth had organized the search of the town. He entered the room and stood silently, awkwardly, without saluting.

"Did you see the last round of mortar that came in?" Garth asked.

Leonard paused and thought.

"No," he said. "But one of my men reported a small hole blown in the roof of a house near the square. He was in the house when the shell hit."

So the accuracy of the homeguard insofar as aiming their mortar was concerned had not improved.

"Do you have your map?" Garth asked.

In reply the sergeant searched in his jacket pocket and produced a wrinkled roll of paper which became a map. Garth outlined on the map the third portion of the town which remained to be searched. Leonard was to take charge of the search and, as soon as the search of the second segment of the town was completed, he was to move on to the last third. Garth would be with the half-track, coordinating the fire of the tank with the attack of the infantry, but he would try to watch the progress of the search. With these orders Sergeant Leonard turned silently and left the room.

Garth noticed, again, the explosive materials in the corner of the room. A picture came into his mind of Frau Englehart and of Hoff, head bent, eyes on the floor, questioning the woman. Where was Hoff? And where, for that matter, was the burgomaster? A vagrant thought

crossed his mind of the colonel speaking: We got a translation with a thick German accent through thick American Jewish lenses and lips. So that was Hoff—or rather, it was the colonel's description of Hoff. The colonel's words had struck him as an unexplained reference which recurred in memory, needing comment.

So Hoff was the thick German accent through the thick American lenses that had translated the story of Europa and the Bull for the colonel. And Garth had sent the Jew, Hoff, to be an overseer, a supervisor, to Behrens as he organized his makeshift government which was in control until the Military Government units of the army could move in and take control. He had sent the Jew to be his emissary in Behrens's eyes. Actually it was only that Hoff spoke and wrote German with a fluency possessed by no one else in the battalion. By physique, temperament and personality the man was ill fitted for the task given him. But the experience would be good for both. In his old age, Hoff might silently reflect over this day, reliving it, word built upon word. And Behrens would be strangely uncomfortable in his work in the future, feeling watched, and, indeed, being watched.

MacMorris came in from the rear.

"Are the tanks ready?" asked Garth.

"Yes, sir," said MacMorris. "They ought to turn them over any minute now. The half-track is alerted too."

"Have you seen Hoff?"

"Not for about an hour. He was with the burgomaster and a couple of other Germans. They went back toward the square."

Garth looked at his watch. It was almost time for the crossing force to move. He found his helmet and submachine gun.

MacMorris looked around.

"Do you want to come back here?"

Garth thought of the bed.

"Yes. It'll do as well as any place."

"I'll leave Kelly to watch our stuff. He wouldn't be any good to us even if he came along."

"Bloom and his driver will be here, too. Tell Sergeant Leonard to drop off a man to watch their gear."

"Yes, sir."

Garth turned and walked through the rear doorway into and through the narrow dark hallway and out into the courtyard. A tank engine fired and then caught itself into a steady roar as he stepped from the building. The half-track was maneuvering into position so that it could be first out of the courtyard. The other tank engine emitted a cloud of smoke from its exhaust and then it too settled into a steady roar. In the rear entrance to the courtyard Sergeant Barnes stood waiting. Garth signalled, first holding up five fingers and pointing toward one tank and then repeating the signal for the second tank. Barnes nodded and stepped back through the entrance and then reappeared followed by a column of men. He directed the first five men to Bedford's tank and then led the other four men to MacMorris's tank. Behind Barnes, Sergeant Leonard appeared in the entranceway and stood watching.

The half-track had maneuvered into position and was waiting. Garth mounted over the hood and dropped down between the driver and Allen. He looked back and saw MacMorris nod and signalled to the driver to go ahead. Creaking metallically, the awkward vehicle moved ahead. Behind him the radio operator and the gunner were in their positions. When they

entered the street the driver turned the wheels sharply, tugging at the steering wheel as the front of the vehicle swung around. Then they were in the street going toward the square. When they had gone about fifty yards he signalled the driver to stop. The first tank came into the street, braking the right track violently in order to make the turn. A moment later the second tank appeared. Garth motioned to the driver of the half-track and they moved forward, protesting. They entered the empty square. The guard turned to watch the movement of the vehicles through the square. The pile of weapons had grown to a considerable size. Keeping to the right the driver maintained a steady forward speed. When they had gone past the fountain--the stalking dragon and the man with his hammer who waited to kill--Garth told the driver to stop. The sound of the tank engines grew louder. Garth dismounted and motioned to the tanks to halt. He walked to the rear and met Sergeant Leonard just entering the square.

"How many men do you have for the search party?" asked Garth.

"Eleven," said the sergeant. "There are two men in the street between the river and the square. I have two more in the square and three along the road. That leaves five, counting me, to do the searching."

Garth turned and started back to the half-track. Barnes stood up-right behind the turret of MacMorris's tank. Garth saw that he stared fixedly at the row of houses which faced the far side of the square. His head turned for a moment in Garth's direction and then toward the houses. He seemed to be looking up at the second floor windows of one of the houses. Then he leaned over and spoke to one of the men behind

him and without hesitating dropped off the deck of the tank. When he regained his feet he faced the far line of houses and then turned and came running toward Garth. Garth was now even with the fountain. Barnes was beginning to point as he came to a halt a few paces from Garth.

With the sound of the rifle shot Barnes began to fall. Garth saw his face dropping, farther and farther away, and finally the face snapped forward and Garth saw the top of the helmet. Barnes seemed to squat and then topple to one side. Blood appeared on his jaw.

Between the weight of the hammer and the buttocks of the statue, Garth saw the muzzle of the rifle projecting from a window. The infantrymen were jumping off the tanks and scrambling for cover. Garth opened the cover of his submachine gun and fired three bursts at the window. A rifle bullet struck the leg of the statue and was deflected toward the half-track. Some of the infantrymen identified the target and began firing. Garth ran to the tank and climbed onto the hull and looked down at MacMorris.

"One round, high explosive, super-quick," he shouted. Harper, the loader, stared at him and then ducked away. MacMorris's head came through the hatch.

"Target—that window!" Garth pointed.

MacMorris nodded. Garth put his lips close to the sergeant's ear.

"Give me two grenades," he shouted above the roar of the engine.

MacMorris bent forward and then handed Garth the two grenades.

The turret went rapidly too far to the left and then returned. The muzzle of the gun rose toward the window. Garth heard the shell slam forward and the clang of the block as it locked the shell in the tube.

"Fire!"

The window disappeared in flame and smoke and the deck of the tank shuddered beneath his feet as the gun recoiled.

Garth dropped off the side of the tank and fell on his side. He scrambled to his feet and ran toward the second tank. He changed his direction and ran toward the door below and to the right of the window. Several of the infantrymen followed. Now, he thought, if the rest cover us, we'll be all right. The machine gun in the turret of his tank fired rapid bursts at the window.

He ran directly toward the door. The men who followed stood pressed against the wall of the house. He tried the doorknob, and the door swung open. At last, he thought, here's one place that the SS man slipped. He stepped away from the door, pulled the pin of a grenade, and threw it inside the door. Waiting for the explosion, he stared at the metal lever of the grenade which lay in the space before the doorway. The explosion was a low pitched blast of sound and wave of air, like a heavy cough. The door slammed violently shut and behind him he could hear the sound of breaking glass.

He turned the doorknob again and slammed his shoulder against the panels. The door flung inward and he saw a stairway opposite the doorway. Without stopping, he was pounding upward toward the second floor. He heard men on the steps behind him. At the top he swung around and, glancing back, saw that the men had followed him. An open doorway stood to the left of the stairwell. Crouching low he ran through it, firing the gun in short bursts. There were two rooms, separated by a partition which had open double doors. Through the open space he saw two bodies

in the other room. A burst of bullets entered the window and tore the ceiling, ripping small spurts of dust from the plaster. He backed out of the room.

"Tell them to cease firing," he called to one of the infantrymen standing in the hallway. The man ran rapidly down the stairs. Garth had seen only two bodies. One was a woman--undoubtedly Frau Kloster. The other was a man in a black uniform--Stohr, the policeman. The SS man was not there--at least Garth, in his brief look, before the machine gun drove him back, had not seen him. He looked back among the men in the hallway. A corporal stood near the stairwell.

"Corporal," Garth called, "take two men and see if you can find a rear entrance. The SS man must have gotten away again. And hurry."

"Yes, sir." The corporal saluted and called on two men to follow him. The three ran down the stairway, their boots making dull thudding noises on the stairs. Hearing that sound, Garth realized that he had not heard any firing from outside for a moment. He looked speculatively at the closed door.

"It looks like the tank gun did it," he said.

One of the men grinned in the semi-dark.

"It ought to," he said. "Jesus Christ, what a noise!"

The silence continued. Cautiously Garth reentered the room. He held his gun at ready, but there was no human movement. Dust was thick in the air and settling on the objects in the room. The man lay near the window and the woman had been thrown almost under the bed. He heard the sounds of men in the next room. An infantryman stood in the doorway.

"Send back to the aid station for Sergeant Bloom," he ordered the man. "Tell the rest to stay out. You keep guard on the door. Don't let anyone except Bloom in."

He went to the man and knelt, feeling for his pulse. Garth could see that his chest and abdomen were torn in several places by shrapnel. He could not feel a pulse. The German had hard, sharp features, relaxed now, and his eyes stared toward the far wall of the room. He left the man and went to the woman. She did not appear to be wounded. Her pulse was irregular, but rapid and strong. She lay on her back, eyes closed, with her blonde hair twisted about her head. One leg was bent awkwardly over the other.

He looked around the room. The smell of the high explosive shell was strong in the settling dust. The bed was neatly made and the articles on the dressing table seemed to have been placed with care. He turned to the window. The shell had struck the lower left corner of the opening and blown a round hole in the masonry. The man had been close enough to be in the path of shrapnel, but the woman must have been exposed only to the concussion.

"Medics," called the man at the door.

Sergeant Bloom knelt beside the man. Garth looked at the woman. Her face was gray with the settling dust.

"This one is dead," said Bloom.

"Take a look at the woman."

Bloom walked across the room. He straightened her twisted leg and then pulled her from under the bed.

"There are no wounds that I can see," said Bloom. "Pulse okay. Might have been knocked unconscious, or it might be shock."

Garth remembered the river crossing.

"We'll take them back to Frau Englehart's," he said. "See if you can bring the girl around. Try to identify them."

"Yes, sir," said Bloom. "Okay if I use a couple of infantrymen for a minute?"

"Got them from the men in the hallway," said Garth.

Then he thought of the SS man again.

CHAPTER IX

Outside, when Garth came out of the house and into the square, the tank engines were still running. The turret guns pointed upward toward the window, above and to the right of his head. Grouped about each tank the infantrymen squatted, rifles leaning across arms or knees, and smoked and stared silently at the buildings which closed in on the square. Barnes's body, on its back now, white face and naked eyes staring upward, arms extended downward and hands alongside hips, reproached him from beside the fountain. Garth forced himself to look away. He saw MacMorris in the tank turret and motioned to MacMorris to join him. The sergeant placed both hands on the turret top beside the hatch opening and hoisted himself up, then each leg swung down over the curved surface. He slid to the deck and jumped to the ground.

