

“Nice talk, Mary Cat. I don’t see you around the nunnery.” Della tucked away the newspaper into her ready-bag. “Maybe I ought to set my sights higher, a war correspondent. Anybody find out, is he taken?”

To not let that hang in the air, Cass handled it crisply: “I didn’t have any reason to ask, did I. Everybody, strap on those chutes in case this moron pilot isn’t any better at reading a fuel gauge than he is the weather.”

Mary Catherine couldn’t resist a last dig on Della. “That correspondent you have your eye on is bound to be married,” she spoke with the air of one who had been through enough men to know. “The good ones always are.”

“Lieutenant Reinking, sir? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Not again. Doesn’t that damn general have anything else to do, like run the base? On edge anyway, Ben had intended to slip into his office only for a minute before heading to the communications section and then checking the flight board again. The last two times, the board showed NTO ZV--no takeoff, zero visibility--for Cass’s squadron. It spooked him--possibly more than it should, but it spooked him nonetheless. Fog induced crashes, and P-39s such as Cass’s WASP 1 squadron flew were notoriously deadly in a crash; that 1200-horsepower engine in those things was situated directly in back of the pilot seat, like a cocked catapult. *Seattle wrote the book on fog, surely to God they’ll scrub the flight, won’t they?*

Along with fretting about Cass and trying to wind down from leave, he had spent the afternoon with his typewriter in a back room at the base library wrapping up the piece on Vic. The war did not recognize Sunday, but somehow it was the slowest day of message traffic and his intention was to send in the piece while the sending was good. In the way of that stood a squat broken-nosed hardcase in rumpled uniform, nervously fiddling with his cap. Ben eyed him distrustfully until he realized there was no armband of a day-room runner on this one.

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“Why don’t they send him home to me?”

Ben hoped it wasn’t because a one-legged hero did not fit with TPWP plans. He could hear the strain in his voice as he tried to put the secretive hospital in the English countryside in the best light. “There’s a facility--a place there where they help people pull through something like this. It’s an estate.” It was for depression victims. Mangled Royal Air Force pilots. Commandoes wrecked in body and mind from the disastrous Dieppe raid. And, Tepee Weepy had seen to it, a “supreme team” running back with an empty pantleg.

He left all that last part out; from the look on the man who had raised Victor Rennie, bringing the letter maybe was bad enough. After a bit Toussaint said absently: “Vic says it’s awful green there. Hedges.”

“Toussaint, you better know. I’m supposed to write something about Vic. It’s my job.”

“Funny kind of job, Ben, ain’t it?”

You don’t know the half of it, Toussaint, not even you. He tried to explain the ongoing articles about the team, the obligation--if it was that--to tell people what had happened to Vic while he was fighting in the service of his country.

“Country.” Toussaint picked up that word and seemed to consider it. He gestured in the direction of Great Falls. “Hill 57,” he let out as if Ben had asked for an unsavory address. “You know about that.” Something like a snort came from him, making Ben more uneasy yet. After a long moment, he held up the letter. “Here’s what’s left of Vic, that I know of.” He handed it over. “Take down what it says.”

Nonplussed, Ben unfolded the piece of stationery and read it through. He chewed the inside of his mouth, trying to decide. It had been offered and he couldn’t turn it down. “You’re sure?”

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As if some signal had been given, East Base began to hum with activity while the runner walked him through the military maze of buildings. Fire engines trundled to their ready spot near the end of the runway, followed by the medical corps ambulance, known on every airbase as the meatwagon. Next, the flightline went from empty to maximally busy in a matter of minutes. A spate of P-39s took off one after another and headed north, leaving their chorus of roar behind. Other fighter planes, likely the check-out flights, were being rolled out of the big hangar he had blundered into. Ben watched it all; another day in the war, of the five hundred and some he had been through. Back here, he could tell time by the sun, and he aligned the other zones around the world with it now. The clock of war was in his head every waking minute. It was close onto noon here, so in England the day was drawing down and Moxie Stamper would be in a supper chow line on a secure bomber base if he was lucky. Carl Friessen would be in a foxhole listening to the night noises of the New Guinea jungle. On the destroyer zigzagging in the Pacific, Larry Danzer already was in tomorrow; Danzer, with his taste for any advantage, would like that. Member by member of the supreme team, Ben memorized anew the time difference from here to there, adjusting himself toward the schedule of telex messages that followed him from base to base.

The one-star officer in charge of East Base evidently had been building up a head of steam while waiting for the TPWP interloper. Base commanders generally did. Ben sometimes wondered if that's why they were called generals.

Ben's salute still was in the air when this one, an obvious old ranker with a face like he'd been eating fire, started in on him. "So you're here to make us famous. I'm not sure I like that."

Nice even-tempered base you run here, General--everybody pissed off all the time. Ben stood his ground by holding his salute until the personage behind the desk was forced to say, "At ease, shit's sake, man." The general peered at the

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Ben stood there wondering if he looked as mortified as he felt. All over the hangar other heads popped out of other planes: a set of blonde curls here, a hairnet there, and everywhere chest-high indications in the coveralls. The place was all women. A majority of them, it seemed to him as he tried not to gape, were devoting full attention to him and this vixen high over him on the airplane wing.

Wiry within the folds of the coveralls, she was wiping her hands on a grease rag while she eyed Ben up and down. If looks could kill, she did not need a fighter plane on her side. Squinting up as she glared down, he parked his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket, hoping a casual approach might simmer her down. "Don't get the wrong idea. I'm only checking in. Which means I have to be checked out, they tell me. Look, miss, I'm not trying to be fresh."

She did a little something to the collar of her greasy coveralls, and an insignia flashed out. "Try 'Captain,' why don't you."

Too late he caught sight of the ready-bag sitting in the cockpit hatch, with WASP wings and a squadron leader's striped star stenciled on it. *Just my luck with this base, I light in here and brush up against a queen bee.* "Next time I'll be sure to, Captain. Steer me to the infirmary and I'll have my IQ checked along with the rest, how about?"

"Three buildings down from Ops, where the control tower is, and ask for the short-arm inspector. If your IQ is where I think it is, you can have both done at once." She finished him off with a last dismissing look. "Crew chief!" she was moving on to her next victim even before he turned away. "Who looked over this engine, Helen Keller? The points are burned. I want them filed down and reset before I take this crate for a checklist run."

Glad to get out of there with his hide on, Ben went and presented himself at the infirmary for the evidently important process of dropping his pants. A clean bill of health promised to be his only gain for the day, however. At his next stop, the

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There was a bad sign, literally, the moment he stepped into the dooryard; a blotch of something written in red on the rusty weathered door, like lipstick on a witch. Walking up to it with a sinking feeling, he found it was a shingle tacked to the doorwood and lettered on it in barn paint the message: ELK SEASON.

Incredulous, Ben squinted west, met there by half the mountains in North America. Hunt a hunter in one day, in all that? It was too much, this whole deal of Quick Vic and a roving grandfather old as the hills. Toussaint Rennie must be crowding eighty-five. He didn't have any business going after elk alone.

While Ben stood there stewing, the silence of the dried-up little ranch seemed to reprove him. Out where weeds took over from the yard, the pole corral stood empty except for one broomtail pony, and the barn looked like it would fall down if a person blew his nose around it. All right, he conceded, maybe pursuit of elk was the only business Toussaint did have. But where in this rugged upper end of the Two Medicine country would the old reprobate have a favorite hunting ground?

For a moment--more than that, actually--he was tempted to give this up and concoct whatever he could, from football times together, for the TPWP piece about Vic. Give it the Loudon treatment for once. Loudmouth it, the Treasure State team had learned to refer to the guff put out week by week by the scruple-free sportswriter climbing to fame on their backs in '41. Ted Loudon's coarsest lead followed Vic's four-touchdown game: *Wyoming was scalped on its home field today, by a halfback marauder from the northern plains named Vic Rennie.* Ben would have given plenty, then and now, to see the copy Loudon handed in and verify whether the sonofabitch had actually written *halfbreed halfback* and a queasy editor struck it out, or if Loudon slyly just let it smirk there in the shadows of *marauder* and *scalped*. He and Jake Eisman and most of the rest of the team had

in its
vicinity

too. Finally he decided there was nothing to be done but call it a day until further word on her flight. His body agonized that there was little hope now of seeing her tonight, even if her squadron lifted off before sunset in Seattle; his brain tried to fight down the wave of desire and encourage the fog to hold so Cass would bunk there for the night instead of flying blind into murk and mountains.

Jake Eisman wasn't bunked in anywhere, he could count on that. Halfway up the whitewashed walkway to the Officers Club, Ben caught the sound of his penetrating baritone--in their playing days, Jake was restricted to whispers in the huddle lest he be heard the length of the football field--in the mob of song emanating from within; the O Club always tuned up drastically when a planeload of pilots returned from the Alaska run. Ben never ceased to marvel at how fertile the war was for songs. He intended to write about this someday just for the havoc to be created at Tepee Weepy by lyrics such as Jake was enraptured in at the moment:

*"Oh, the Russians are drinking in Fairbanks,
While we fly through snow, ice, and shit.
When we land they shout out, 'Thanks, Yanks!
Now watch us bomb Hitler,
And Himmler,
And Fritzie,
And Mitzi,
While you fly through snow, ice, and shit!"*

Central as a vat in the bibulous bunch ganged around the piano and hoisting another drink at the end of each chorus, Jake jerked his head toward the bar as soon as he spotted Ben. They hadn't seen each other for a week and the ATC's largest and possibly most boisterous pilot always came back from the far north with more Alaska tales than Robert Service. Tonight Ben was more than ready to let the conversation flow from that direction. Ordering a beer for himself and another as

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of love.
There was
no limit
to it.

reenforcement for Jake, he drifted to their usual corner table while the bass-and-baritone crowd around the piano roared through a final chorus like sea lions.

Tense as he was about Cass, he didn't manage to have the best face on things when Jake showed up at the table. Jake plainly had been here indulging in beer and song long enough to be justifiably somewhat askew. His dark hair flopped to one side--on him it looked good--and his tie was loosened. His breast pocket nametag was a radical number of degrees off angle; a hand-lettered last name only on everyone else, his as ever notified the world in full: LT. JACOB EISMAN.

"What's eating you, scribe?" The big man roughed Ben's shoulder with a mitt of a hand as he went around to a facing chair. "A three-day leave don't agree with you? Send the next one my way, and you can freeze your ass over the Yukon while I party."

"Why would they hand me an airplane when they barely trust me with a pencil?" Ben roused himself and got busy deflecting the topic of his leave. "No substitutions allowed anyway, you ought to know that. Grandpa Grady himself told me within this very hour you are the pride of the ATC--"

"Only because I slipped him tickets on the fifty-yard line for the Homecoming game."

"--so there you go, who'll mush the flying dogsleds north if not you? The serum must reach Nome, Nanook."

Jake snorted. "Alaska runs on vodka these days, ain't you heard?"

"War is heck," said Ben, cracking a smile in spite of himself.

"I'll clink to that." Jake tapped Ben's beer bottle with his own, drained what he had left, and reached for the next bottle. "Been meaning to ask you, Ben friend. If I'm so all-fired popular, when do I get my moment of fame again?"

That particular question had more behind it than Ben wanted to deal with. Juggling the 'supreme team' pieces into some kind of monthly sequence was

Casper
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always tricky enough, even without what had happened to Vic and what waited in the file after his. Now this, thrown in. *Time to get yourself some radar, Reinking--* he hadn't walked in here at all expecting this from Jake. He said shortly, "Dex is next. No cutting in line."

Jake leaned in, covering the table like a cloud but grinning as he came. "Where is he, Ben? C'mon. Where's the dexterous one putting in his war?"

"Goddamnit, Ice, will you lay off that? I still can't tell you. They'd have me cleaning latrines from here to eternity if I did." *And you wouldn't like knowing.*

"That rich sneak," Jake was saying appreciatively. "He's in something like the OSS, isn't he. Greased his way in there with Archie Roosevelt and the other blueblood daredevils. The glamorous war, that'd be his. Parachuting into Krautland in the dark of the moon with a knife between his teeth. That it?"

"Have another beer, Jake."

With lazy grace Jake signaled to the bar for another round apiece. "Top secret, huh? Tell Dex to bag a few of the bastards for me."

Just then the hubbub in the Club went up several more notches as yet another flock of pilots came rollicking in. Several of them were shorter guys, fighter plane jockeys who looked even more compact beside the brawn of the bomber pilots, and their particular reason for celebration, Ben could overhear, was that they hadn't had to bounce through the air to the cold of Alaska, only Alberta. Edmonton was the first hop for P-39s, with their limited fuel tanks, and Canadian reserve pilots in need of flying time sometimes ferried the planes onward up the long chain of bush-country airfields to Fairbanks. These flyboys swarming the bar were home from an easy day's work before dark. Glazed, Ben stared past them out the Club's picture window to where the defining lines of evening were making the buttes across Great Falls stand out like oldest earthen fortresses. Sundown would

reach Seattle in less than an hour, on top of fog. Consumed with fret about Cass, he tried not to hate the lucky fighter pilots elbowing to the bar.

During this there had been a distinct lack of words from across the table, and he realized Jake had been studying him critically. A different kind of grin sneaked onto Jake now. "Benjamin, you've been holding out on me another way. But I found out about it, ho de ho. Can't fool Yukon Jake."

Ben's insides lurched. He and Cass had tried to be as hard to spot as chameleons, how did they stand out all the way to Alaska? "You don't want to believe everything you--"

Impatiently Jake wiped that away with a paw: "I have it on good authority. Shame on you, earning yourself a purple one in your spare time over there in the paradise of the Pacific. What are you, some kind of incognito hero?"

"You're too swift for me," Ben exhaled in some relief, although Tepee Weepy did not want it made known that its supposedly unarmed correspondent had a combat exploit and a scar to show for it. "Where did you pick that up?"

"Carlo the Friesian, who else." Jake sat back, folding his firelog arms in satisfaction. "Probably comes as a surprise to arty-farty ends, but tackles can write and fullbacks can read. Letter from Carl the other day says you and him got a New Guinea welcome from the Japs and you came out of it with the wound, the Purple Heart, the commendation, the whole schmear. How come you didn't tell me about it?"

Ben started to hide behind a swig of his beer, but was afraid it would come right back up. "It was just a graze." It was everything beyond that for the infantryman an arm's length away from him and Friessen. *And the Jap*. The memory churned in him. The grotesque hand-to-hand struggle on that jungle trail. His three weeks of impatient mending on the hospital ship. "Don't look at me like that, Ice. I'd have told you about it sooner or later." *Maybe*. "It's not something

I'm particularly proud of. Correspondents are supposed to stay out of the way of metal objects flying through the air."

"That your next piece?" Jake pressed. "After Dex? Hell, I'll give up my spot to read about it. Carl said it was pretty hairy."

Ben made a zipper motion across his lips, hoping it would end this.

Jake gave a huge sigh of exasperation. "Then I might as well give you a bad time about something else while I'm at it. I read in the newspaper you went calling on Grady's Ladies. So tell me, how's the hunting there?"

Minimum honesty sounded innocent enough here. "Too many of them are married."

"That's a sonofabitching shame, you know that?" Jake let out over the increased noise, the piano gang lustily singing a filthy tribute to Daisy in the grass. Ben squirmed and wished they would work their way to something that did not rhyme with Cass and the rest.

"I mean, can you imagine a marriage like that?" Jake was shaking his head. "The old lady gets up in the morning, puts on her flying suit and straps on her .45 and goes off to war. Wow."

"Jake, something like that happens these days more than you might think." In the Excelsior Hotel some mornings, for instance. "People do what they do."

"I know you," Jake bridged right over that, pointing the neck of a bottle at him, "you were too busy scribbling things down to sniff out the needy bachelor girls for us needy bachelors. Myself, I never get a crack at our sisters in arms. I fly out, they fly in, round and round we go."

Good thing, too. That's all I'd need next after Jones, you linking up with that she-wolf blonde in Cass's flight. "Airships that pass," Ben philosophized hopefully.

“Besides, I don’t need any of your hotshot WASPs,” Jake stated with startling primness. Then leered goofily. “I’ve got something of my own going. Tell you about her sometime.” Ben was surprised. It wasn’t like Jake to be mysterious about any female conquest.

“You made them sound pretty good, you know.” This time Jake spoke soberly, and Ben went back on guard. “Like maybe they could handle the Alaska run, Ben buddy?”

“All I say in the piece was some of them, all right, a bunch of them have as much flying time as any of you and if they were handed a map could quite possibly find their way to Fairbanks. But I didn’t mean--”

“I’m for it,” Jake broke in. “Let the WASPs fly that run and send me after Germans. Sooner the better.”

Ben sat up. “Jake, serious a minute. Bombers over Germany get the guts shot out of them--when I was at St. Eval doing the piece on Moxie I saw them land with holes the size of boxcar doors. You really want in on that?”

“If that’s what it takes, hell yes. I don’t like what Hitler has in mind for me if the crazy little dipshit wins the war.”

“Plenty of those bomber pilots end up bailing out over occupied territory,” Ben said slowly. “POW camps are no picnic.” His throat was tight as he tried to find a right way to say it. “What I hear is that the first thing they do is check dogtags to sort people out. No telling what they’d do to you, Ice.”

“You think that’s not on my mind?” Jake replied in the quietest tone he was capable of. “But I figure it this way,” the voice took on a calculating timbre, “those ack-ack assholes have to single me out from a lot of guys dropping bombs on them, first.”

Goddamn it, don’t count on that. Half in despair, Ben stood ready to point out that the law of averages had not been any suit of armor for certain ‘supreme

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team' members so far, but Jake knew as much about that as he did, almost. It was always a mistake to see the workhorse fullback known as the Iceman, the sportswriters' pick for All-American at that position in hallowed '41, as mainly a physical specimen. Jake stood 6'3" in stocking feet but the upper several inches were brain. The chips in his grammar from smelter work were deliberately maintained, Ben understood; in Black Eagle, the melting pot under the smokestack, someone like him had to make his words register on people high, low, or in between, as needed. Drinking with Jake was treacherous, but in any other human endeavor Ben would have trusted him with his life. Seven years they had been friends, since the high school all-star game that put them together on a team for the first time. Then hundreds of TSU football practices, banter, bull sessions, a long winning streak of camaraderie. Josting arguments were nothing new between them; this had turned into something far beyond that. Ben felt he had to pierce the matter:

"That's why you wanted me to hurry up and do the piece on you, isn't it. So you could wave it at somebody who might have some influence and say, 'Hey, I'm a famous guy, wouldn't it be great to have me over there bombing the balls off the Germans?'"

"Couldn't hurt, could it?" Jake responded defiantly. Then just as quickly looked sheepish. "Sorry I asked. Sonofabitching war, I don't know what gets into a guy." He set about working himself toward normal with a boost of beer. "I mean it, though, about getting over there somehow. Ben? I'm not saying you got any pull, because if you did, you'd be up, up and away like the rest of us, wouldn't you. But if you ever stumble across any, remember your poor deserving teammate, okay?" The old grin came back. "Who's gonna look out for me if not you? What's that poem"--Jake pronounced it *pome*-- "O captain! My captain!"

Consensus
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Relieved, Ben responded in the same vein: "You're looking for pull from someone who took a demotion from civilian life, are you? Good thinking, Ice. Didn't I help you crib your way through the logic course any better than--?"

Jake was holding up a hand for silence. He cocked an ear at the preliminary commotion from the piano. "It's bad luck not to sing this one. Everybody in." Swinging his beer bottle to the beat, Jake joined in mightily to the swelling roar of music that filled the building:

"Bought the farm, bought the farm!

Crashing the plane leads to harm!

There was blood on the cockpit,

and blood on the ground.

Blood on the cowling,

and blood all around.

Pity the pilot,

all bloody and gore,

For he won't be flying

That airplane no more."

After the last chorus tailed off into drinking, Jake looked across at Ben.

"You're not singing these days?"

"Frog in my throat."

"You really are off your feed. C'mon, Ben, it's just a song. Lets off the steam."

"I know what it lets off, for Christ's sake." He shoved back from the table and popped to his feet. "Just remembered, I need to check something in Ops. A VIP flight I'm supposed to keep tabs on in case there's any brass worth interviewing. Be right back."

He sprinted to the Operations building, slowing only as he walked into the room where the flight board covered one wall, hoping the clamor of his heart was not loud enough for the night Operations staff to hear. As ever, he whipped out his pad and stood there jotting random flight information, scanning the entire board like a good working reporter, but the chalked entry for WASP 1 midway down instantly had told him what he needed to know. Since meeting Cass he had never imagined looking forward to a bed without her in it, but the blessed three white letters RON up there for 'REMAINING OVERNIGHT' did the job.

Back at the Officers Club, before rejoining Jake he veered to the bar. He told the barman, "Fill the tray."

The bartender crowded beer bottles onto the round serving tray until there were ten or a dozen, Ben didn't bother to count. He picked it up and steered toward the table.

Jake surveyed the forest of bottles on the tray. "What's all this?"

"Anesthesia. I have something to tell you about Vic."

who knew where that would lead? War correspondents read other correspondents, and he was well apprised from Russian dispatches that the Red Air Force already had women flying in combat, surely some of them in the same P-39s--the Laplander legend notwithstanding--that had hopscotched all the way from East Base. It went through him in a chill mix of clarity and dismay: if the powers that be were ever to begin miraculously handing out assignment orders according to abilities shown thus far in World War Two, Cass and her WASPs might as well go all the way to the Eastern Front and take on the Luftwaffe, while groundpounders like him stirred the Kool-Aid at USO dances.