The windows stared silently back at Garth as MacMorris walked through the open sunlight. Behind each window, he thought, a German, and behind each German an idea which unites them all and gives in its shelter security and only dies with a rough grinding jolt of fire when the intruder, who is not included in the idea, but must exist also, appears.

"The SS man escaped," he answered MacMorris's questioning glance. "The rifle is gone, so someone must have gotten away, but we got the other two. The man named Stohr, the policeman, is dead. The woman

is unconscious."

"Barnes is dead."

"Get your tank out on the bridge approach. The SS man will probably try to cross the river. If you see him get him. I don't care how."

MacMorris turned and made decisive circles with his right fist. The tank engine roared and died down and the infantrymen crouching near the tracks got stiffly onto their feet and moved away as the tracks protested shrilly and the iron monster sullenly swung around, grating one track while the other scraped white spots on the stones, disturbing the increment of centuries. Garth shook his head to Bedford, the commander of the second tank, telling him that it was his duty at the present to do nothing. The first tank paused briefly while MacMorris clambered up the front slope plate, onto the turret, and dropped into the hatch. His head reappeared, and the tank grated forward, turned slightly when it was past the fountain and, picking up speed, went into the street leading to the bridge.

Sergeant Leonard stood looking at Barnes. Garth walked rapidly toward him. The sergeant turned to face him, eyes expressionless.

"Get the rest of the platoon together," Garth ordered. "The SS man was upstairs with the girl and the policeman, but he's escaped. Your squad leader took two men and is searching the area immediately in the rear of these houses. Take the rest of the men and sweep out toward the river. The tank is on the bridge approach. Send one man there to warn MacMorris not to shoot any of our men. Don't let the SS man cross."

"Yes, sir."

The sergeant stood, waiting.

"That's all."

Leonard turned and signalled to the remainder of the infantrymen. The men got to their feet and began to group around the sergeant. Bloom, followed by Perkins, appeared in the doorway. On the litter between the two the girl lay, still unconscious. Garth watched them pass silently, past the body of Barnes, to the corner of the fountain pool and then toward the medical vehicle. The SS man might have escaped before the tank gun was fired, so the dismounted squad might be too late to cut off his path to the river--was undoubtedly too late. Garth followed Bloom and Perkins who were preparing to place the litter on the steel rack over the hood of the jeep.

"Wait," he called. "I'll have to use the jeep for a little while. Get some infantrymen to help you with Barnes and the woman. Get them back to your aid station."

Between them, Bloom and Perkins lowered the litter to the stones. Dust from the loosened stones and plaster still formed a rough film over the woman's features. She lay breathing quietly, much in the same attitude in which Barnes lay, but without the blood on her face. Two web straps secured her to the litter.

"Did you look at Barnes?"

Bloom straightened up and looked toward the statue.

"Yes, sir," he said. "He's dead."

"Put Barnes on the other litter. You can send back for the man."

"Yes, sir."

Bedford stood beside his tank.

"Wait here," said Garth. "I'll send someone after you when I need you."

"Yes, sir," said Bedford. He dropped his cigarette and walked to his tank and signalled for the driver to kill the engine. Garth climbed into the jeep and turned the ignition switch. The motor caught and he pulled the jeep up beside the half-track. Allen, the vehicle commander, stood upright on the armor-plated engine hood.

"Allen."

"Yes, sir."

"Come with me."

Allen, his carbine slung over his shoulder, jumped to the ground and ran around the jeep and sat beside Garth. Garth let the clutch out viciously and shifted into second and then high as he swung in a wide circle around the tank, then past the fountain and into a street leading from the square. Some distance ahead, the infantry, led by Leonard, were moving at double-time. As the jeep roared past the column Garth saw two men detach themselves from the group and turn into a narrow street which led toward the river. Impatiently Garth watched the monotonous houses stream past. He spun the steering wheel savagely and careened into a side street. At the end of the street he could see the river. He slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel, making the vehicle skid to a sliding halt with a huge cloud of dust thrown into the air. He dismounted from the jeep and stood looking across the river toward the far bank, the houses, the road leading upward, thinking: In the army you do it by the numbers. You get a G-2 report--everything that is known of the enemy and some knucklehead's idea of what the enemy is capable of--and you read it over and think about it and then throw it away because obviously the only way such a report could be compiled, outside of a circle of secret agents, collaborators, informers

who could go back and forth or communicate easily back and forth between the invader and the invaded so that no secrets remained, was in the imagination of some second lieutenant, inspired by eau de vie, back at Corps Headquarters, who must turn out, create, so many pages for the captain who will give it the professional West Point flavor, otherwise the two of them will be bounced out on their respective asses and sent to some fighting unit. So you throw away the G-2 report letting it go at: the enemy is there, still fighting. Then you get a G-1 report of your own potentialities, personnel, morale, capabilities. Three tanks, a half-track, a jeep; twenty-three men, himself, twenty-four. In the infantry platoon, thirty-one men. Losses: tankers--two killed, one wounded, hospitalized; infantry--one killed, the commander; vehicles--one tank destroyed. So, personnel, 97 percent effective; vehicles, 80 percent effective. Enemy losses: personnel--one dead, one captured, one escaped. Receiving mortar fire from across the river, probably from some homeguard old men who have only a few rounds of ammunition left to defend their fatherland since they fire a round and then may wait thirty minutes before firing another and since there seems to be no pattern or plan to their target. But it isn't proper to get these steps mixed up and if it's done the Army way it would be best to go back and take these in the proper order. The only thing that really matters though is our capabilities. The infantry is capable of and will cross this river with a squad of men who will attack the homeguard who tend their mortar so ineffectively. The two tanks are capable of laying down a limited cover of fire for the infantry attack, enough to make a timid homeguard wither in their foxholes and surrender with white faces to the infantry without either side firing a shot. So we are capable of

that but we were not capable of carrying out our orders because some coincidence has crossed our path with man, SS, trained, efficient, capable of many things, and a woman, fanatic, capable of even more, and a helper, an apprentice, of limited capabilities, dead now.

Finally there was this wall which must be faced, this question which must be answered: What was he himself capable of? The question had been there since the moment he had stood in the strong acrid smell of the room and looked down at the body of the woman, realizing that she still lived, was only unconscious, her body thrown by the blast until it was stopped suddenly so that the brain was thrown against the braincase and battered about until it no longer functioned and identity left her temporarily--a living death, which, when fought off, must be followed by real death. For that was the question: What was he capable of? Killing her? Those were the words which represented factual, material reality, but for the reports and for talking about it with other men it could be referred to under more acceptable terms--execution, martial law, morale, not revenge. Wounded pride? Face-saving honor?

The decision had already been made and the knowledge of the inevitability of it, the plodding slow events, conversations, forced smiles, commands subdued and quiet with a timbre which lingers, until the final irrevocable act of the projectiles whipped faster from point to point than the imagination can conceive puts its final seal on the incident. The decision was made when he looked back, after firing the two warning rounds from the junction, and raised his arm and dropped it as the signal for the other tanks to follow. Up to that point it could have been changed. A squad of infantrymen could have been sent to investigate the clump of trees from which the panzerfaust had been fired. The SS

man could have been forced to abandon his position. The foxhole could have been discovered and thus Garth could have been alerted to the threat. Garth might, then, have sent the infantry across the river at the junction with orders to approach the bridge from the rear—to attempt to capture it before the charges could have been set off. But none of these things had happened. The tank had been destroyed, the bridge blown, and Barnes killed. Now the final act was in sight. The woman was going to die.

So the decision had been made and he had made it sometime within the last twelve hours without being at all aware that anything unusual had occurred. He, of the few hundred people in the river valley, had been lightning-ringed by fire, set apart, so that he could at last become a killer. It was the final springing of the trap which was the war: up to this point he could think that he had never directly been responsible for the death of any human being but from this inevitable act onward he would know the taste of power. He had seen many men die but he could still say to himself--it was not my act which took that life. Perhaps I helped but I am not alone responsible.

So the decision had been made and all that remained was to reconcile himself to it. First of all, military necessity. A conquered people must be forced to admit they've been conquered. The persons and effects of the conquerors must be regarded as inviolable. So long as the war lasts the army has one duty—to fight the enemy--and anything which interferes with this duty must be destroyed or exterminated. The sentry who falls asleep on his proper post of duty must pay the price. The legal basis of war is an agreement between all concerned that some shall fight

and fight in a certain way, and the civilian who breaks this agreement, this orderly way of doing things, must pay the price. We set aside certain persons and we pay them and dress them properly and we say to them you must fight and killing is a normal part of your job, but no one else can fight because we must do this in an orderly fashion and no one must interfere with the army's duty. So it is, purely and simply, a matter of military necessity. No one man is responsible; we're all in the same boat and some of us shoot and some get shot.

He recognized the odd sound as the scraping of Allen's lighter wheel turning against the flint. The lighter must have worked because the noise ceased. A moment later he heard a step.

"Cigarette, lieutenant?" asked Allen.

He took one and lit it from the sergeant's cigarette.

"He got away again," he said bitterly.

"Yes, sir."

Garth inhaled and looked again across the river.

"Let's get back," he said.

He turned toward the vehicle. Somewhere back in the town, a mortar shell exploded. It was two o'clock--just one hour since the first round had awakened him.

The half-track was not in the square when Garth drove back into the town. Bedford's tank was where it had been when Barnes was killed. Bedford and one of his crewmen were sitting on the turret. Garth shook his head negatively without stopping. He looked without emotion at the torn wall of the house in which the conspirators had made their most recent effort against the invaders. Since the half-track was gone Allen

rode with Garth through the square and on to Frau Englehart's inn. Garth parked before the two story building and Allen walked around the open driveway which led to the rear. MacMorris's tank stood on the bridge approach. Garth called and when MacMorris came he told him to find Sergeant Leonard and to assemble the crossing squad and carry them to the junction. The infantrymen were to begin crossing at once. MacMorris and Bedford were to find a position from which they could fire on the mortar. When that was done he should report to the half-track by radio that he was ready. Garth would coordinate the crossing operation. Then he turned away and opened the door and entered the large room. Kelly sat at one of the tables. Before him was a litter of torn ration boxes, cans, and mess gear. Garth looked down at Kelly.

"Enjoy your meal?" he asked. He had not eaten since morning, yet he could not look at the prospect of food without revulsion.

"Same old stuff, lieutenant," said Kelly. "Say, I heard you doing some shooting after you left here. They said you caught these Krauts who knocked off Merrill's tank."

"The big one got away."

"The SS?"

Garth nodded.

"Has Hoff or the burgomaster been around?" he asked.

"I think they were both out back a while ago," Kelly answered.

"Bloom's got that woman in his aid station. Last I heard she was still unconscious."

"Look around and see if Hoff and the burgomaster are still here. If they are, send them in."

Kelly turned to go.