Cass luckily broke in on his tumble of thoughts. "I've been so wound up, I haven't even asked how leave was. Fun?"

"The opposite." He told her the story of Vic.

"That's rough." Without being asked, Cass bolstered his drink. "A leg off-- I think I'd rather be dead, put out of my misery."

When Ben didn't say anything, she shifted around on the bed to face him more directly. *It's going to happen one of these times like that, isn't it, Ben. That Tepee Creepy outfit will yank you off somewhere to chase after another one of your team buddies and make you keep going, no more East Base, no more me. No more us, except pen pals. And that kind of ink never lasts.* Asking, she carefully confined it to: "What's next?"

Sensing treacherous territory, Ben answered with equal care: "Just more of the same, a catch-up piece on one of the guys on the team. He's--someplace I can't tell you about or why."

Cass let her puzzlement show. "Then how do you write about somebody like that?" Jake Eisman the other night had asked the same thing: "*How in the hell do you show off Dex without blowing his cover?*"

“Goddamn carefully,” Ben recited the same answer. “Don’t give me that look, you with the airplane. I know better than anybody that what they’ve stuck me doing in this war is a strange business, stranger some times than others.”

“Touchy. All I was going to ask is, are you going to be away? To wherever this mystery gink is?”

“I find that out tomorrow.”

“Ben?” Cass swirled the last of her drink, gazing into the bottom of the glass as if fortune-telling. “Something you better know.”

At her tone, he braced back a bit against the bedstead. “Ready on the firing line, I guess.”

“I’m a wingwalker.”

He looked at her cautiously. “The county fair kind?”

“Fairs, air shows, rodeos, you name it. Anywhere people would pay to see somebody swoop over them hanging onto the struts and guywires of a biplane. If it was a woman, so much the better for the take.” She tossed her head, as if the whipstream of wind from back then was in her hair again.

“I, ah, more figured you for a stunt pilot.”

“That, too. We--”

Her voice caught on the word, Ben waiting unmoving until she could gain enough breath go on. She had told him how she’d haunted the airfield outside Missoula when she was a kid, brassed her way into the Civilian Pilot Training course when there was a tiny opening for women, and in the end linked up with a smokejumper turned aircraft rigger for the Forest Service; the wedding ring there on her finger told the rest of that.

“--Dan and I,” she managed to get the words out, “talked about barnstorming across the whole country. Turn into flying gypsies, kind of. We weren’t much more than punk kids, it sounded like heaven to us. Off we went,

weekends, holidays, giving it a try wherever there was some kind of two-bit show. I'd loop the loop and all that, and for the finale a buddy of ours who flew for the smokies would take the controls and I'd waltz out onto the wing. We were hot stuff on the fairgrounds circuit there for a while. Then right away with the war, Dan's Guard unit was called up--you know all that."

Choosing between perils, Ben turned the topic back to wingwalking: "Uh huh, well, that's quite a talent."

"Know what the first rule of wingwalking is?"

He could tell this was not the time to guess *Don't sneeze?* "I'm here listening."

"Never leave hold of what you've got, until you've got hold of something else."

He covered her ring hand with his own, the ache for her now a sharp pain. "That goes for guys as well as guywires, am I to understand? Husband kind of guy?"

"For the duration, Ben," Cass said levelly, "like every other damn thing. Even if I wash out of the war somehow or who knows what happens"--he understood that meant even if something took him out of the war in more or less one piece--"I couldn't do it to Dan, leave him while he's out there getting shot at. If I did, you would always wonder what sort of tramp you'd ended up with." Her next words stumbled a bit but they came. "We're loco over each other, but that can't change the fact that I am as married as a person can get." She poked him in a rib, trying to change the mood, her eyes saying she was desperate to. "So, football hero--why aren't you? It might have saved us a lot of trouble."

Ben thought. "I didn't ever have time to."

"Ben!" Cass couldn't help laughing. "It only takes two minutes in front of a Justice of the Peace, believe me."

Handwritten notes on a yellow sticky note:

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“Two minutes is a long time for a football player.” He wanted out of the dead end of conversation about the duration as badly as she did. “The wingwalking. You’re, ah, not going back to that, are you? After the war?”

“Don’t know yet. A lot depends.”

He shook his head, resorting to mock rue, some of it not so mock. “A woman who flies a fighter plane with a ceiling of thirty-five thousand feet, and as if that isn’t enough fooling around with altitude, she wants to get out and stroll along the wing of some cropdust clunker. I have to inform you, Captain Standish, that’s the long way around to get your kicks. A nuthouse doctor would definitely call that a promiscuous acrophiliac tendency.”

Cass’s smile crept out and grew impish. “Know what? You make it sound dirty.”

“A guy can hope.”

She peeked down. “I see he can. And there’s still some night left.”

The teletype clerk looked up nervously when he strode into the wire room, early if not bright, the next morning. Ben was used to causing dismay this way. He knew he was hated by innumerable men around the world who had never laid eyes on him. Public affairs officers required to keep close track of the doings of whatever member of the ‘supreme team’ they were unfortunate enough to have in their unit. Code clerks who had to make room for the priority dispatches to some destination known as TPWP. All of them wondering, what in the name of brassbound military rigamarole was this about? Hell, he wondered that himself too much of the time. Resolutely trying to clear his head of the lingering effects of the scotch and Cass, he grabbed the nearest message pad--it happened to be the jittery clerk’s--and wrote down in block letters:

Find
Cass

ODD MAN OUT STILL OUT. WHAT DO?

As the clerk took it to code it and send it, Ben added an instruction guaranteed to further mess up the man's day: "Let me know as soon as the reply hits that machine. Not a runner. You."

Ben had settled into his desk chair to try to look busy and Jones was assiduously sorting old piles of accumulated paperwork into new piles when the clerk surprisingly soon stuck his head in their office. "It just came in, sir."

What there was of it. Standing over the teleprinter as the clerk fed in the decoded version, he frowned at the sole word that chattered out:

PUNT.

Very funny, you bunch of sadistic deskwarmers. Actually he had no idea whether Tepee Weepy's cryptic messages emanated from an entire bureaucratic swarm or from that mustached colonel single-handedly thrusting pieces of paper at some frazzled wire clerk. Either scenario, it came to the same: orders were supposed to be orders. Drawing a long breath in the face of that, Ben pulled the message pad to him again and wrote out:

FIELD SLIPPERY HERE, PUNT INADVISABLE. GO TO CAMP?

He didn't even make it back to the office before the clerk chased him down. The reply awaiting him this time was anything but brief.

DO NOT REPEAT NOT GO TO CAMP. MAKE STORY LOUD ON BACKFIELD ANGLE. IMPERATIVE.

Ben's groan alarmed the clerk. *Sonofabitch.* Loudon, of all damn people to be expected to imitate. *If they want the Loudon approach--*twelve hundred overripe words about the glory days of the Treasure State backfield, the cloud-of-horseshit kind of sportswriting Ted Loudon could produce in his sleep--*then why don't they just put the jerk in my uniform and be done with it?*

Ben crumpled the message into his pocket and stalked out. The more he thought about it, the more fed up he got. The likes of Ted Loudon and Grantland Rice and other bards of sentimental slop about sports notwithstanding, the One Great Scorer was not visibly awarding touchdowns to the TSU backfield in the game of war. A misty-eyed glance backward to the season that ended with Pearl Harbor would do no justice to any of the four teammates. Jake would puke. Moxie Stamper would snicker. Vic above all deserved a decent cloak of quiescence over his running days. And Dex, whatever he had become, was no soapslick halfback any more. Ben reached the office with his mind made up.

“Jones, old lad, how would you like to go for a little ride tomorrow? Fill us out a motor pool requisition. Under REASON put down: *dogs of war*. And you better fill your pockets with puppy biscuits.”

The pods of parachutes opened prettily, one blossom of silk after another, cloudflowers against the blue field of sky overtopping Seeley Lake and the Mission Mountains beyond. Ben had just joined the large circle of jumpsuited men craning their necks upward; even so, his uniform and flight jacket drew slanted looks from corners of eyes. He knew he had to hold his temper against the automatic hostility here; guys in the situation of these had plenty to watch out for. A groan went through the group as a billow of dust whirled across the landing strip, where strips of canvas were crisscrossed--tentpegged down so as not to blow away, Ben could not help but notice--into a prominent X. Carrying its mischief higher, the gusty wind caught the dozen chutes, dancing the dangling men sideways across the air as if they were dandelion seeds. The first jumper managed to land with a neat tuck and roll, which could not disguise the fact that he had missed the X by fifty yards. The chutists after him, sawing desperately at their lines, landed progressively farther

and farther off the mark, until the last few were blown into the chokecherry bushes at the far end of the airstrip.

“God damn it,” the grizzled foreman of the parachutist squad hollered at the windstrewn legion, “if you can’t come any closer to the God damned target than that, you might as well have stayed in the God damned airplane!”

Wincing at the language, the camp director made his way through the canvas-clad younger men and steered Ben off to one side.

“Tough way to get to a spot,” Ben spoke the measure of sympathy he felt for the jumpers. More than once on New Guinea he had seen fliers bail out of flaming planes and be swept behind Japanese lines by tropical easterlies. It seemed to him an unfair fate even for war.

The camp director smiled thinly. Solemnly hatted, with silver showing at his temples and everlasting wrinkles in his thrush-brown suit, he looked like a parson. As Ben knew he was, of some kind.

“The U.S. Forest Service prefers to believe it can prevail over wind,” there was a bit of pulpit in the voice. “Not to mention fire and terrain.” The man was gazing at Ben as though he could see into him if he only were given time enough. “Their belief and ours have been made to coincide here, as we tell all our visitors.”

Ben looked around. The Seeley Lake smokejumper camp was a mix, right enough, old Civilian Conservation Corps buildings together with fresh woodframe ones that somehow appeared more ecclesiastical than governmental. An obstacle course at one end of the layout was balanced off by a restful chapel at the other. The whole place did have the feel of discipline, but not the military kind. Here, he was uncomfortably aware, a war correspondent was the odd man out. Every man at this camp--aside from profane exceptions like the parachutist foreman in a forest ranger hat--was a conscientious objector. “Enlistees in alternative service” by official jargon; “conchies” by rougher account. Somewhere in their number,

conscientiously aloof from the fate-willed military brotherhood of the rest of the TSU football team, was Dexter Cariston.

Remember that hunting trip, Dex? I'd be ashamed to tell you, but I've thought many times how that could have come out different, and then this would have. If your rifle had gone off while we were climbing around up there in the rocks, the kind of thing that happens. Shot yourself in the foot--hell, just one toe--that would have done it. You'd have been safely out of the war and on into med school with nothing said, and I wouldn't be here trying to figure out how to lie about you.

The truth itself, in what he was seeing around him here, was strange enough. A pacifist camp born of wartime needs. Whoever ordained it, here the paradoxical project was in the tall woods of Montana, where the historic peace churches--Quakers, Mennonites, Church of the Brethren--were providing their able-bodied young men in place of other able-bodied young men conscripted for combat. And still were belittled for their pacifism; he regularly heard these rigorous noncombatants with parachute packs on their backs sneered at as draft-dodging yellow-bellies, notwithstanding that they were volunteering to tumble out of airplanes into worst mountain country to fight forest fires.

But where was the familiar husky form of Dex, in any of this? Up there in the jump plane doing wind calculations? Or hiding out when he saw the jeep with U.S. ARMY AIR FORCE/EAST BASE stenciled on it pull in here?

Ben's silent perusal of the camp was brought to a brisk end by the director. "What can I do for you, officer? I don't mean to be inhospitable, but the military is supposed to leave us alone."

"Preacher"--Ben had no idea on earth how address a minister of these plain-collared denominations--"nothing would make me happier. I'm the palest imitation of 'military' you're ever apt to see, though. Only a pencil-pusher, sent around to

in a couple of these papers

write up several of my college buddies doing what they think their duty is. One of them thinks his is here with your bunch." *I will now lead thee into temptation, parson.* "You wouldn't mind seeing his standpoint splashed across most of this country's newspapers, would you?"

"Mysterious are the ways," the camp director granted, again smiling marginally. "Which member of our 'bunch' is this?"

Ben spoke the name, still searching the faces of the sixty or so smokejumpers arrayed on the airstrip as if Dex's familiar one had to be there.

"Ah, our Dexter," the ministerial timbre resounded. "He's in the boneyard, of course."

Everything within Ben, body and soul, turned over. Dex, dead, here in conchie Valhalla? How? There weren't odds steep enough to cover such a thing. The war killed O'Fallon and Pennington a predictable way, on the battlefield, and claimed Vic Rennie's leg in the casual accounting on the margin of combat. But this lightning strike straight through any reasonable order of life onto Dexter Cariston in these peaceable woods--through the shock Ben tried in vain to make his voice work.

Nothing marred the camp director's. "You probably ought to hustle across there," he pleasantly indicated to the other side of the airstrip. "His shift is about over."

Then Ben saw it beyond the clustered smokejumpers, the low businesslike building with the mandatory red of a first-aid cross painted on its eave: the 'boneyard,' right. Broken ankles from hard landings, busted fingers and hands from banging into trees on the way down, those doubtless were the constants of an infirmary at a place like this. Relief pumped through him. *Why didn't I guess, Dex? Follow the trail of bandages toward anything medical and there you'll be.*

Taking quick leave of the director, Ben climbed back into the ragtop jeep Jones had requisitioned. He still felt somewhat guilty about dropping Jones outside Helena, all by his lonesome, to do the dreary photo shoot on military sled dogs and their earnest trainers, but not overly. Jones and everyone else had to be left out of this. The last thing in the world Tepee Weepy wanted made known was that one of its 'supreme team' heroes was sitting out the war at a pacifist camp. For that matter, it was the last thing the others on the team, up to their necks in the armed struggle, would want to find out. As he drove around the end of the airstrip and pulled up to the infirmary, Ben found himself half hoping Dexter Cariston, marked down from dead, was in there on crutches with a fractured something-or-other; **Injured in Training Camp** was a story he could fiddle around with and not have to say just what kind of camp.

A cow bell clattered above the door as he stepped into the infirmary. Medical clutter was everywhere, shelves and tables of it. Over by a rack of crutches a single shabby desk sat unoccupied. Through a doorway toward the back, however, a sandy-haired figure could be seen bent over a microscope. "Be with you in a jiffy," came the glossed voice, as incongruous here as it was in a football huddle, "quick as I dispose of this strep culture."

"Take your time, Dex, it's looking like a long war."

Dex's twiddling of the microscope ceased for a bare instant, but his head did not budge from the eyepiece. "They all are, Ben."

Ben watched him deal with the glass slide beneath the lens, step out to the sink and soap up and wash as exquisitely as a surgeon--Dex had only to come into a room and the air grew rarefied--then with just a hairbreadth of hesitation arrive across the board floor with right hand extended. *Handshakes are the last to go*, Ben thought as their palms met. "Something tells me you're not here to fish famous Seeley Lake," Dex was saying in his easy way. Next, though, a held-in

expression twitched across his sturdy Scotch face. "Hated to hear that about Vic. Always has had more than his share of hard luck, hasn't he."

The roar of engines drowned out anything Ben might have had to say about how luck was distributed. Landing briskly, a Ford Tri-Motor blasted up dust as it trundled along the airstrip toward the next set of parachute trainees. Dex moved to the window to watch as if it were his sworn duty, leaving Ben to join him or not. After a moment, he went over. *What do I know about how they run this preachy outfit, maybe this is some kind of rite--they all worship the Tin Goose every takeoff.* Whatever the foreman was hollering now at the chutists ducking aboard was lost in the plane's racket, but Ben would have bet significant money these next practice jumps would be closer to the mark. He turned and asked:

"I'm curious--how come you're not out there leaping into thin air with the rest of the smokies?"

"Don't think I didn't," Dex answered tightly, eyes still glued to the shuddering aircraft filling with jumpsuited men. "Twice. Both times I threw up in the face mask. Ever try to steer a parachute into a forest of hundred-foot Ponderosa pines with a faceful of vomit, Ben?" Consciously or not, Dex rubbed his mouth with the back of his thumb before managing to say: "They washed me out of jumper training. All the years of football and Bruno and his Letter Hill, and five minutes of bumpy air does me in. Isn't that a corker?"

That needed no affirmation. Dex had been the team's best natural athlete, elastic as a circus performer, comfortable on the field as a cavalier at a lawn party. And here he was, handing out crutches without even earning one. Ben glanced around the infirmary. "You're it, here? Doesn't this kind of setup need a medical staff?"

"The Rochester doctor I didn't get to be, you mean."

They both laughed in their old way, briefly.

As if remembering his manners, Dex sobered and spoke as he turned from the window. "The way things are, doctors can't even begin to be everywhere they're needed. Not in the war, not here either. I'm the equivalent of a medic. I can splint a man up, shoot some morphine in him, until we can get him to the hospital in Missoula. If it's something besides bones and bruises," he shrugged, "there's a registered nurse here in town, comes in twice a week. Don't grin at me like that, Reinking. She's married."

Ben's grin went out like a light. He looked away, across postcard-perfect Seeley Lake to the summer cabins and rowboat docks spaced the distance of a flycast apart. The maintained forest along the shoreline stood sumptuous as fur trim, and even the hackles of brush looked scenic. *Peaceful sonofabitching place.* Skipped over by the clock of war. Cass with a dozen red-hot pistons gobbling combustible aviation fuel at the back of her neck this very minute. Jake Eisman freezing his bodacious butt at the controls of a B-17 while wishing the Alaskan caribou far below were Germans in his bombsights. Carl Friessen in the utmost swamp of Hell that was New Guinea, dug in for another night in a stench-filled foxhole that he didn't dare leave even to take a crap. Every one of the team members in the actual war, those who were left, ticked through Ben's mind like split seconds on a stopwatch. He realized he was breathing harder than he should and tried to steady down, the antiseptic air of the infirmary not helping. What bugged him so much? Conscience wasn't priced by the pound, Dexter Cariston could have found simpler ways to stay the warless one of them all--the purr of money in his family could have taken care of that. Even so. "This does it for you?" the question shot out before he had time to tame it any. "Watching guys hop out of planes into trees? I'm really asking, Dex."

"I'm doing what I can to keep blood in people," the words came clipped, "instead of letting it out of them."

The superior tinge in that answer did it. Anguish went through Ben like a convulsion. *There's more to know about blood than shows up in a microscope, you medical Jesus conchie!* He stood there unsteady, momentarily mindblind, wondering whether he had screamed that in the frozen face of Dexter Cariston.

The New Guinea jungle, a few months back. Everyone warned him the place dripped voracious insects when it wasn't oozing rain warm as monkey piss, and by the time he tracked down Carl Friessen in a rear-echelon tent encampment along the Sanananda road, the crisp new combat fatigues he'd been issued were wringing wet and he was trying hard not to scratch numerous bites that itched like crazy. *At least nobody's shooting at me. Yet.* Standing there smacking mosquitoes with one hand and then the other, he peeked in through the bug netting that served as a tent flap trying to make sure he had the right man. In their football years Friessen had been rangy enough to plug more than his share of the line at left tackle. Now he was rawboned, worn down to sheer frame. Deliberate as ever, though, he hunched there on his bunk wearing thin black Jap pajamas--Ben thought he had seen every conceivable form of war souvenir, until now--while cleaning his carbine with an old toothbrush.

"How's the hunting been, Carl?"

The lantern jaw that had tempted football opponents to mention the word 'horseface'--invariably to their regret--swung around from the rifle-cleaning task. "Lefty! They let just anybody in this bugger of a place, do they?" The same dromedary grin, even if its wearer was a barely passable imitation of the Friessen of old in any other way Ben could see. The nickname he so seldom heard any more twinged in him a little. He was not left-handed, not even close. Back there on the football field, that mattered not a bit to Friessen and the other four; the TSU middle

linemen, the brawn brigade, always had their own slant on things, all of them calling him 'Lefty' because he was the left end. The right end, Danzer, they just called 'Danzer.'

Now, as if remembering his manners, the pajama-clad soldier left off work on the carbine and ceremoniously came to unloosen the netting. "Quick, step inside out of the skeeters."

They whacked one another like kids and talked without letup. One by one, Ben caught him up on the other team members, Carl wagging his head at each report. "In on something secret, huh?" he said to Ben's quick passing over of Dex. "He would be, the sonofagun." The goodnatured grin appeared again, but not for long. "This's been all kinds of fighting, Lefty," he sounded veteran far beyond his years. "Three months nose to nose with the dinks to get this"--he sent a heavy look around the pulverized jungle of the Sanananda battle perimeter--"though I don't know why anybody'd want it." Morale did not stand much of a chance here, Ben had to acknowledge. New Guinea notoriously was a back door of the war, everything about it shabby and short-shrift while the bulk of Allied military effort was addressed to the battle for Europe. Yet a continent was at stake here, too, the Japanese army almost within touch of Australia as long as it clung to outposts on the New Guinea coastal plain. The patchwork force of desperate Aussies and scraped-together National Guard units were assigned to root the enemy out pillbox by pillbox, sometimes sniper tree by sniper tree. The regiment here was called the Montaneers, hardy Montana Guardsmen given the task of spearheading the fighting against the Japanese from the beachheads on up into the overgrown tropical mountains. Even if Ben had not seen the battle reports on the savagery of this death struggle in the jungle, it could be read in the lines of Carl Friessen's face. "We're nowhere near done, either," the bony infantryman was saying. "The hot

rumor is a landing up around Salamaua.” He estimated Ben with a flat gaze. “You come all this way to go in with us?”