"Clean up some of this mess," said Garth. Kelly went to the table and stuffed the trash in the empty ration box. He went out a moment later through the rear door. In the corner near the OD chest of explosives Garth found the gasoline stove and the coffee pot. There was a half full can of water but nowhere could he find the coffee. The old fox wasn't losing his fresh coffee that easily. Garth carried the stove to a well-lighted table. He turned the cap on the base of the stove until it was tight and then began to pump the compressor rapidly. When there was sufficient pressure he turned the pump handle until it was locked down and then opened the needle valve wide. Raw gasoline spurted up into the cup and dripped around the outlet. He turned the valve off and lighted the gasoline and watched it burn until it flickered and died out. When he turned the needle valve again and lighted the spurting gasoline vapor it burned orange and yellow and finally a hissing blue.

Hoff entered the room. Behind him the burgomaster entered and stopped. Garth motioned toward the table, pointing to the chairs which faced it. Behrens limped to a chair and sat down heavily. He watched Garth's movements impersonally. Hoff followed the burgomaster slowly. Garth went to the water can and filled the blackened coffee pot from it. He returned to the table and set the coffee pot on the hissing stove.

"Have you seen Frau Kloster?" Garth asked Hoff.

Hoff swallowed.

"Yes," he said. "We looked in at her. She was still unconscious. Bloom is with her."

Garth nodded toward Behrens.

"He knows all about the death of Barnes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where were you when it happened?"

"At the local power plant. Herr Behrens was making arrangements to keep it in operation."

"Did you hear anything about the SS man and Frau Kloster before the fight in the square?"

"No, sir. Herr Behrens inquired about them in several places. No one seemed to know anything about them."

"What about the house in the square?"

"It was lived in by someone who left town three days ago. The SS man broke in from the rear, Herr Behrens thinks. Everyone thought the house was empty."

"Either that or they didn't care to mention it to us or to Behrens."

There was only one cup in the litter of equipment. He turned to Hoff.

"Go out to the half-track," he said. "Borrow two cups and get some coffee from Allen."

Hoff stood up quickly and went from the room. Behrens sat watching the blue flame under the coffee pot. Garth turned and walked to the rear door and then stopped. He looked back at Behrens. After a moment the burgomaster's head turned and he stared impassively at Garth. Then his gaze returned to the blue flame. Garth went out the door and through the narrow dark hallway to the door which had the red and white emblem tacked onto it. He opened the door and stepped in. Perkins stood a pace

or two from the door; Bloom sat on a canvas cot. On the canvas stretcher the woman lay.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Still unconscious," said Bloom.

"Let me know when she comes to."

"Yes, sir."

Behind him through the open doorway he heard padding footsteps. Hoff passed him silently. He held two canteen cups and a small jar of soluble coffee, managing to hold the three objects awkwardly as he held everything. Garth turned and followed Hoff back to the large room. Behrens sat as Garth had left him, staring at the burning stove. Garth glanced into the lidless coffee pot. Small bubbles which had formed on the bottom of the pot had begun to rise to the surface, but the water was not yet boiling. Garth went to one of the front windows and looked out.

As always the street was deserted. He was afraid to face the fact that Frau Kloster would become conscious again. She was an attractive woman. In the square as he looked down at her face as she was carried past by Bloom and Perkins he had felt an impulse to rub his finger in the dust which had given a faint patina to the high, smooth brow, but he had only continued to stare curiously at her face for a moment. Now he could wish that he could stop time or he could wish that she would die, but neither of these things would happen and he still had an inevitable course to follow. Returning to the table Garth saw that the water was about to boil. He measured out a portion of the coffee into each cup and then poured water into each. The water became brown immediately but in each cup some of the powder remained solid, floating about

in small circles trailed by a black current.

"Ask Herr Behrens if he can get two coffins."

Hoff stared blankly at him.

"Two coffins?"

"Yes."

Hoff swallowed once and then addressed the burgomaster. The two men talked in low voices, seriously, not looking at him.

"He asks 'For who?'"

"The dead man. Frau Kloster."

Hoff did not translate. Behrens understood. He turned his head and stared at Garth. Then he spoke. Hoff listened.

"He asks if it is necessary."

"It is."

Garth stirred his coffee. Behrens spoke again.

"He asks why."

"Because it is the way of armies. He knows that. This is what happens at a time like this."

Hoff translated and Behrens listened. He faced Garth and spoke.

"He says she is not really a bad woman. She lost her husband in France. It is only natural that she should feel resentment."

"And it is only natural that we want to live."

Behrens faced him while Hoff spoke, then his gaze dropped. Garth knew that it was not the logic of the words or the manner in which they were spoken which ended the disagreement. There was no answer which either of them could bring. Garth indicated the table.

"Coffee?" he asked.

Hoff repeated the word to Behrens. Slowly the man reached out and

took one of the canteen cups and raised it to his lips. He tasted the coffee and then set the cup back on the table. Then he spoke slowly, staring steadily at the coffee.

"He can get the coffins," said Hoff.

"Tell him he is to make a public announcement--a written notice--of Frau Kloster's execution. If there is a priest of her faith here Herr Behrens may bring him to her. Otherwise no one else is to see her. After the execution he will have both coffins taken through the square for burial. The funeral will not be public. No one is to be present at the execution except Herr Behrens, the priest, if there is one, and direct relatives. There will be no funeral procession except those persons."

Hoff talked slowly and carefully.

"He understands," he said. "There are no relatives."

"He'd better start as soon as possible," said Garth. "It won't be long after she regains consciousness."

Garth tasted his coffee. It was strong and bitter. Behrens stood up and looked at Hoff. Hoff turned toward the door and the two men silently went out. Garth glanced at the two cups of coffee and then went to the window. Side by side the German and the Jew walked toward the square.

"Lieutenant?"

He turned to face Perkins.

"The German woman is conscious."

He thought for a moment.

"Hoff and the burgomaster went toward the square. Find them and tell them that they are to get back here as soon as they've done what I

sent them to do. Tell them that Frau Kloster is conscious and that I need Hoff to translate. I want Herr Behrens as a witness too."

"Yes, sir."

"That's all."

Perkins went quickly out the door. Garth watched him walking hurriedly toward the square. He tasted his coffee again.

CHAPTER X

Bloom

After checking the German woman's pulse and respiration Sergeant Bloom sat down on the canvas cot and looked at her. She was still on the stretcher, bound by the web straps. Dust which had settled on her face and clothing in the upstairs room remained undisturbed. Her pulse and respiration were nearly normal but she had not as yet given any signs of regaining consciousness. Her breathing was somewhat slower than when he had first checked it and she gave the appearance of sleeping quietly. Her body temperature, when he had somewhat reluctantly slipped his hand under her skirt and along her thigh to her hips and the soft abdomen, seemed normal so far as he could judge. He had left his hand there a moment considering his next move and then quickly removed it and rearranged the skirt over her knees.

The woman's body was well proportioned. Her youthful figure was plainly apparent in spite of the shapeless clothing in which she was dressed. Her breasts might have been larger but perhaps that effect was because of the reclining position of her body. Her skin was white under the film of dust; her facial profile showed a high forehead, a concavely sloping nose, narrow almost pursed lips even when relaxed, and a firm jaw line. Her face was rather narrow, seen from above, and her eyes seemed to be too closely placed together. Framed by blonde

hair, braided into tight strands which were fastened on the back of her head, her face was attractive.

He considered, again, what he might do, but this time without the necessity of erecting any mental barrier which must prevent him from behaving in any other way than was acceptable to himself. He would need some water if he should try to wash the dust from her face and there was plenty of water available but he felt a reluctance to begin the task. It was almost too private, too personal. On the other hand, he might use some stimulant to try to bring her back to consciousness. Perhaps the water alone, if he should decide to wash her face, might be enough to bring her around.

Now that he had followed the thought to that point it was a necessary and almost inevitable act to follow it one step further. Why? Why revive her? Was it not a civilized custom to shoot persons who had done what this woman had done? Why revive her at all? Why not just shoot her as she lay? It would only make a small hole in the canvas sheet which formed the bed she lay in and some blood might spill onto the canvas, but the hole could be patched and the blood could be washed out and no one would ever be wiser and it would be more merciful. Suddenly the sharp shafts of all the unmerciful acts of mankind thrust in upon him and he felt a great sorrow. He heard a step outside and was grateful when the doorknob twisted and Perkins entered. Perkins stood for a moment looking down at the woman. Then he turned to Bloom.

"We put the dead German and Barnes in the kitchen," he said. "Side by side. Each one's just as dead as the other."

Bloom gazed curiously at Perkins. Perkins's story of the morning came again into his mind and he was forced to readjust again his

assumptions about the man. He said nothing, however.

"How's this one?" asked Perkins.

Bloom motioned wordlessly toward the woman. Perkins waited for an answer. Bloom forced himself to speak.

"Pulse normal," he said. "Respiration normal. Temperature normal, by guessing. Still unconscious. I'm no doctor so I don't know why."

Perkins glanced at him and turned back to the woman.

"You want to try to revive her?" he asked.

Bloom considered the question.

"Why?" he asked finally.

"Hell," said Perkins. "I dunno. Maybe the lieutenant will want to talk to her. Maybe she'll say something interesting."

"What do you think will happen to her?"

Perkins started to answer and then became aware of the meaning of the question. He stared at her for a moment and then his head turned to Bloom.

"This one too," he said. Then comprehension was accepted. "Yeah. They shoot people like her."

"Do you want to revive her?" asked Bloom.

Perkins stared at him. Then he began to smile.

"I'm no ghoul," he said. "This is interesting, though. We both know what's going to happen to her, but I guess we see it differently." He paused and thought. "No," he said. "I guess there's no reason to revive her. Let her enjoy life while she can."

"How do you see it?" asked Bloom.

Perkins thought again. "That's a tough question," he said. "I guess I don't really know how I see it. But like they say, it's not

dying that hurts so much. It's just being dead so long."

Now Perkins looked questioningly at Bloom.

"How do you see it?" he continued. "Can't you make it into a thought for the day? This has been a long day, and I'd hate to have it pass without a thought."

Perkins's triumph, Bloom realized, would come when he, Bloom, lost control of himself and attempted in any unplanned fashion to retaliate. Sudden steps outside the door interrupted his thought. The door swung open and Lieutenant Garth entered the room. After looking at them briefly he stood looking down at the woman. Finally he spoke.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Still unconscious," Bloom answered.

"Let me know when she comes to."

"Yes, sir."

Garth stepped backward and the door closed. Perkins's eyes swung back to Bloom.

"Well?" he said.

"How would you like to have on your mind what he's going to have on his mind in an hour or so?"

Perkins stared at him.

"Oh," he said, understanding. "He might not go through with it."

"He'll go through with it."

"How about the thought?"

Bloom felt himself becoming more and more irritated with Perkins.

"Today's thought," he said, "has to do with the effect of war on men. All men have some concept of suffering since they've all suffered something at some time--some more, some less. But war sends them in one

of two directions. Either they learn to ignore it and it never affects them--they're the normal persons--or they become super-sensitive and then everything that touches them touches raw nerve ends."

"And what are they?"

"They're the ones who had better watch out because they're right on the edge."

Perkins thought for a moment.

"Well," he said. "That's not such a bad thought for the day. It seems to me it's life that has that effect, not war. But it's not a bad thought."

"Thanks," said Bloom.

His gaze dropped to the woman lying on the stretcher. She lay with her eyes open staring at him.

"Go tell the lieutenant she's awake," he said.

MacMorris

At the road junction MacMorris dismounted and talked briefly with Bedford. The men of the crossing squad began to prepare their equipment for the crossing. First one man stretched his poncho out flat on the ground and then the second man spread his poncho on top of the first. Then their rifles were laid diagonally across the ponchos so that they formed a rude cross. The edges of the ponchos were turned up and the corners tied with shelter-half ropes and finally the eyelets which edged the rubber sheets were laced together so that the bundle formed a square raft. The funnel-like opening for the head was pulled up and tied to the top rifle. Then each man stripped to his shorts and put all his clothing and equipment inside the raft. Two of the men edged

into the water with their equipment carried between them. When they were waist deep they let the raft down and the crude improvisation settled deep in the water. One of the men pushed himself out into the river. He looked back at the other and said something and the other man pushed the raft gently forward. The man who was swimming seized a corner and guided the raft outward. The second man inhaled and plunged into the deeper water. He swam slowly and deliberately to reach the raft. The distance between the two men and the bank increased.

The man in charge, a corporal, was sending the men across in pairs as they were ready. The corporal would add his equipment to the last pair, since the crossing force was now cut down to nine men and he had no partner to make a raft with, and the last three would cross together. MacMorris reviewed the plans with the corporal and then signalled to Bedford to follow him in his tank.

From the junction he followed the highway back in the direction from which they had entered the valley that morning. When Garth had called to him just before they left the OP for the road junction he had been too hurried to be able to plan consciously any way to approach the subject of Frau Kloster. Then when MacMorris realized that at the moment in Garth's life when Garth would be faced with his biggest decision, he, MacMorris, would be elsewhere, directing the fire of the tanks across the river at the dug-in enemy; when he came to the realization that this was an unavoidable fact, he felt at first a sense of disappointment; then, as the tank went through the square toward the edge of town, he thought: This isn't a side show. That man is becoming too much of an obsession. And the answer came: Just this once more. The end is in sight now and it would be a great loss to miss the moment

of decision. But, in rebuttal, getting away from it now enables you to break that spell and to focus on the real problem. Frau Kloster. Is she going to live or die?

So long as this is a debate, he thought, why not argue the question? Resolved, that Frau Kloster should be executed for practicing guerilla warfare. Summarizing the affirmative arguments: military necessity--we must impress the civilian populace with the necessity of accepting defeat, of facing reality; morale of the troops--if she escapes punishment we will be resentful at such lack of forceful leadership; revenge--for the death of three men. And the act must be performed immediately for if it is delayed even an hour then it may never happen. The negative: she is a woman, a human being, and, like all human beings, involved in mankind. No more, no less.

And so, since it always had lost this debate, the negative would lose this one also. The negative argument was fundamental, getting at cause and effect, but it could not survive against the logic of warfare. The real question then was the question of Garth. Since it was inconceivable that Garth would refuse his part in the awkward tableau which was soon to exist briefly in time, the question was in reality what effect would it have on one Lieutenant Garth, Joseph P.? Would it finally penetrate the layer of reserve? Would he finally break at some point along the way and in fact reveal himself? Would the human being behind the shield be forced to step out in the open, naked and afraid, and recognize himself for what he was? It could happen today and MacMorris would not be there to see it. No one else had ever looked, so very likely he would never know whether or not it happened. The medic, Bloom, might notice, but he hadn't known Garth long enough to be

on his guard. Kelly would be there but he wouldn't see anything. Perhaps Kelly was right. Perhaps MacMorris was imagining the whole thing. Perhaps Garth was just like any other man wanting only a drink and a woman to be complete. For a moment MacMorris reconsidered his interest in understanding Garth. The two had been together long enough that each appeared to understand the other without the necessity of words to explain actions. But that wall of reserve which Garth maintained still separated them. That was his only interest--to see the real man just once, alone and afraid.

He turned in the turret and looked back toward the river. On the far bank two men were half out of the water struggling with an awkward bundle. About one-third of the way across two more men swam toward the far side. He glanced up to the top of the valley wall where the mortar was located but without glasses could make out nothing human.

What would he do if the question were to be put to him: Will you volunteer? Will you be on the firing squad which performs the execution? What answer could he give? The only way to answer yes would be to convince himself that it was a duty, something without which the army couldn't go on. And that would be awfully hard to do. How about Garth then? If simply being on the firing squad was that difficult, how then could one man give the order to execute the woman? Only by retreating before the military necessity. The individual could simply retreat before that necessity, surrender to it and live with it a part of him forever after. That was the only explanation. The human being simply wasn't designed to make such decisions. The decisions were already made. All the man had to do was to recognize the time. To everything there is a season . . . a time to be born and a time to die.

He pressed his microphone switch and told Murrey to make a left turn and start climbing the hill. The tank slowed as Murrey shifted gears and then the gun swung to the left and the front of the tank dipped down into the ditch. The rocking motion as the tank climbed out of the ditch threw him forward against the front of the hatch. Murrey kept the transmission in the lower gear as the engine began to labor under the climb. The incline became steeper and the soil was rockier as the tank climbed higher. Behind him Bedford's tank seemed to be climbing with greater difficulty. Ahead, an indentation on the valley wall provided a level place. He directed Murrey to the level ground and told him to halt. Dismounting, he gave Murrey the necessary signals so that the tank was properly placed to give Bedford a firing position a few feet away. He signalled Murrey to cut the engine and as the noise died away he walked back until he could see Bedford's tank. The engine was laboring under the extra load but the tank ground steadily forward.

Kirby

It was the first time Kirby had ever seen a tank destroyed and he had watched the burning vehicle and the attack on the grove of trees with a calm detachment which made him forget his wet feet. Then, as the column was about to enter town there was a great blast of smoke and the bridge was no longer. After that, as though these events had been overpowering, the invading force had settled down into a somnolent state of inactivity so far as the observers were concerned. Scott made a short expedition back to a grove of trees and brought back several pieces of wood wet only on the outside. Since there seemed to be little

chance of anything happening both Kirby and Scott removed their boots and dried their socks before the fire which Scott built. Then they lay back to smoke and Kirby drifted off to sleep.

He was awakened by Scott who pointed out the small force of men across the river and approximately opposite the bridge. They stood openly on the crest of the opposite bank without any apparent organization to their efforts. He noted the time and reported the presence of the men to the half-track and then studied the force through his glasses. As nearly as he could tell they wore German uniforms. Some of the men began to dig holes. Their position was completely exposed on the face of the valley wall. Finally he saw what must be a mortar tube being placed in a firing position. He reported these happenings to the half-track as they occurred. The enemy force did not seem to be a cause for any concern on the part of the Americans in the town. As the slow process of the enemy digging in was carried out he lost interest. Scott had gone to sleep. He wished he could go back to sleep but one of the two had to be awake.

Then the first round had been fired from the mortar. At first there seemed to be no response but slowly the military force in the town came to life. Then another round of mortar fire seemed to goad the sleeping giant into activity. After some time the tank engines were heard faintly and then the sound of a heavy gun fired once. He called on the radio, inquiring as to the cause, but received no answer. Finally he heard the operator's voice respond to his call. Sergeant Barnes was dead. - A German woman had been captured and a German killed. But the SS man had escaped. What SS man? Kirby wondered. Then, later, two tanks left the town and returned to the road junction, passing the

still smoking tank opposite the small grove of trees. The tanks carried infantrymen who dismounted at the junction and began to prepare for a river crossing. Watching these preparations through his glasses, Kirby smiled. He was glad he did not have to make the river crossing.

Then he turned his attention to the news. Sergeant Barnes was dead. That left Sergeant Leonard, in the absence of any assigned officer, in charge of the platoon. To Kirby this was an improvement. Leonard was stupider than Barnes but more honest. Kirby was indifferent to the death of Barnes. He had never particularly cared for the man although he had never really found any reason for liking or disliking him. It simply made no difference--the death of Barnes. He could not recall whether Barnes had a family, a wife and children, or a mother and father. If he had he must never have mentioned them to anyone. Barnes was not a negative quantity. He was a zero.

He went on to the other items. A German soldier had escaped. Then it must have been the soldier, the SS man, who had destroyed the tank and in some fashion had managed almost immediately after doing this to destroy the bridge. And he must also be responsible for the death of Barnes. This soldier had indeed had a busy day. Kirby felt a grudging admiration for the enemy soldier. And, to top everything, the man had escaped.

That left only the woman to consider. Why had a woman been captured? He called the half-track again and was given more details. They were, the operator had said, probably going to shoot her. They were going to shoot her because she was a civilian who was at least in part responsible for the destruction of the tank and the bridge and the death of Barnes.

So it wasn't the soldier alone. He had had help. And they were going to shoot her.

Watching the men at the junction he let the thought grow in his mind. He would like to be a member of the firing squad. He did not know what firing squads did exactly but he could imagine himself on the front row of a group of men, kneeling and aligning his rifle sights on a motionless vague figure before him. This desire had nothing to do with Barnes. He had no desire to even the score for a dead man. It was not revenge, really. He couldn't square any insult, implied or actual, on the American army by shooting one German, and a woman at that. What then was the reason?

It took him some time to arrive at an answer. Experience. That was as close as he could come to stating it. He simply wanted the knowledge that at one time at one place he had with a conscious act of will taken the life of another person. It was simple and frightening. Perhaps, if it were actually possible, he would be afraid to volunteer. But here on top of the hill he could believe vehemently that he would make the choice.

Below, at the junction, the tank men mounted their vehicles and the tanks moved back from the crossing position.

CHAPTER XI

Garth walked impatiently to the row of windows which opened onto the street. Brushing the upper curtains aside, he could see the slight elevation which led up to the bridge approach, and, in the opposite direction, the street which ended at the square. There was no sign of Hoff or Behrens, nor had he seen Perkins since Perkins had walked swiftly toward the square in search of the two. Now that he could do it more calmly, he thought about the death of Barnes.

He had first noticed that Barnes was standing behind the turret of MacMorris's tank looking up at the second floor window. Barnes had kept his attention fixed on something for a moment and then leaned down and spoke to one of the other infantrymen on the tank. Then he had stepped to the edge of the hull and half-vaulted off the tank, landing on the cobblestones and catching his balance with an effort. After looking again at the upper window he had turned toward Garth and began first to walk quickly and then to trot. The only explanation for such behavior was that Barnes had seen something which either made him suspicious—perhaps a rifle muzzle against a light background or the outline of a man in uniform—or something which had identified to him the hiding place of the SS man. It was probably only enough to make Barnes suspicious; otherwise the sensible thing to have done would have been to fire first and ask questions afterward. So he had only seen enough to

make him suspicious and it had caused his death.

After Barnes had been shot Garth had seen the rifle muzzle which projected from the window. He had seen the muzzle through the opening in the statue between the buttocks of the man and the heavy hammer which he held behind his back. A rifle bullet had struck against the statue and been whirringly deflected toward the half-track. So there had been a shot fired at him.

He turned and saw Sergeant Leonard just inside the door. The tall man stood awkwardly looking about.

"Come in," Garth called.