“Alongside you, Carl,” Ben replied more calmly than he felt about it, “that’s the idea. Although they only let me carry paper and pencil.”

Friessen wagged his head again. “Suit yourself, Lefty. We’ve tried all other kinds on the Japs, why not pencil lead?”

A week later, the two of them were on a slippery trail in the head-high grass on the ridge above the Bitoi River, with the other seven men of Carl’s squad. Ben intended to called it quits as soon as they made it back to the invasion perimeter. His pad was full with the past days. The pre-dawn scene in the landing craft as it broached in a big wave and sea-sick soldiers had to dodge a sliding jeep that broke loose from its fastenings. The Australian commandoes guiding them ashore with blinking signal lights after wading in from behind enemy lines through a swamp and swimming to the assault beach, the winks of brightness showing each man of them standing in the sand proudly naked except for his Digger hat. The steady advice from Carl during the endless crawl for the shelter of the treeline as Japanese bullets flew over them: “*Keep your head and butt down. Remember gopher hunting? We’re the gophers here.*” By now, abundantly shot at but not shot up, Carl’s platoon was dug in inland from the beachhead and everyone agreed they had lucked out so far. The Japanese line had bent back up the height of ground overlooking the Bitoi River and the plan was to let the artillery plaster them there for awhile. Sent on patrol before daybreak to sight out a forward observation point, the squad had mapped and azimuthed a good spot and, job done, were heading gingerly back down the trail, the scout out front with a Tommy gun, followed by the buck sergeant in charge, then Carl with Ben tagging close behind, the rest of the column bringing up the rear. When something plopped in the mud at the heels of

the scout, it took a split second for them all to realize it hadn't dropped from his pack. That left very little time before the grenade would go off.

"Down!" the buck sergeant screamed. Carl hit the ground, Ben an instant behind him. The grenade's explosion heaved the trail under Ben's belly. He heard somebody cry out, hit by fragments. The trailside grass tore open, Japanese in camouflage uniforms pouring out, five, six, *Christ, will they never stop coming*, eight. Carl reared onto his knees and shot one before his rifle was clubbed out of his hands by a Japanese mortarman madly swinging the mortar barrel like a sledgehammer. The American on the other side of Ben was being bayoneted by a surprisingly large enemy soldier. Fumbling for the only weapon he had, a trench knife, Ben rolled that direction and slashed the tendons across the back of the Jap's legs. As Ben scrambled to his feet above the shrieking flopping enemy soldier, a shot came from someplace--he never knew where--and tore a piece of meat off the tip of his left shoulder. It missed bone and bicep by a fraction of an inch, but the impact and pain sent him reeling. Around him the trail had turned into a muddy trench of men clubbing, grappling, firing. Another American went down, then two Japanese blown away by the buck sergeant's .45 pistol. Carl was kicking at the maniacal mortarman who in a final wild sling hurled the mortar and grabbed for a grenade on his belt. Carl swarmed onto him and the two went down in a pile together, the Jap's arm outstretched and the grenade twitching in his hand as he tried to dislodge the pin. Wound and all, Ben flung himself, desperately pinning down the struggling arm, his blood dripping over the tangle of the three of them, until Carl clambered astraddle of the Jap and with no other weapon at hand beat the man to death with his helmet.

"What's this, the poor man's Hemingway green around the gills?" Dex's tone turned unmistakably medical and concerned. "Something wrong with you?"

Trying not to let the effort show, Ben forced himself back to the task that had brought him to Seeley Lake.

“Sick of what we’re all going through, isn’t that enough?” he evaded with another modification of truth. He had led the camp director to believe Dex’s decision not to fight could be read between the lines of whatever he wrote about the smokejumper camp; try as he might, people would need something stronger than Dex’s microscope to find anything of the sort, Tepee Weepy would see to that. He had told poor Jones before leaving him to the dogs that he was going into Helena to spend the day covering a war bonds bingo marathon; half an hour had taken care of it, then he’d headed here. *Big day for the one-man liar’s club.* He was starting to feel like he needed a bath. Something had to be said, and he put all he could into it:

“Dex? Guess what, it’s your turn to be written about and I’m up against it.”

“I thought so.” The well-bred Cariston face smiled the slightest bit. “Isn’t there a saying from one of your movie moguls, ‘Include me out?’”

Ben brought the TPWP patch on his arm around under Dex’s nose. “The outfit I’m assigned to believes in all or none, and they’re not interested in none.”

“Can’t they count better than that? I’m only one man out of eleven and--”

“Nine, now. Counting Vic.”

Dex winced. “Ben, all right, I am the only one without his rump on the firing line somewhere.” He eyed his listener speculatively. “Even yours on occasion, if I don’t miss my guess. You have the look of someone who wants ‘at them.’”

I’ve been at them. They’ve been at me. My shoulder hurts, thinking about it. “Let’s don’t argue about each other’s reasons, Dex. Pearl Harbor and the Luftwaffe are signs enough to me they’re out to get us, and I don’t like being got.”

“Granted. But I believe several million others are ‘suited up for democracy’”--Dex cast a meaningful look at Ben’s flight jacket--“to forestall that.

There will never be a shortage of people to fight wars, will there. Would the eleven of us be missed if it wasn't for this mysterious menagerie you write for?" He arched his head to one side as if a thought had just come to him. Ben was remembering the time Dex had stopped football practice cold by asking Bruno why football-field lines always were laid out in skin-eating lime instead of talcum. "Take that further," he was formulating now, "what if all of us together had said 'No' to induction--"

"You'd have had to hogtie Animal."

"--and instead--"

"And coldcocked Stamper and Danzer because they wouldn't get to show off at parades."

"--shut up a minute, will you; and volunteered for something like this outfit instead? The team that followed its conscience away from war instead of toward it." Dex's gaze at him had grown as intense as it could get. "You're the writer, Ben, what's wrong with a story like that?"

"You want my two-bits' worth? First, we wouldn't be known as the famous Golden Eagles of '41 any more, we'd be called the Golden Chickens. Maybe that'd be a relief, I don't know."

"Not necessarily," Dex put in drily. "There's still a reputation attached. When we hitchhike to town from here, the local yokels try to run over us." Somewhere overhead the Ford Tri-motor droned around and around, no doubt dropping little weighted windage test chutes. Dex glanced up. "We even have to watch our step around our Forest Service trainers. Some are okay about us, some aren't."

"I imagine. To answer what you asked, though. If the rest of us pleaded conscientious"--he tried to glide nicely over the *conchie* sound in that-- "alongside you, I figure we'd all add up to a footnote in some philosophy book someday. A

usaty
caustically

one-paragraph kiss on the cheek from Bertrand Russell, tops. One thing sure, the United States military wouldn't be demanding a piece on you peachy-keen gridiron heroes from me every month."

"We're nothing but trophies, you're saying."

"No, on top of that you're a friend and a pain in the ass." Ben checked his wristwatch and grimaced. "Dex, listen, I only came here because I have to know. This is it for you?" He swept a hand around at the camp. "For good?"

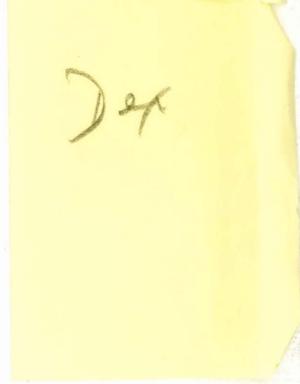
The uncommon furrow across Dex's brow showed he took that as an affront. Before he could say anything, Ben spelled out:

"For the duration. For however long this damned war takes. If there's any chance you're going to change your mind, get tired of people trying to run you over and decide to waltz off into a medical deferment from a friendly doctor your family might happen to be acquainted with"--he locked eyes with Dex and kept them there--"I need to know now. If I wiggle hard, I could skip writing about you maybe a month or two yet." He paused. "What I can't do, you better understand, is some piece that outright says you're a conscientious objector. They'd throw that away so fast it'd set the wastebasket on fire." Ben shifted from one foot to the other, as if adding body English to what he was about to say. "But I'm not the only scribbler in existence. If that's the story you want out, you could put it out yourself. The *Chicago Tribune* loves anything that shows up Roosevelt and his crowd. Or go the other direction, the parson who runs this place likely would have some ideas about how to show you off to the world as pacifist Exhibit A."

"Don't think he hasn't brought it up." Now Dex was the one who looked anguished. "You want to know if I'm here until the last shot is fired. All I can tell you is, I made the hardest choice of my life to be here and I *am* here. Believe me, I've lost sleep over it. Most nights." Ben read his face in a way he had never had to before; Dex was not the confessing sort. "You aren't able to write the plain truth



✓



Dex

about me," he could hear the cost in the words, "and I don't dare make it known either. One guess why, Ben. Cariston Enterprises. I have two brothers-in-law in the war. I'm the direct heir, but there'll be a family fight for control, down the line. The gaffer"--Ben wondered just how much wealth one had to grow up with to call one's father that-- "is backing me, so far. But he doesn't want it shouted around that the last male Cariston refuses to shoulder arms for his country." Dex broke off, offering a bleak smile. "There. Secrets of the rich."

"One size fits everybody," Ben said wearily.

"So, you have to hide me in plain sight." The idea seemed to intrigue Dex. "I'll be interested to see what you come up with."

So will I, Dex, so will I. Before turning to go, there was one more thing he had to tend to. "I'll bet an outfit like the Forest Service would have a jerry can of gas they could loan to a man. Particularly if they didn't know about it."

"Stuck your neck out to get here, did you?"

"Only about seventy-five miles."

Dex clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, there's a back door to the fuel shed."

The next day, his conscience objecting every word of the way, he wrote Dexter Cariston into undesignated war duty, a medic repairing men who parachuted into fields of fire, the type of fire not specified.

When Ben didn't say anything, she shifted around on the covers to face him more directly. In bed and out, he was unbeatable company, bright as a mint silver dollar, funny when he wanted to be, but serious about life; any way she looked at him, he amounted to a first-class passion ration. ^{deep-down} And while maybe she was stuck with wearing a wedding band, he was the one trapped in a wartime marriage of inconvenience with the shiny-pants Washington outfit with all the initials. *It's going to happen one of these times like that, isn't it, Ben. That Tepee Creepy outfit will yank you off somewhere to chase after another one of your team buddies and make you keep going, no more East Base, no more me. No more us, except pen pals. And that kind of ink never lasts.* Asking, she carefully confined it to: "What's next?"

insert

Fairbanks at last presented its snowy self, he was hoping the frigid chamois would not take his face off with it when he removed it.