The sergeant stepped forward. He wore his helmet and carried his rifle slung over his right shoulder. He stopped near the table where Garth had left his submachine gun.

"You wanted me, lieutenant?"

"Sit down," said Garth.

Sergeant Leonard sat down heavily. He had slipped the rifle sling from his shoulder with an easy movement that told of great familiarity with the weapon. Now he sat with the rifle upright and held in position by large, relaxed, red hands--the hands, Garth thought, of a farmer.

"The German woman is going to be executed," Garth said.

There was no change in the relaxed features of the sergeant. He continued to look at the bayonet stud on the rifle which stood level with his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

Garth realized that he had paused, waiting for a reaction from the sergeant.

"I want you to pick a firing squad of six men," he said. "I don't want volunteers. I want you to pick men who can hit a target at thirty feet without any question of missing. I want the best shots you've got left here."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to inform them now of what they are going to do. Have them clean their rifles. I don't want any jams or malfunctions. It's got to be done as quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir."

"There will be a paper target pinned over the woman's heart. They are to aim at that. Tell them that she is not likely to suffer if they hit it."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think they will object?"

Sergeant Leonard was silent. Then, as he started to speak, Garth heard the sound of an exploding shell. He looked at his watch. Two-thirty. Sergeant Leonard listened a moment, then spoke.

"The men I pick won't like it," he said. "But I think they'll shoot to kill. They're not raving mad about Barnes, but they don't like it either."

"The woman will be standing at the rear wall. The firing squad will be opposite, against the rear of this building. Bring the squad in in a column of twos when I call."

"Yes, sir."

"Have them bring their rifles unloaded. I'll give them the ammunition and witness the loading."

"Yes, sir."

"Send me six clips of .30 caliber. Do you know Kelly?"

"The tank man who called me?"

"Yes."

"Yes, sir."

"Send the ammunition in with him. Do you have any questions?"

"When does this happen?"

"I don't know yet. Have the squad ready on call."

"Yes, sir."

Sergeant Leonard stood up and slipped the rifle sling over his shoulder. He stood undecided. Then he spoke.

"I don't guess there's anything else you could do, lieutenant," he said.

Garth stared at him. It was the first time he had seen Sergeant Leonard expose his feelings.

"I hope you're right," he said.

The sergeant turned and walked out of the room. Garth walked again to the window. Would Hoff and Behrens never return? Then he thought again of that single bullet which had hit the statue and had been deflected.

Regardless of the exact relationship between the three the SS man must have been the leader. They had found a hiding place in the empty upper floor of the house, probably at the suggestion of the policeman, who would be likely to know of such places. Then the hours must have dragged along with the SS man impatiently or patiently waiting his time to strike again and attempting to coordinate the efforts of his untrained assistants. Finally there was the noise of the tanks and a parade of the enemy before him. He would find it necessary to study the

enemy force a moment or two to locate the leader and the leader was the only one who was worth exposing their position for because it was probably the last time they would have to strike and it must be made to count. So the column halted and a man dismounted from the open vehicle and walked to the rear. There was no insignia on this man's uniform but his manner and finally his orders to the dismounted men confirmed him as the leader. The SS man brought the muzzle of his rifle up slowly and followed the man as he came walking back toward the tanks. Just as the German was about to squeeze the trigger he saw that he must wait until the man passed the statue. As the SS man swung his rifle to the cleared space he saw another man running toward the leader. It could only mean that he, the hunter, had been seen and was now the hunted. The decision to fire was made instantly and he caught the man's head in the sights and squeezed the trigger and then worked the bolt expertly, pulling it to the rear and clearing the empty brass cartridge and ramming another round into the chamber in what felt like the same motion. He aimed again at the leader but his shot was hurried and he saw the leader point his submachine gun at the window and fire. The man fired his gun expertly, firing three shots and then sighting again and firing three more shots. The bullets whacked into the ceiling above the window spraying dust down and driving him back from the window. Then he saw the tank turret turning and the gun being elevated and at the last moment he threw the woman down and hurled himself prone on the floor. When the explosion was over he raised himself and looked at the woman and the policeman, both perhaps dead, and then because escape was imperative, he abandoned the two.

So if it had happened that way, Barnes had saved Garth's life—not intentionally, but he had done it nevertheless. And the cost to Barnes had been his own life.

When Garth looked out the window again, Hoff and Herr Behrens were walking along the street with a third man who wore a black coat above gray trousers. The man's rather thin white face was topped by a black felt hat. Garth guessed that he represented the church. The three walked silently, each staring directly ahead.

"Lieutenant?"

He turned. Kelly had entered the room through the rear door.

"Yes?"

"Did you want these?"

Kelly held several clips of .30 caliber rifle ammunition in his cupped hands.

"Yes."

Kelly stared at him.

"Take one of those tables over in the far corner. Take each round out of the clip, wipe it with a dry cloth, wipe out the clip, and replace each round in the clip. I don't want a speck of dust in any of them."

"Yes, sir," said Kelly

He did not move. Garth looked at him questioningly.

"What are they for, lieutenant?"

Kelly asked the question with a sort of desperation.

"The German woman is going to be shot," he said.

Kelly, still staring at him, began to move toward the table Garth had indicated. He moved in a sort of trance. Garth heard the sound of steps and then the door opened and Hoff entered. He was followed by the

man in the black coat. Then came Behrens, swinging his body at each step. Hoff stepped forward and the strange man moved into the room uncertainly. He removed his hat.

"Lieutenant," said Hoff. "This is Herr Müller. He is the pastor here. Frau Kloster is a member of his church." He turned to Müller.

"Lieutenant Garth," he said.

"Herr Lieutenant," said Müller. He bowed his head sharply. His hair was cut short and his face, clean shaven, was heavily wrinkled.

Garth extended his right hand. Müller took it and shook hands briefly. Garth bowed his head.

"Herr Müller," he said.

The pastor seemed to be searching Garth's face for some clue to Garth's feelings. Garth consciously set his features in a mask which was composed and deliberate. As the pastor spoke, he looked first at Garth, and then, apparently realizing that the pathway of communication lay through Hoff, he began to address the Jew.

Hoff translated. "He speaks to you in the name of God. Herr Behrens has told him that you plan to execute Frau Kloster. He asks whether there is any way in which you might be induced to change your verdict."

"There has been no trial and no verdict," said Garth. "Nor is there any way to change the sentence."

Hoff spoke in German. Müller listened and asked a short question.

"He asks if the execution can be delayed?"

"No."

Müller understood without Hoff's repetition of the word. He stared a moment at Garth then turned to Behrens and started to speak but did

not. He turned back to Garth to protest. Then, suddenly, he sighed, bowed his head and stood submissive. Garth spoke to Hoff.

"I'm going to tell Frau Kloster what's going to happen to her," he said. "I want both of them as witnesses—and you, of course. Tell them that."

Garth turned and walked back to the table where Kelly sat. The assembled slips lay before him. Kelly nodded yes at Garth's inquiry about the ammunition. After sending Kelly to bring Sergeant Leonard and two armed men, not members of the firing squad, Garth turned back to the three men. He sat at a table near the wall.

"I want Herr Behrens and Pastor Muller to sit here," Garth said, pointing to a position a few feet to his left.

Hoff spoke to the two men. They took chairs and moved to the position indicated by Garth, then sat down.

"And I want you to sit there," Garth said to Hoff. He pointed to his right. Silently Hoff moved a chair and sat down. There was a knock on the door and Sergeant Leonard entered. He was followed by two men who carried rifles slung on their right shoulders.

Sergeant Leonard paused and then stepped forward and awkwardly saluted.

"There is a German woman, Frau Kloster, in the aid station," said Garth. "I want these two men to guard her. Go to the aid station and bring her here to me. If she is unable to walk, bring her on the litter."

Leonard saluted and turned without speaking. Garth sat, simply refusing to think. Finally he heard the sound of footsteps in the hallway and looked up to see Sergeant Leonard enter and hold the door

aside. Frau Kloster came into the room. In the dim light near the rear door her face and figure were indistinct. As she approached Garth watched her face for the sharper delineation of features which the better light near the front of the room gave. He found somewhat to his surprise that he could face the woman, not curious, but not afraid. As she came nearer he saw that she had washed her face of the film of dust which had given her the gray complexion on the two previous occasions he had seen her. She still wore the same clothing and her hair was still tightly braided about her head. She walked stiffly upright, refusing to look either to the right or left. The two guards followed her into the room, halting just inside the door and standing at attention.

Frau Kloster moved without hesitation to a position immediately in front of Garth. She stared at him a moment then shifted her gaze to Hoff briefly. From there she looked at Behrens only long enough to identify the man and then on to Müller. For the first time her expression changed. She nodded her head and smiled.

"Guten tag," she said.

Garth had expected something out of the ordinary as he had anticipated her voice. Now it was almost a disappointment. She was only a woman. Her appearance, her behavior, the air of confidence about her, pointed to her as a person of forceful personality who might be found dominating others. Beyond that the picture of her which Garth had formed during the last five or six hours was an exaggeration.

Müller bowed his head and spoke.

"Tell her my name," Garth spoke to Hoff. "Tell her that I command the units of the American Army which are at present occupying this town. Tell her, also, that since I had legally imposed martial law on this

town and that since she has willfully disobeyed that law I have, without resorting to a court-martial, imposed a death sentence."

Frau Kloster's eyes shifted first to Hoff as he spoke and then as he identified Garth she looked directly at him. Garth sat staring at the woman while the flow of German words filled the room. Then Hoff ceased speaking and still the woman stared at him.

"Ask her if she understands what I have said," he ordered.

Hoff spoke. The woman looked first at him then back at Garth.

"Ja," she said.

"Tell her that the reason for my sentence is that she was either directly responsible or involved in helping to bring about the death of one American soldier in the square. Before that she was involved in bringing about the deaths of two other American soldiers and the destruction of one tank and the bridge in this town. Ask her if she denies this?"

Hoff spoke again. Frau Kloster listened, then turned her head to face Behrens, breathed deeply and spoke.

"She says this is the way a German does it. Then she says she is proud of what she has done. She denies nothing."

"Ask her who fired the bullet that killed Sergeant Barnes."

Hoff spoke and Frau Kloster answered.

"She refuses to say what happened."

"Does she admit that she was involved in the death of at least one American soldier?"

"Yes."

"Does she understand that this makes necessary the death sentence?"

"She does."

"Ask her if she would like to be blindfolded."

"She says no."

Garth was silent a moment. Then he glanced questioningly at Herr Behrens.

"Ask Herr Behrens if there is anything he would say."

At the question Behrens slowly shook his head.

"Then this interview is ended," said Garth. "Tell Pastor Müller that he may stay with Frau Kloster. I hope that he will do so."

Hoff spoke. Behrens and Müller stood up. When Hoff finished Müller made his sharp formal bow to Garth and walked to Frau Kloster. Garth turned to Sergeant Leonard.

"Post one man on guard at each door," he called. "The rest of us will leave. Frau Kloster and Pastor Müller will stay here, along with the guard."

He saw the clips of rifle ammunition on the table where Kelly had left them. Distributed three to each pocket, the clips weighed his jacket down. Garth turned to Hoff.