In the warming hut that seemed tropical, Jake drew him aside. "So, Benjamin, the transport from Nome doesn't pick us up until morning. How do you want to celebrate the layover?"

"Thawing out."

"Wallflower." Jake delicately fingered a frost-abused ear as if to make sure none of it had dropped off. "Got a little something I better tell you." He took a circumspect look toward the other end of the hut where the rest of the crew was loudly stomping and rubbing warmth into themselves, then leaned in close to Ben and whispered:

"I'm getting Russian tail."

Still numb enough that he was not sure he had heard right, Ben checked the lusty expression on Jake and saw that he had. "Are you. They owe you some, I guess."

"Yeah, wouldn't the cossacks just cream their britches?" Jake grinned proudly.

"Who's the unlucky woman?"

"She's a pilot."

Ben stared at him.

"Well, was a pilot. She's missing a few parts--got all the right ones, though. But a couple of fingers." Jake wagged a hand with the last two digits down out of sight. "Those pissant Nazis like to shoot back. Now she's a bug driver."

This, Ben found nearly as stupefying as the pilot part. The runway they had just come in on was pulverized ice, gray banks of chips spewed up by metal

grippers in countless plane tires, with furrows that were more like ruts to land into. Buzzing around out there on the equivalent of a skating rink in thirty below on one of the little tow tractors called bugs sounded to him like a job for only the hardest Eskimo. Or a madwoman. Or worse.

“Jake, or should I just say Dummy--”

“Ben, Ben, hold it down, okay?”

“--get your mind up from between your legs and think about this a little, will you? Anybody the Russians trust enough to station here is apt to be a Red, like those big stars on the sides of these planes, remember? And the United States government does not look kindly on the Communist party.”

“What are they going to get me for, consorting with an ally?” Ben’s point did cause Jake to reflect. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she diddled a commisar or two along the way to get here. She knows her diddling.”

“Will you listen a goddamn minute? You and Tractor Woman--”

“Katya. Katya Gyorgovna Zhukova. The Russians really go in for names.”

“Jake, we’re heading to the mess hall,” the co-pilot called. “You two coming?”

“My scribe and me have got matters of national importance to attend to. You’re in charge, Charlie, see you at breakfast.”

The co-pilot gave a wave and was on his way. “What happens when you get famous.”

Ben was furiously fumbling out of the last of his layers of flying gear. “Do you have a lick of sense left at all? Maybe you’re living on love, but I need chow.”

“You’re going to get it, don’t worry,” Jake soothed. “The Russkies have their own mess hall and they like to talk shop with B-17 pilots. C’mon, you’re gonna meet Katya.”

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He wondered if he was imagining, but the crowded mess hall smelled to him straight off the pages of Dostoevsky. Cabbage, dank wool clothing, copious boot grease. Feeling as if he was in another world, he spooned up the formidable soup and devoured hunks of bread while Jake alternately ate and banked his hands through the air in testimony to the maneuvering capabilities of B-17s. Across the table, Russian pilots who either looked like plowboys or middle-aged pirates--the generation between had largely been wiped out by the Germans' demonic sieges from Leningrad to Sevastopol--listened monastically. Amid the bulky men, a woman who was not at all what Ben had expected--trim, keen, authoritative; she reminded him alarmingly of Cass--translated Jake's effusions and Russian spatters of questions.

"Yakov, they say, how big bomb pile?"

"Bomb load, right, two thousand pounds," Jake made an expansive gesture. "A ton--do you have those back home?"

"*Tonna*," Katya reported, drawing the first smiles from the Russian airmen.

At first Ben had been relieved to see other American uniforms in the roomful of brown drab, a plump major and a couple of shavetail aides sitting with an ascetic looking Russian majordomo of some sort. The major proved to be the liaison officer, which meant he was there only under obligation, and in a matter of minutes had sent over the more diminutive of the aides to inquire why they were not in their own mess hall with everyone else. *Awful good question, shorty*. Jake pulled out all the stops, citing Ben as a big shot correspondent chronicling Lend-Lease and the peerless pilots of both nations. When the underling relayed that, the major gave them an edgy look, but he directly departed and so did the thin-featured political commissar or whatever he was. The entire room sat at attention until the

man was out the door. The moment he was gone, Katya relaxed and turned to Ben. “You are from *gazeta*?” Her voice was throaty and adventurous, and in spite of himself he could imagine how smoky it would sound in bedroom circumstances.

“Gazettes of all kinds, right, Ben?” Jake trumpeted. “He’s as important in our country as your guys on *Pravda*.”

“Thanks all to hell for the comparison,” Ben snapped. The Russian airmen were getting to their feet, taking their leave with stiff nods. As the mess hall began to empty out, a contingent dressed like Katya, male and female alike in thick-ply ground crew coveralls, drifted over curiously. She rattled out something and they sat down. *Wonderful, Ice. Now we’re the main attractions at the zoo.* Of all there was to worry about in this, he figured he might as well start way up the list. Katya was watching him bright-eyed. “You have the same name as a very famous person,” he speculated.

She burst out laughing. “No, no! Marshal Zhukov is not my family. He is great man, we are no ones.”

Ben wanted that to be true. Zhukov was the titan of the Eastern Front, reputedly able to stand up even to Stalin’s midnight military whims, and with geography on his side he had held out until he could start bleeding the German invaders to a slow death. The glut of war on Soviet soil seemed beyond sane comprehension. Three years now since Hitler made Napoleon’s old mistake and turned thousands of miles of Russian snow into the blood of both sides; Ben had access in the correspondents’ pool reports to the riveting dispatches of the Red Army front-line daredevil Vasily Grossman and discerned from Grossman’s crafty coverage that survivors of the struggle had been through hell from both the enemy and their fanatic rulers. His eyes slipped to Katya’s right hand and the sacrificed fingers. The million-dollar wound. A piece of body exchanged for a grant of existence. Before he could ask her what kind of aircraft she had flown--he had a

spooky feeling it was a P-39, but that very well may have been Cass on his mind-- Jake interjected. "They use this place as a canteen after it shuts down. Get ready to toast Mother Russia, Benjamin my boy."

Vodka made an immediate appearance. Glasses were splashed full and hoisted in accompaniment to a unison cry of "*Na zdroya!*" Jake winked across at him. "That much Russian I know. 'Good health,' buddy." Wary from Cass's coma cola elixirs, Ben tested what sat so innocently clear in his glass. It tasted like spring water that had been tampered with by a moonshiner. While the Russians tossed theirs down he took a medium swig and clamped his fist around the glass to hide the fact that he hadn't emptied it. Nonetheless the bottle was making the rounds again and another toast was necessary, this one Jake's "*To bolshi semnadtsi!*" The Russians banged the table in homage to big bombers and gulped down. Here came the bottle again. *Holy damn, they inhale the stuff.*

Katya leaned toward him as if what she was about to say was vital. "Kheminev. You have meet in the war?"

The Ernie question. He'd had it dozens of times. *You'd think Hemingway invented the written word.* "I met him once, yes." He did not say it had been in the bar of the Savoy in London. He hiked his shoulders up and huffed out his chest to show the Hemingway mien. "Built like a bull. He was on assignment for *Collier's*--

"Coal? Kheminev write about stove thing?"

"It's a magazine." Ben pantomimed flipping pages.

"With us *magazin* is on gun." Katya was impatient to reach her point.

"Question. Kheminev famous in Soviet Union, we all read. Hero in *The Sun Up Again*. Is he steer, not bull?"

Jake woke up to the topic. "Wait a minute. I read that. The guy lost the family jewels? Where'd it say so?"

“That’s Hemingway for you,” Ben sought to explain and realized the vodka wasn’t helping. “He doesn’t outright *say*--”

Jake shook his head in disbelief. “Weird. Did you ask him?”

“Of course I didn’t ask him, the whole point of the goddamn book is--”

“Whoa. How can that be, the guy has lost his valuables and we’re supposed to read it between the lines? I’d say that’s news, it ought to be spelled out in black and white.”

“Kheminev is kid us, *da*?” Katya contributed. She shook her head censoriously. “We have saying: ‘What is write in ink, axe can not cut off.’”

It hit him then, along with whatever shot of vodka the count was up to by now. He chortled and couldn’t stop, laughing himself silly while others around the table tittered in anticipation. Finally he caught enough breath to say it. “That character’s name is Jake! Get it, Ice? He’s a *Jake* and his working part is missing in action and yours is present and accounted for and--” Jake guffawed and vowed to write Hemingway a complaining letter. Katya reddened and grinned foxily, translating in a rapid low purr to the other Russians. They caught on and roared.

Wiping his eyes--a bit of a sting there; he crazily wondered whether vodka could reach the eyelids--he focused as best he could on Katya. “Question for you.” Her expression froze at a degree of politeness. “You flew. Tell me about that, please?”

“Nacht hexen.” Katya rapped her breast sturdily, then fluttered a hand through the air while giving out an eerie high-pitched whistle. It was the kind of sound you could feel on your skin, and Ben tried not to twitch.

“It stumped me at first, too,” Jake broke in. “But they’ve got great big mothwing biplanes called Polikarpovs that just about float through the air. Our darling here flew one of those. Two-seater, so what they’d do, she and a woman bombardier would go out in the middle of the night and get up a little altitude, just

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behind the front lines, then cut the engine and glide over the German side,” his outsize hands tracing that out in the air. “The bombardier had the explosives in her lap, she’d toss the bomb package out, blow up some Germans, and Katya would rev the engine back on and they’d haul ass out of there.” Jake nearly bent double in fealty to the next episode. “Here’s the best part. The Germans are down there scared shitless, all they can hear is the wind in the wingstruts as Katya and her chum come drifting over. They run around yelling ‘Nacht hexen!’ Night witches!”

“Was good, flying,” Katya said quietly. She pantomimed steering a tow tractor. “Day witch now.” Shrugging, she reached for the latest vodka bottle with the remnant of her hand.

Dazed, Ben sat out the rest of the evening that stretched toward morning. He felt he had to, he was Jake’s alibi for consorting with allies who happened to be Red as their crimson flag. The conversation whenever toasts weren’t being made crashed along in two languages and in between. At some point Jake volubly told the joke about the dude who was invited to a fancy barbecue and worried whether he would be able to tell cow pie from caviar and which fork to use with which. Katya’s back-and-forth lingo had turned giggly, but Ben was numbly aware she could hold the tongue-tangling booze better than he could, they all could. In the haze of alcohol muddled images kept coming to him. Cass wingwalking amid the struts of a whopping biplane with a grinning Katya in the cockpit cutting the engine, on and off, on and off. *Sonofabitching war. Women didn’t start it, why does it have to drag them in?* He tried to ward it off, but New Guinea replaced Alaska at terrible intervals, the grassy ambush with gashed bodies everywhere mingling with a teletype ticker absurdly chattering in the middle of the trail.