"Tell Pastor Müller, alone, that it will happen within the hour."

Garth walked through the hallway and started to go out into the courtyard; then, with a sudden thought, he turned back to the door of Bloom's aid station. He knocked and, after a moment, pushed the door inward and entered the room. Bloom sat on a chair staring at a wooden field table. As Garth stood watching him, Bloom slowly turned his head toward the lieutenant.

"Do you have a stethoscope?" Garth asked.

Bloom nodded. "Yes," he said.

"Can you use it?"

Bloom nodded again.

"Bring it with you then. I want you in the courtyard shortly."

"Yes, sir."

Bloom's reactions were exaggeratedly slow.

"How do you feel?" Garth asked.

Bloom swallowed.

"I'll be all right," he said. "I'll be along in just a moment."

"Do you have a pair of scissors?"

Bloom looked questioningly at Garth.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Bloom opened a field chest and found some scissors. He held them extended toward Garth. Garth refused them.

"Find a piece of paper," Garth said. He was being, he realized, deliberately cruel. Was it because he was still being carried inevitably onward by the stream which had taken control of his actions? He had failed to regain control and so he was in the process of bringing about the death of another human. "A piece of paper," he repeated. "A piece of a bandage box will do. Cut out a circle about two inches in diameter."

"Now?" Bloom asked.

"Yes."

Bloom found a small cardboard box and tore open one surface. He emptied the container of a roll of gauze and then tried to cut it with the scissors. Finally Garth took the scissors and the box from Bloom and cut out a circular piece of cardboard.

"Now," he said. "A pin. A safety pin."

Bloom looked blankly at the disc a moment.

"Oh," he said. "Right here."

Garth had intended to ask Bloom to pin the target on Frau Kloster. Now he was doubtful about Bloom being present at all. Garth took the pin and worked it into the cardboard. He slipped the target into his shirt pocket and, glancing once more at Bloom who sat now staring at the table, turned and closed the door behind him as he left the room.

Outside, in the courtyard, the half-track was parked alongside the rear wall. Two men on bedrolls slept beside the vehicle. Sergeant Allen was inside and as Garth approached the half-track, Allen looked down at him.

"Any contact with battalion?" Garth asked.

"No, sir," Allen answered. "We gave them a call about five minutes ago. But no luck."

That, Garth thought, was the final appeal for Frau Kloster. If he could get in touch with the colonel he could pass the buck, shift the responsibility. The colonel could say yes or no. Stop or go ahead. But there was no communication. The decision was his.

"Move your vehicle out into the street," Garth ordered.

Allen stared at him. He appeared reluctant, as though he were curious to observe what was to occur next.

"Yes, sir," he said finally.

He got out of the half-track and woke the two sleeping men. Garth walked to the gate and opened it into the orchard. Sergeant Leonard was inspecting a rifle. Garth nodded to Leonard and the tall sergeant walked toward the gate. The half-track began to move.

"Yes, sir?" said Leonard.

"Are they ready?"

"Yes, sir. I'm just finishing a short inspection. They're ready."

"This is how I shall give the fire order," Garth said. "First, the loading. Then: Prepare to fire. Release safety. Aim. Fire. A silent count of three between commands."

Leonard nodded.

"Prepare to fire," he repeated. "Release safety. Aim. Fire."

"Assemble the squad and bring them in."

"Yes, sir."

Leonard saluted. It was the first time Garth had seen him make the gesture naturally. Then Garth stood alone in the empty courtyard listening for sounds from the orchard where the infantry was assembling.

"Lieutenant."

Allen had entered the courtyard from the street.

"Yes?"

"Sergeant MacMorris says to tell you he's in position with the tanks. He wants to know should he zero in."

"Not yet," said Garth. "Another fifteen minutes should be enough."

"Are all the infantrymen across the river?"

"No, sir," said Allen. "Six are across. The rest are on the way."

"Tell MacMorris to wait until I give the order. Tell him to report when the crossing squad is ready to move."

"Yes, sir," Allen started toward the street.

"As soon as you've told him that, post a guard on the front entrance. Don't let anyone in."

"Yes, sir."

He looked at his watch again and saw that it was four minutes after three as a mortar shell exploded. This time the explosion sounded from

the river bank, upstream from the orchard. It was closer, he thought, but still too far away to do any damage. Then Sergeant Leonard was looking toward him questioningly from the rear gateway. Garth nodded; Leonard faced to the rear.

"Squad, attention," he called. "Forward, march."

The men entered the courtyard, their boots sounding dully on the cobblestones. Leonard was shuffling his feet in time with the marching men in order to synchronize his commands.

"Column left. March."

The men marched at attention with their rifles slung over their right shoulders. When Garth looked to the rear he saw that Bloom had entered the courtyard.

"Squad halt. Left face. Parade rest."

Leonard posted himself before the firing squad. Garth turned to Bloom, who, pale-faced, was obviously making an effort to carry on.

"Would you call Hoff?"

"Yes, sir."

Bloom turned to the building. A moment later Hoff appeared in the doorway.

"Tell Pastor Müller that we are ready," said Garth.

"Yes, sir."

Bloom had reentered the courtyard. Garth approached him, looking carefully at the man.

"Sergeant Bloom," he said. "Can you go on? If you can't it would be better to say so."

"I don't want to, lieutenant," Bloom could hardly talk. "But I'm trying. I'd rather stay and try than give out now."

"I need you. But if you can't, you can't. Don't be ashamed because you're human."

Bloom seemed to recognize the words. He breathed heavily once or twice.

"I'm better, lieutenant," he said.

Müller came out the rear door of the inn. Frau Kloster walked behind him, then the two guards appeared, followed by Hoff. Garth walked diagonally across the courtyard to a point in front of the firing squad. The stone courtyard wall was directly behind him. He caught Hoff's eye and nodded and as the pastor and the woman and the Jew began to walk toward him he signalled to Sergeant Leonard. The woman followed Müller, walking erectly. Garth moved forward.

"Ask Frau Kloster if she would like to have a blindfold," he said to Hoff.

The woman stood against the wall facing him. He stepped to her and took the white paper circle from his pocket and pinned it as exactly as he could in the middle of her breast. Then he stepped back one pace. Hoff had not yet spoken, but now as Garth turned his head he heard Hoff's words. The woman seemed to listen patiently, then she shook her head negatively. She did not speak.

"Tell Pastor Müller that he may remain another moment with her. Watch me. When I signal to you, you must take him back with you to the other side of the courtyard."

"Yes, sir," said Hoff. He spoke in German.

Garth did an about face and saw that Leonard was in front of the firing squad which stood at attention. Leonard saluted.

"Sir," he called. "The squad is formed."

"Post," Garth returned the salute.

Leonard moved aside and stood at attention facing the squad.

"At ease," Garth ordered.

The men relaxed. Garth walked rapidly to the front rank. Stopping before the first man he reached in his jacket pocket and took from it a clip of ammunition. He gave it to the man and watched while the rifle was loaded. The second man loaded his rifle and then the third man and finally the fourth. The fifth man had some trouble forcing the clip into the receiver and then that was done too, and the bolt slid forward. Then the sixth man had completed loading, Garth stepped back.

"There is a white target on the woman's breast," he said. "You are to fire at that. Each of you has a loaded round in your weapon. There are no blank rounds. You are not volunteers. You are following orders. Your orders are to shoot to kill."

He turned his head and saw that Hoff was watching him. At his nod Hoff spoke to Müller. For a moment Müller continued talking to Frau Kloster; then he made a sign of the cross and bowed his head and turned to follow Hoff. The woman stood erect, eyes closed. After a last look at Frau Kloster, Garth turned to the firing squad.

"Squad, attention."

The men stared straight ahead.

"Take firing position."

The front rank moved one pace forward and the three men dropped into kneeling positions.

"Prepare to fire."

The rifles were brought into level alignment.

"Release safety."

Garth heard the slight sound of the safety levers being pushed forward.

"Aim."

The world retreated to a great distance and Garth saw it in a miniature size with everything reduced to inconsequential nothingness until it rushed back and only details were visible. The black gunmetal front sight of the M1 rifle nearest to him. The nervous tic in the cheek of the middle man in the rear rank.

"Fire."

The noise was deafening. At the last moment he looked toward Frau Kloster and saw the woman staggered by the bullets. She was visibly thrown by the impact, spun halfway around as though a giant hammer had struck her. She fell against the wall and then dropped to the cobblestones.

"Order arms."

His voice was clear in the silence. As the men lowered the butts of their rifles, Garth walked toward the crumpled body of the woman. He turned his head and tried to call Bloom but found that he was unable to speak. Garth saw that Bloom was following him and then he was standing over the body of Frau Kloster, unable to bend downward. The woman had fallen face downward. Garth saw a dark red stain on her back which bubbled and grew larger. Bloom moved into Garth's field of vision, kneeling beside the woman and moving her gently onto her back. Garth was certain that she was still breathing. Blood came from the relaxed lips. The white target had blood on it, and the front of her dress was becoming blackened. He saw Bloom fit the stethoscope to his ears and then search for a place to apply the tube. Unable to place the

stethoscope where it would be useful, Bloom seized the woman's left hand and felt for a pulse. Then, in desperation, Garth saw, Bloom tore her dress, exposing the skin which was too white and too red, and placed the stethoscope down into the red area and listened. He moved the stethoscope down and listened again. Frau Kloster's body tensed and Garth heard a strangling sound and the body relaxed and the sound was gone. For an interminably long time Bloom listened; then he too seemed to relax as he released the end of the stethoscope and looked up at Garth.

"She's dead," he said.

CHAPTER XII

Coming out on the river bank had been a mistake. Hoff was a few paces behind him, but Garth was away from the half-track radio and cut off from effective command of his force so long as he remained away from the half-track. He thought of returning to Frau Englehart's inn but the memory of the courtyard decided him against going back. MacMorris was intelligent enough and perfectly capable and would undoubtedly, in the absence of orders from Garth, coordinate the fire from the tanks with the attacking infantry and would finally end up directing the entire operation. Garth could sit back against a tree and relax in a ringside seat, watching the operation through his field-glasses.

Back to the left, about one-third of the height up the valley wall, a tank gun flashed. Garth halted and faced to the right, lifting his fieldglasses to his eyes and trying to focus quickly on the crest of the hill across the river. He listened for the sound of the projectile and heard the high-pitched, tearing sound that was the high-velocity shell. The faint sound was gone quickly and he watched the hill for the explosion. Either the round went over the target or buried itself in the black earth before exploding. In either case the effectiveness of the gun was lowered. It was the third round fired by the tanks and as yet he had not seen any of them strike. MacMorris had

been ordered to use a delay fuze setting which meant that for a brief interval after impact had set the fuze powder chain into action the projectile would not fire. If it ricocheted off the ground, it could travel forty or fifty yards before exploding ten or fifteen feet above the ground. Placed accurately such fire was extremely effective against ground troops, even though they were dug in. But the wet ground and the angle at which the projectiles struck the earth here seemed to make them bury themselves rather than bounce upward.

Nothing happened up on the crest of the hill. He listened carefully and thought that he heard the faint thump of the exploding shell but was almost immediately convinced that he had imagined the sound. Lowering the glasses, he looked up the river in the direction of the junction. Nothing moved. He readjusted the glasses and studied the terrain across the river more carefully. The alternative to using the delay fuze setting was to use the superquick setting which meant the projectile was exploded almost instantly on contact with the target. If the projectile hit the earth it would have time to dig in a few inches before the explosion occurred. The greater part of the explosive force would be exerted upward from the ground, however, and the shrapnel would be scattered harmlessly through the air. But such fire was quite frightening to untrained troops and would probably keep them in their holes. That was all he hoped to accomplish with the tank guns—to keep the enemy infantry down in their holes while his men approached the position unseen so that they could overrun the enemy before the enemy knew they were attacked.

So coming out here on the river bank had been a mistake. It would be necessary to get back to the half-track so that he could direct

MacMorris to change his fuze setting. But going back to the half-track meant walking through the courtyard.

The thought of the courtyard brought into Garth's mind a picture of Bloom, who had stood with the bakelite funnel on the free end of the stethoscope dangling against his chest and leaving small spots of blood on his shirt. Garth had felt a need to call Bloom's attention to this but he could not bring himself to speak. Bloom had turned and walked quickly toward the rear door of the inn. Garth had seen Hoff standing with Behrens and Müller and when he motioned to him, Hoff approached.

"Tell them—" Garth felt that he was going to vomit, "--that the body is theirs for disposal. Also tell them that they can have the body of the dead policeman."

Hoff turned back to Behrens and Müller. The two men listened and then walked to the body and stood looking down at it. Müller knelt and began to pray. Behrens stood quietly. Leonard, in command again of the firing squad, bowed his head a moment. When the sergeant raised his eyes he motioned silently for the men to follow him and walked toward the rear entrance. Garth approached Hoff.

"Go to the half-track," he said. "Tell Allen to tell MacMorris to proceed with the plan. And bring fieldglasses back for me. I'll be in the orchard."

He had looked one more time toward the huddled figure of the woman and the two men who watched over her, and then had gone out the rear gate. The men of the firing squad had broken apart from each other. As Garth walked through the orchard he saw that all of the men were watching him. He walked on to the river bank and stood waiting. Then Hoff had come with the fieldglasses.

Garth lowered the glasses from his eyes and stood looking across the river at the far bank. Nothing moved in the entire expanse which lay before him except the slow current of the water. He turned and began to walk along the river bank toward the junction. It was as equally illogical to go one direction as the other.

A mortar shell exploded about fifty yards ahead. Instantly he fell flat on the ground, face twisted to the left, eyes open, seeing the trunk of a pine tree which strangely enough he had not seen before. Shrapnel whistled over him and when it was gone he raised his head and looked back at Hoff. Hoff lay prone. Garth called his name and Hoff nodded that he was unhurt.

Garth rose to his feet and started forward again. He pushed his jacket sleeve up on his wrist and looked at his watch. It was only seventeen minutes past three. That round was certainly ahead of schedule. There was something unusual that he should recognize about that last mortar shell and then, as the next shell exploded, he realized in a sudden flash that the Germans, recognizing at last that they were being attacked, were firing their remaining ammunition. He felt the slicing, slashing impact on his left thigh and hip and, being thrown to the left and spun about helplessly, he remembered Frau Kloster in the courtyard as the volley struck her, the woman being thrown forcibly against the courtyard wall and spun about until she fell forward on her face. His legs would no longer support him and there was a blinding pain in his left side. He had fallen on his face but he managed to raise his head and saw Hoff on the ground several feet away. Hoff raised his head slowly, got to his hands and knees, and then Garth was aware that Hoff was bending over him trying to lift him.

"Get out," he said savagely. "Get back. There's more coming. You've got about twenty seconds to get out. You can't carry me. Get back, and when it's over, bring Bloom."

And then Hoff must have been gone because he fell back to the earth and the silence closed in on him. He waited, shaking, and the next round exploded. It seemed to be farther away judging by the sound. When he opened his eyes he saw, a few inches from his face, a jagged, shiny strip of metal. Shrapnel. He knew that it was hot, blistering hot, to the touch. He reached toward the piece of metal and touched it with the forefinger of his left hand. He could not feel the burn over the pain from his leg. Then the earth churned before him and vast, outrageous destruction upward was begun.

The sensation was, for a moment, new. Someone was either applying an electric charge or heat to his leg, which existed out of proportion to the rest of himself. Garth opened his eyes and looked about. The room was the same room in which Frau Kloster had lain when Garth looked in on Bloom and Perkins and the woman. He turned his head and saw the floor close by and was for a moment puzzled and then he realized that he lay on the litter and that what he saw must have been what Frau Kloster had seen when she had regained consciousness. Without thinking, he tried to raise himself to a sitting position, but the pain from his leg went beyond all knowledge. He struggled to maintain his consciousness.

When he opened his eyes again the room was unchanged. He turned his head slowly and saw the green field chest. It had been moved from the table to the floor. The top of the chest was almost level with his

eyes. A white enameled tray, about two inches high, lay on top of the table. On one side were several rolls of gauze and two bottles of pills. He could see the pellets enclosed in the brown glass. The powder from the pills made a brown fog on the inside of the bottles.

On the other side of the tray he saw three small lead containers. The containers had sharp needle-like shafts projecting from the round ends. They were morphine syringettes, Garth remembered. The needle ends were to be thrust into the skin near the wound and the tube was to be squeezed. If the man was slight, it was necessary only to squeeze about half the contents into him. If he was a heavy, bulky person, the whole tube was emptied. A crumpled tube and a torn paper envelope lay on the far corner of the chest.

He could remember Bloom hovering and darting over his prone body. Once Bloom had held a morphine syringe level with his eyes and squeezed gently, squeezing until some colorless liquid ran from the hollow needle and dripped from his fingers. Bloom must have injected the morphine into his leg although Garth did not remember the actual process, or that any pain was involved.

The room was lighted by yellow globes which floated near the ceiling. The ovals were small and dim so that the light did not glare in his eyes. He wondered what time it was but his watch was not on his wrist. The windows were covered by blackout curtains; sometimes it was easier to leave the curtains up during the daytime than to remove them, so it might be either night or day. He tried to remember from his previous visits whether or not the curtains had been up. He could not be sure. Then he saw the canvas cot on the opposite side of the room. A man lay on it, sleeping quietly. Garth could not raise himself enough

to see the man but it could only be Bloom. And since Bloom was sleeping it must be night.

So long as he remained motionless he did not feel the pain too strongly. It was when he moved, when he forgot and moved or when he was forced, finally, to move, to bend his right knee or to flex his ankle that the pain took command. As long as he could lie motionless he could exist in a sort of half-conscious state which was not quite sleep, and, if he could keep control of the thoughts he allowed to exist, it was rather indolently pleasant to think, to allow his thoughts to wander. But it was impossible, of course, to bar the dead woman and the day. They demanded entrance and won it by simply allowing nothing else precedence. He would need some way to face this problem. He wished he could float in imagination and look down at his half-conscious self and see himself as Bloom might see him because then he could think of himself in such terms as: Why, you goddam fool. You thought war was a purifying experience and you weren't forced into it. You wanted to come and see what it was all about. You said: Damn the goddam draft. Why couldn't I have been a defense worker in an aircraft plant or why didn't I get into the air corps as a file clerk? But you knew all the time that it was only pretense. You weren't being yourself, or even trying to be. You weren't even a reasonably exact facsimile of yourself and the only reason you got by without being exposed was because the men with whom you came into contact had never known you before and were all too preoccupied with themselves and didn't give a damn whether you existed or ceased to exist. You find now that the war has done something to you—it's a trap—but you don't know exactly what that something is or when it happened. You do know it hasn't purified you

or anyone else and so you pity yourself a little bit or a great deal and you know you're living faster than you can, that there isn't time to catch up and you know you are being driven by something which is what produced the feeling after you had given the order back at the junction committing yourself and your men to action and then knew it was no longer in your hands. You had to act to keep on living and somewhere it became pure chance but while it lasted it was the greatest show on earth and maybe you could get a pass to Paris and Pigalle. And then the trap was sprung and you gave an order, a fire order in the courtyard of a German country inn, and by that simple order acquired a new and different future in which there was no room for pitying yourself either a little or a lot. You could recognize it and maybe someday live with it or you could refuse to recognize it and be a different person. A built-in lobotomy. Every man his own brain surgeon.

The pain from his leg was becoming more intense. Bloom must have given him morphine and a sedative and now the effects were wearing off. So from now on he could expect to feel an increase in the level of pain which he was enduring from his leg. His hip felt numb and below that there was nothing but an awareness of pain. He wondered if Bloom had been forced to amputate his leg. By looking toward his feet he could see what he thought must be both feet, but, in the dim light, he could not be certain. Moving carefully he slid his left hand down along his ribs and his stomach and finally to his hips. There he felt a rounded shaft circling his hip. Alongside his hip bone a slender metal shaft projected toward his foot from the rounded padded piece. Reaching into his crotch he found that the rounded shaft apparently ended on the inside of his leg. A second thinner metallic shaft extended toward

his foot. The softer padded ring that circled under his hip was pushed against his buttock with great force. If he could only relieve that pressure it might ease the numbness of his hip.

After a moment he remembered. He was in what the doc had once referred to as a traction splint. Evidently his leg was fractured so severely that the bones could not be set with a simple splint. The traction splint stretched his leg, pulling against the muscles which forced the shattered ends of bone into impossible positions. When the leg had been stretched enough that the bones could be properly aligned a second splint, a contact splint, could be bound around the fracture, thus holding the bones in place. The doc had said that these traction splints were for the really serious fractures and that sometimes it took a long time to get out of them. But they gave a man a chance of gaining full use of the leg again.

He needed two things. He needed a drink and he needed to urinate. Possibly he could manage the latter without too great a mess on himself but the first was out of the question. He wondered how to wake Bloom. If there was something within reach, his helmet, or a boot, which he might raise and drop on the floor the sound might do the job. But there was nothing he could reach.

"Bloom," he called. His voice sounded weak. He called again louder, and waited. The sleeping man did not stir. He called again with the same result. Just how soundly did Bloom sleep?

Then he heard the sound of steps becoming more distinct. They came from the left, from outside the room, from the large central room of the inn. The doorknob twisted and MacMorris stood in the doorway. He stared uncertainly into the room for a moment and then stepped in.

He was bareheaded and unarmed and seemed to be awkwardly aware of this.

"Good evening," Garth was the first to speak. "I guess it's evening—or night."

"Yes, sir," MacMorris appeared to be too sleepy to think. He looked at his wristwatch. "Just about one-thirty," he said.

"I was out quite a while," said Garth. "What happened?"

"That mortar damn near got you," said MacMorris. "They said six rounds dropped all around you. Bloom said he thought you were dead when he got there. He told me that your leg has the worst fracture he's ever tried to set."

"What about the mortar?"

"Nothing to it. They all surrendered when the infantry got to the top of the hill. They didn't want to fight anyway. The infantry stayed over on the other side. They've got all the homeguard prisoners."