He pinched himself in hidden places to drive off those blears. Sick with longing for Cass--*shame to waste all this drinking without her*--he endeavored to concentrate on the troubling matter of Katya. Suppositions were not in shortage.

Suppose she had a husband somewhere? Suppose she had a Communist party commissar somewhere? Suppose she actually was the daughter of the great general Zhukov, performing whatever patriotic duty it was to hang out with clueless Yanks? No, wait, the clues simply were different, each to each. Jake's forebears had two thousand years of periodic murder directed at them. If anything, it had given Jake immunity from common fear. Jake didn't have to back up for any Mother Russia or anybody else. Determinedly he took stock of his massive friend across there amid the merry Russians, and that did it. The broad Slavic faces around the table all at once reminded him of Havel from football. And along with Havel, O'Fallon. Vic with greatly more cut off him than a pair of fingers. The others, out there in the treacherous time zones. He felt like sobbing. The team and its mortal dangers were a mere handful compared to the innumerable slaughtered in the vaster jaws of war, no question there. But they were his handful. God damn Jake and pulling *Pravda* out of the air. He was more than just a mouthpiece for a government propaganda organ, wasn't he? Had to be. Tepee Weepy only had him in its custody, it didn't own him. His mind lurched to the piece waiting to be written about Jake and this polar oasis where big bombers were handed off. *Good old ink, get it down with just enough between the lines, can't even cut it off with an axe, right, Ernie?* He wished he had a typewriter then and there, to capture all that was going to seem incredible in the sober light of day. Here the pair of them were, Jake and him, up near the top of the world, frozen though it was, thrust out of the lives they'd thought they would lead and in the company of a female warrior who proudly answered to the name of Night Witch.

Four time zones to the east, Bill Reinking rolled out of bed, careful as always not to disturb his wife. Cloyce was a notably late sleeper. Not many of those in a town like Gros Ventre, and he reflected on the distant passion that had

brought this particular woman from satin bedcovers to the quilts they had shared for nearly two dozen years. She was all for any manner of bedding at the time. *As was I.* This time of year first light detached itself from night in stubborn gray and he put on his glasses to track down his clothes and shoes. Padding across to the window that gave a glimpse of horizon through the giant trunks of the cottonwoods, he checked the sky as usual, not that the weather of the moment meant anything in Montana. The day ahead of him began cumbrously sorting itself out as he crept down the stairs--the county agent's session at the high school on food production for the war effort, all afternoon given over to typesetting the gleanings sent in by his rural correspondents, a Ladies' Aid pot-luck supper nominally nonpartisan where the Senator would just happen to whip through and speak his mind about the condition of the nation. By now he could forecast those indignant sentiments almost ahead of the words coming out of the Senator's formidable mouth, and the Senator no doubt could parrot off his dogged editorials before they were written. *We're as bad as an old married couple.* That stray thought stung. He tried to yawn it away, stoking up the kitchen stove in the semi-dark to hurry the coffee. It was a terrible habit for a newspaper editor, rising at dawn after late nights. Yet he had always done so and figured he always would. *The early bird gets the worm, but is that a balanced diet?* Fumbling for a pencil and pad on the sideboard, he wrote that down to use as a column-bottom filler.

While the coffee perked, he put on his mackinaw and hat to go out and scrape the frost off the car windshield. Another bit of headstart that did not gain a soul much in the long run, but it was something to do. Besides, the dawn air brought him a little of Ben now that he was stationed at East Base once more. That rainbow of planes to Alaska and then Russia: any amount of time Ben put in where virginal aircraft were flying instead of bullets was to be prized. *Praise be, Franklin D. I knew Lend-Lease was worth the abuse I took every week for being for it.* He

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paused bent over the whitened windshield, taking in the silence that ushered the slow change of morning light. As a newspaperman he had to hew to the necessary enlistment of all men's sons in this war against the evils of Hitler and Tojo, but as a father he could privately covet any interval of amnesty for Ben. Scraping off another peel of frost, he paused again to listen. East Base started up even earlier than he himself did. It was an added habit now, delaying out here in the daybreak until he could hear the first distant sound of planes in transit.

His bunk was shaking and he wanted it to quit. Any motion made his head feel on fire, approximately to the roots of his hair. When he finally unclenched his eyelids, Jake was standing over him with one big mitt of a hand rocking the bunkframe. "Another day, another dollar, buddy. How you feeling?"

"Next thing to dead, if you really have to know."

"The more you sleep, the less you sin," Jake said cheerily as he opened the blinds and let in sunlight harshly magnified by snowdrifts. "You ought to be pure as a daisy."

Ben shielded against the brightness with an arm. Groggy as he was, it occurred to him to ask: "What time is our plane back?"

"It's gone." Jake busied himself at his ready-bag. "The other guys went with it, but I got us a better deal. We are now the captain and crew of our very own bush plane, Benjamin."

Ben woke up entirely. "Bush plane?"

"Sort of, yeah. You'll see. Weather people up here use it. Needs a little fixing up, so they're sending it south. It'll get us there, don't worry."

"When?" He wrenched up in bed, with something like congealed panic oozing past dizziness and hangover. "Have you gone even more crazy than usual?"

I've got to get the piece on you done and in to Tepee Weepy on time or the bastards will never let me live it down."

"You're on assignment, ain't you? So assign yourself a nice leisurely flight and relax. You can write in the air as good as you can on the ground, I bet."

"Jake, square with me a minute, okay? Am I hallucinating or something? Won't it take goddamn near forever to make it to Great Falls in the kind of kite you're talking about?"

"That's the whole point," Jake explained with magnanimous patience. "Hours in the air, Ben--guys like me have to live by 'em. This'll put me up on anybody else in the East Base group by twenty or more hours of flying time. That much closer to the real war, my friend."

"Let me catch up here." Ben wobbled his head to try to clear it, which proved to be a painful mistake. "This field just lets you walk off with one of their planes to go home in?"

Jake rubbed his jaw. "It took a radio message to Grandpa Grady. He said he could spare me for a couple extra days. Said he could spare you indefinitely."

"I'm trying to decide whether to commend you or bust your nuts in my report, Eisman." The Fairbanks operations officer petulantly kicked the tire of the parked aircraft as if shopping the last jalopy on a used-car lot. "At least it gets this thing off our hands. But when you said your friend here has his wings you didn't bother to tell me he hasn't used them since, did you." His eyes bored into Ben. "I've never let a paper-airplane pilot be a co-pilot before."

"He's just along as sandbag, sir," Jake soothed, "strictly a glorified hitchhiker."

"That is precisely what he needs to be. Reinking, is that your name?" The ops officer appeared dubious about even that. "Unless Eisman goes deaf, dumb

and blind, or has some other kind of shit fit, you are not to touch those controls. Do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, sir. I am to sit at the right hand of flying ace Eisman and be inert bodyweight for the next two or three days." Ben's answer drew heavy gazes from both men. "Does that about sum up my heroic role in the war effort?"

Jake piously stepped in. "Don't mind him, major, he rolled out of the sack on the wrong side this morning. I'll throw him out the cargo hatch if he tries to wrest the controls from me."

"With my blessing." The ops officer walked away as if the pair of them might be contagious. "Hand in your flight plan and vacate my airfield, lieutenants."

Skeptically Ben studied the aircraft again. "All right, Ice. What did you say this piece of junk is?"

"A Grumman Widgeon. Quite the rig, ain't it?" Jake was going through the motions of his inspection walk around the plane, although they both knew he was going to give it a clean report unless a wing dropped off and brained him.

Exhausted as the Widgeon OA-14 looked, Ben considered that a possibility. A spiderweb crack across half of the cockpit window--on the co-pilot's side, naturally--lent it a wall-eyed appearance. Perhaps fittingly for a weather plane, most of its paint from nose to tail had been swiped away by Alaska's vicious moods of climate. Dents in the struts of its wing pontoons indicated it had encountered more than occasional tree limbs while docking at inlet weather stations. Ben felt doubt in his gut. He had flown in amphibious aircraft before, but this one seemed designed to dither between sea and land. Beneath the cockpit and the first few passenger seats was a belly hull for it to float on, and spraddle-legged landing gear with narrow tires called bicycle wheels poked perilously out of that hull, barely holding the craft up off the concrete runway. Not since the most rudimentary biplane, back in earliest pilot training, had Ben seen aircraft wheels like these, and the rubber was

so aged and bald it looked to him as if it very well could have been the same weary set of tires.

He could not help eyeing the low belly of the semi-seaplane and the accumulated runway glop. "Will this thing clear?"

"Just," Jake said as if were a sure thing. Coming around the nose of the plane, he lobbed a bundled flying suit which Ben instinctively caught. "Ready to go for a ride?"

With Jake applying considerable body English to make up for two fewer engines and a couple of thousand fewer horsepower than he was used to, the Widgeon crawled into the air above Fairbanks. After the B-17, which was like traveling in a submarine in the air, to both men the floatplane felt like a flying raft, fickle every time it met a new air current. Slowly, slowly, it wafted over the tin rooftops of Fairbanks, its shadow lagging and shrinking behind it as if reluctant to leave the safety of the city limits. While Jake was busy coaxing the engines to smooth out, Ben peered out his side window at the glistening ice of the Tanana River and the curd of war materiel along its banks, instantly reaching for his pad. The supply dump, as it was aptly called, consisted of an infinite number of crates of aircraft parts, heaps of tires, long ranks of belly tanks, runway equipment of every sort; some of it tarped over and some of it not, the Lend-Lease mountains of supplies resembled an otherworldly tent encampment, strangely peopleless, strewn beside the frozen river for miles on end. Ben jotted as fast as his hand could go, adding the scene to others of untold weaponry stacked on Pacific atolls and Atlantic docks. He had read that the weight of impounded water in gigantic dams, Fort Peck and Dnieperstroï and their serpentine ilk, in theory added up to enough to affect the rotation of the earth. Looking down at the enormity of the random arsenal

piled up on one Alaskan riverbank, it could be readily imagined that the depots of war were pooling into a mass force certain to make the world wobble on its axis.

“Pilot to co-pilot,” Jake intoned from two feet away. “Say farewell to Fairbanks, it’s all bush from here on.”

Ben glanced up and out over a sunlit wilderness seemingly unmarred by anything but the frail cracklines of the cockpit window. Sky, land, perimeter of the earth, all seemed to enlarge as the plane throbbed out into the circle of blue morning. To his astonishment, winter gradually gave way as they headed southeastward toward Yukon Territory. Fairbanks was caught in some isobar that had slipped from the North Pole, but snow had only seeped into the highest elevations along the upper Tanana. The river threaded ahead of them, marked as far as the eye could see by the gold of birches captured in its valley, amid spotty spruce and tundra everywhere else around.