"Did you ever hear from Battalion?"

"Yes. They should be here by about six in the morning. We got them on the radio just about dark."

"Where are they?"

"About twenty miles back up that road we came on. Remember that town off to the left?"

"I think so."

"That's it. They're getting on the road early—the colonel and the doc."

"The doc?"

MacMorris hesitated.

"Bloom told them your leg was serious. But you'd better talk to Bloom. Shall I wake him?"

"Yes." The pain felt measurably stronger.

MacMorris went to Bloom's side and shook the sleeping man.

"Bloom," he called softly. "Bloom. Wake up. Wake up, dammit."

Bloom sat up quickly and looked around. Then he relaxed and stretched. He looked across at Garth and swung his legs to the floor and stood up. He had been sleeping in his underwear and his identification tags swung across his chest.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Not so good," said Garth.

"Anyone who stopped as much shrapnel as you shouldn't feel good. But you'll live."

"I see you've got a traction splint on me."

"Yes."

"Can a man urinate with one of them on--or does he have to hold it?"

"Well," said Bloom, "hold it for another minute, anyway."

He began looking in the field cabinet and came out with a white, funnel-like container.

"Here," he said. "We call this a duck. You get it in place and then duck."

He pulled the blanket off Garth's body.

"There," he said. "You can't miss."

"Now I need a drink," said Garth, after a moment. "Just one big long cold drink of water."

Bloom poured water into a canteen cup. He looked again in the cabinet and placed a glass tube in the water. The tube was bent at an angle and when Bloom placed the cup on the floor beside the litter Garth

had only to turn his head and drink.

"I guess you can take a fair drink," said Bloom. "Lucky for you you didn't get any shrapnel higher than your hip except for a piece that dented your helmet. No abdominal wounds, so go ahead and drink. Only don't make yourself sick."

Garth remembered the wine which the colonel had provided. This water tasted even better than the wine had tasted. He reached up and pressed his scalp above his right ear. The skin was swollen and tender.

"No breaks," said Bloom. "Just a bruise, I think."

"How's my leg?"

"Compound fracture, with considerable shrapnel laceration. In fact, lieutenant, I don't know whether I've done it any good. The doc'll be here first thing in the morning, I hope."

Garth remembered Bloom in the courtyard.

"I'm sure you've done everything possible," he said.

"Thanks," said Bloom. "But I'm not a doctor. I hope it's right. How's the pain?"

"Increasing."

"I thought so." Bloom walked to the table and picked up one of the lead tubes. With forceps he broke the tip off the needle and held the tube level with his eyes. "You've been awake long enough. Here you go again. You're getting so much of this morphine that you'll probably be a confirmed addict the rest of your life. But it'll help to keep you quiet and that's the best thing I can do for your leg."

While Bloom was speaking he had been squeezing the contents of the lead tube into Garth's thigh. Bloom went to the field cabinet and stood looking down. When he turned to Garth again he had two small

yellow capsules in his fingers.

"Take these," he said. "Off you go to dreamland."

Garth filled his mouth with water and swallowed the two capsules.

"You've been talking long enough," said Bloom. He looked at MacMorris. "Close your eyes now and try to sleep. You ought to feel that sedative soon."

MacMorris appeared reluctant to leave. Bloom seemed to be herding MacMorris toward the door.

"One thing," said Garth. Bloom and MacMorris halted. "Why are you up at one-thirty?" he asked.

"I'm taking the morning shift," said MacMorris. "Bedford was on till one, and then he woke me. I guess I'd better go check the guard now."

"Good night," said Garth.

"Good night," answered MacMorris.

Bloom closed the door and returned to the canvas cot. Then he sat and talked idly about life after the war. He planned to go back to college and someday he hoped to be a doctor. It had been quite a struggle to get the two years of college which he'd managed before being drafted. Now he was a bit older and more confident and if need be he'd borrow the money to put him through if he could find someone who would trust him. Before, the thought of such a sum as that which he would require would have frightened him but now he did not worry about it at all. Besides, if he could believe any of the things he read about in the Stars and Stripes, the government was going to give any veteran who wanted it help in going to school.

Garth sensed that Bloom was talking simply to help him pass the time away.

"Are you waiting for the morphine to take effect?" he asked.

"Yes," said Bloom. "How does it feel now?"

"I haven't been able to close my eyes yet."

"I've got to loosen your ankle and massage it. Then I'll have to put the pressure back on. It'll hurt, but I've got to do it."

"Go ahead," said Garth. "I've got lots to think about."

Bloom looked quickly at him; then he moved down to Garth's feet. He raised the blanket from the bottom of the litter and folded it back up over Garth's thighs. He knelt and Garth felt new vibrations through the metal shafts. Bloom was turning something slowly, turn by turn, and Garth felt the pressure on his hip begin to relax.

"I've got a contact splint on the fracture," said Bloom. "If you've been living right and the bones are set properly and the splint holds you might get off easy. How does it feel?"

"Okay so far. I can feel it, but there's been no real change yet."

"Good. Tell me when it gets to be too much."

Bloom worked deliberately, letting loose a half twist at a time and looking at Garth's face after each turn. The pain became suddenly intense and Bloom paused, watching him carefully.

"Only a little more," he said. "Okay?"

Garth nodded. The pain caused him to sweat but it was something he could bear. Bloom talked quietly, reassuringly, and then Garth began to feel Bloom's fingers on his foot and ankle. The massaging added to the pain and he would have liked to tell Bloom to quit.

Bloom asked him to massage his hip under the traction pad if he could reach it. Garth did it slowly and carefully.

Without opening his eyes he listened to the new voice.

"Looks okay so far," said the voice. "You didn't put the traction splint back on?"

"No. He went to sleep while I had it loosened, so I left it loose."

There was a silence for a moment.

"You got this leg the same length as the other leg," said the voice, "How did it feel when you put it on?"

"I don't know, doc. I thought it felt all right but I couldn't really tell."

Garth forced his mind to function. So it was the doc. Doc Bowen. Captain Bowen, U. S. Army Medical Corps. He opened his eyes. The doctor, thin and tall, was standing at the foot of the litter. He looked at Garth's face.

"Awake now?" he asked. "How do you feel?"

"Not so good."

"Where does it hurt?"

"All over."

"I guess it should. How about the leg?"

"It hurts too."

"Can you stand it?"

"Yes."

"Cigarette?"

Garth took a cigarette from the doctor. The doctor worked with his lighter and then leaned over, offering a light. Garth inhaled deeply.

"Hungry?"

Garth tried to think. As nearly as he could remember he had eaten his last ration early in the morning of the day before. Yet he was not really hungry. He shook his head.

"Then we'll give you a cup of coffee. Bloom, will you get some?"

Garth saw that Bloom had been watching. He nodded to Bloom and Bloom turned away for a moment and then went out the door. The doc stood looking down at him.

"I've got an ambulance here," he said. "I'm not going to take the traction splint off your leg, although it won't be tightened. I'll send you back for air evacuation to England. I couldn't do much without an X-ray and England will only be a couple of hours. The ride back to the landing field will take three or four hours. They can get you properly taken care of by late afternoon at the hospital in England."

He paused and began to search the field cabinet. When he turned back to Garth he held a thermometer in his hand. He shook it and then looked at the mercury level. He knelt and placed the thermometer in Garth's mouth.

"As long as you're not hungry I'm not going to feed you anything. If that splint should slip or if you get airsick an empty stomach would be better. Besides, they feed you steak every meal in England. You can catch up tonight or tomorrow."

He drew the thermometer from Garth's mouth and sighted carefully at the mercury.

"It's up," he said. "But not more than it should be. Bloom will ride with you back to the landing field just in case anything should go wrong. The colonel wants to talk to you before you go."

Garth nodded.

"I guess I'm ready," he said.

"To go or to talk?" asked the doctor.

"Either."

"I'll call the colonel."

The doctor went out the door and almost immediately Bloom appeared. He carried a canteen cup carefully. After setting it beside Garth's head he found the glass tube and put it in the coffee.

"Be careful," he said. "It's hot."

"Thanks," said Garth. He looked at Bloom. The man seemed to have retreated behind a barrier.

"I'm afraid this mission wasn't very successful," said Garth.

"But you did your part well."

Bloom was embarrassed. He did not speak. Garth looked up as the colonel's form filled the doorway. Behind the colonel the doctor motioned to Bloom. Then the colonel swung the door shut and sat down on the canvas cot. He looked about the room for a moment.

"The doc says I'm not to keep you long," said the colonel. "He's shipping you out as soon as he can get you into an ambulance."

He paused and looked about the small room again.

"I heard what happened yesterday," he said. "Enough, anyway, to piece it together a bit. How do you feel about it?"

"Not very good," said Garth.

"Have you made any written reports?"

"No."

"Good. Don't. If we don't report it no one will ever be sure it happened. I know that doesn't help you, but there's no use inviting

trouble while you're in the army. Someone will hear that somewhere a lieutenant had a woman shot, but he'll never be able to pin it down. And if, by any chance, they did pin it down I'll tell them that I gave you the order by radio to go ahead."

"That takes me off the spot," said Garth. "But you really don't need to. I'd just as soon admit it."

"This way is better," said the colonel. "This way you can become a legend. You'll live on in Germany--they respect a person for what you did, even if you are their enemy. In fact, if you didn't do it they'd despise you. And you'll live on in the army. Twenty years from now there'll be thirty-year men telling about yesterday and you'd never recognize yourself. But you'll live on."

"I don't think that was my ambition."

"You can't avoid it now. You're a legend."

There was a knock on the door. The colonel stood up and opened it. The doctor entered.

"Through?" the doctor asked.

The colonel turned to Garth. He squatted on his heels and shook Garth's hand. The movement brought pain to Garth's leg.

"This may be the last time I'll see you," said the colonel. "If it is, goodbye and good luck. We'll try to get you back, but I expect you'll be sent home in a week or two when you're feeling better. The war can't last another month."

"Thanks," said Garth. "The same."

The colonel stood up and walked to the door. He turned.

"Remember what I told you," he said. "You'll have to walk carefully to avoid the eggshells, but in ten or twenty years being a legend

will help. Don't forget that you had no choice. That's how you become a legend--the hard way."

And there, thought Garth, goes my built-in lobotomy. To accept that solution would be to live a life of affectation, a life of being someone else, someone superficial, someone in touch with a reality known only to himself. He felt his positive rejection of the colonel's words becoming stronger. In the bathtub--was it yesterday or the day before or the day before that?--he had decided that this barrier which separated men from themselves was a political and military barrier which was crossed only by submission. Now he knew that was only a part of the barrier. Frau Kloster had proved that man could be governed by passion and sentiment and an urge to manufacture justice and still be wrong but the fact that she was wrong did not make the person who enforced law and tradition right. Each was wrong in his own way and learning to know oneself was a process of learning just how one was wrong. Frau Kloster was no Antigone, but . . .

Bloom and Perkins entered the room. Perkins squatted down and grasped the litter handles near Garth's feet. Bloom gripped the handles at his head.

"Ready?" asked Bloom.

"Be careful," said the doctor, through the open door.

Garth nodded. Bloom and Perkins began to lift their burden.