Expansive as the outdoors around them, Jake grinned over at him. “Not bad, huh? Feel like Jack London yet?”

“Trapped this way in a tiny cabin with White Fang for days on end, yes, I do.”

“My, you are cranky today. We’ll purr into Northway in time for lunch, you’ll see.”

Time slowed, attuned to the stately beat of the engines. Half-hypnotized by the ceaseless tapestry of scenery, Ben sat back and let his mind drift. First of all to Cass, the situation with her always up in the air, an apt locution right then but one that made his lips draw tight. Off sideways to the piece he’d done on Dex, legerdemain he couldn’t maintain forever for Teepee Weepy and was not at all sure he should. Back around to Jake, sitting here hoping to ride written words and padded flying time to the air over Germany. Afloat over a corner of the world the

war had not found, Ben uneasily traversed such thoughts as though they were air pockets, unbidden but there.

The plane was droning along at 4200 feet--he would forever remember that altimeter reading--when Jake announced:

"I feel a pimple coming on my butt and therefore deem myself incapacitated. Take over."

Ben made a derisive noise. "Thanks anyway, Ice, but it's been too long since--

"Bullshit, Ben. Once a pilot, always a pilot. Get busy and fly this heap."

"Knock it off, will you?" Unearned favors did not go down well with Ben, never had, never would. "That prissy ops officer had it right, I *am* a paper-airplane pilot any more, and nothing--hey, where're you going?"

"To take a leak in the jug, what does it look like?" Jake vacated the pilot's seat and turned sideways to edge past Ben, patting him on the head as he did so. "Better fly the plane, kiddo, somebody has to."

"You damn fool," Ben hurled over his shoulder, his hands clamping onto the controls. The Widgeon gave a sharp lurch, nosing upward, as Jake's weight moving toward the rear of the cabin radically altered its center of balance. His hands managing to tame that without any conscious help from the rest of him, Ben frantically scanned the infinite banks of dials, switches and gauges of an instrument panel that now seemed the size and complexity of a cathedral window. Flight school had never included this peculiar breed of aircraft in the first place. He could hear Jake back there humming loudly to himself while peeing, which did not help. Still inventorying the instrumentation, he kept coming up one short. Precisely now, of course, the Tanana River chose to turn cockeyed, twisting away in fresh directions, glinting like a silver snake. Alert in every corpuscle, Ben could see wire-like trees down there on its banks, he could see the carpet of yellow leaves on

the ground, he could see the bald tops of hills regularly passing under the wingtips. What he could not spot, somewhere right under his nose, was the most basic aeronautical instrument.

While he was trying to navigate without it, the Widgeon gravitated below four thousand feet and he hurriedly dropped the flaps for some lift. Just then Jake returned to the cockpit, gyrating into the pilot's seat as the plane bounded upward. "Ride 'em, cowboy. I will say, you fighter jockeys fly livelier than us old bomber drivers."

"Funny as a crutch, Ice," Ben gritted out, hands and eyes busy in several directions. "Here, do something with this airplane."

"Just when you're getting used to it? Wouldn't be fair." The big man sat back comfortably to spectate. "Don't worry, Uncle Jake is here to hold your hand."

"Then get busy and do it." Ben squirmed, feeling his face redden as he had to put the question the rawest rookie pilot would hate to ask. "I give up --did they forget to put the compass in this turd bird?"

Yawning, Jake squinted into the glare of the morning sun. "What, you don't know east when you see it?"

That again. Isn't there any other direction any more? "Goddamn it, Jake, I mean it. If I can't get a compass bearing I'll eventually have this thing headed off the map somewhere. Let's don't fool around in the middle of Alaska, all right?"

Jake was unfazed. He sat there loudly humming the chorus that went "*Some people say there is no Hell, but they're not pilots, so they can't tell*" until finally, when Ben had run out of swearwords, he rolled his eyes.

Ben's gaze ascended along with his, to the front ceiling of the cockpit where the compass hung like a bat.

“That maybe is one of the things they’re gonna modify in this clunker,” Jake speculated as Ben sheepishly adjusted course to the compass setting.

“Now then, you ready to fly like a sane person?”

“Damn you, you know I am.”

Bursting into laughter even though he still was struggling to tame the Widgeon’s twenty-eyed dials and sluggish wings, suddenly Ben had never felt better. It ran through him like the thrill when he first soloed, the magic of being lightly attached to the sky. With Jake there beside him to coax and scold and to master any of the alchemy of the cockpit he erred on, the plane was his until they reached the barrier mountains and tricky downdrafts, perhaps half an hour yet. In that window of time, he hoped with all he was worth that Cass right then was flying too, the invisible musculature of the air supporting them both at once.

Eventually Jake took over and thriftily landed at the dirt runway at Northway at noon, and by late afternoon they were far into Yukon Territory. They overnighted in a cold Quonset hut at Whitehorse, then kept to the pattern the next day, Jake handling the plane in and out of dirtpacked Canadian refueling fields and then Ben’s exultant turn at the controls whenever the terrain was not producing choppy air or something else insidiously murderous. His flying intervals became less as mountains grew, and he believed even Jake was relieved when at last they crossed the Rockies and ahead lay the hill country around Newbride, the final refueling stop before the big base at Edmonton.

“Circle a few times so they can get a good look at us,” Jake unexpectedly turned the plane over to him when they were a few miles out from Newbride. “The radio’s on the fritz, let me work on that.” Slipping his own earphones on, Ben heard static and a voice that sounded a lot farther off than the airfield in the middle distance. Treed hills and straggles of the town panned in the field, but it appeared to be a more substantial runway than the dirt patches they had been putting down on

farther north. Ben was ready to be on the ground and regather. The air turned bumpy, and he concentrated on holding the altitude while Jake fiddled with the radio as if profanity was the sure cure. After many oaths, a particularly lurid outburst got through and he turned toward Ben and winked. "Sorry about that, tower. Requesting permission to land. Over." When the radio back-and-forth was done, Jake checked the altimeter and throttle settings and everything else Ben had conscientiously been trying to mind, but made no move to do more than that.

"Want to brush up on your landing skills?"

Temptation nearly overwhelmed Ben. "Love to, but the air has more lumps in it than I like. You take it."

Jake sighed. "Okay, if you don't want any fun out of life. Looky there, nice gravel runway and everything, and you chicken out. I just don't know about you sometimes, Ben buddy." Taking the controls, he aligned with the runway, and as if showing how it was done, waddled the plane down to a perfect touch.

Abruptly the runway seemed to devour the Widgeon. With a sickening lurch the plane nosed over and skidded along on the belly hull at high speed, metal screeching hideously on the runway surface.

Ben shouted, "Put the wheels down!"

"The sonsabitches are!" Jake shouted back. "It's *fresh* gravel!"

The savage grating sound continued to fill the cockpit, both men tossed in their seats by the rough ride, as the plane plowed along. Eventually it ground to a halt.

There was a moment of sickening silence, then the strange wail of the Canadian version of a meatwagon reached them.

"I thought you were going to land it, not fly it into the ground, Ice. You all right?"

Jake rose out of the pilot's seat as if it had offended him. "Never mind me, how's the frigging airplane?"

They scrambled out as the ambulance crunched to a stop a little distance away and a Royal Canadian Air Force officer came leaping off its runningboard. The back doors flung open and a couple of teams of medics poured out, stretchers ready. They all halted at the sight of Ben and Jake standing nearly to their ankles in the runway gravel, gazing at the furrows made by the Widgeon's thin wheels in the loose surface and cursing violently together.

"Tch, tires of that sort," the Canadian officer said with a mild frown when things settled down. "We've had your P-39s and our own planes through here, no trouble. If it's a hard surface you're looking for, though, you're a bit preliminary." He gestured toward heavy equipment parked at the side of a hangar. "We'll have it tarmacked by this time next week, we figure."

Jake looked pale as he turned toward Ben. "I'll miss the next bomber run to Alaska. Grady will have my ass."

And your flying time will be just what it was. And Tepee Weepy will turn me inside out for missing a deadline. "Try it in the morning?" Ben came out with, not knowing what else to say, as a bulldozer coughed to life and clanked out to tow the Widgeon to the paved apron outside the hangars.

They were out on the flight line in the Canadian dawn. Like odd postulants, the two of them knelt under the Widgeon's scarred but intact hull and almost prayerfully began to let air out of the narrow tires on the landing struts. When the tires squished down to nearly flat, Jake proclaimed: "Let's see if that gives the bastards enough surface."

They strapped in, and Jake taxied out, revved the engines to an alarming roar and started down the runway. The entire airfield personnel clustered outside the hangars to watch, and the meatwagon had its motor running.

Shuddering and rattling, the Widgeon struggled mightily to free itself of the ground and there was a brief moment when Ben thought it had. But the more power Jake fed it for takeoff, the more the acceleration of force on the skinny wheels drove them down into the coarse gravel, even as deflated as they were.

As sharp as if it were on their own skin, both men felt the first scrape of the underside of the plane coming into contact with the runway. There was another interminable hideous screech of aircraft metal against rough surface until the Widgeon skidded to a stop, stranded there in the middle of the airfield like a fish on land.

Jake killed the engines.

“Damn,” he said, barely above a whisper. The bulldozer lurched out and towed them back to the parking apron.

Before getting out to face the Canadian contingent, Jake sat in the cockpit chewing his lip. “I hate to start taking the plane apart. Grady will--”

“--have your ass, and rightly so. But maybe only half your ass,” Ben told him with more hope than he felt, “if we can get what’s left of this thing back to East Base more or less on time.”

Looking over his shoulder, Jake took inventory of the interior of the plane and conceded. “Okay, okay. Let’s see if our hosts would like some nice plane seats for their canteen.”

Once the ground crew had unbolted the passenger seats and lugged them off merrily as scavengers given a shipwreck, Jake lined the lightened plane up with the waiting runway and gave it the gas. Glued to the side window as the twin engines

raged and the plane shuddered against the drag of the wheels in the gravel, Ben saw they were past their previous skid marks and thought they might make it this time. Then, agonizingly, they heard the telltale scrape again and in no time the friction of another skid slewed the Widgeon to another dead stop in the middle of the airfield.

“This is starting to get on my nerves,” Jake spoke first in the quiet of the cut engines.

Ben indicated toward the bulldozer operator climbing back onto his big yellow machine. “Think how bored that catskinner is getting.”

While they waited to be towed back to the hangar apron again, Jake softly tapped a big fist against the steering column. “Got one more trick up my sleeve. It takes some doing, old buddy. By you.”

“As long as it doesn’t take buckets of blood,” Ben answered, “let’s hear it.”

He listened without saying anything more until Jake laid out the whole scheme. This time he indicated toward the forest at the end of the runway. “If it doesn’t work, don’t we end up with a plane in those trees?”

“The damn thing isn’t any good to us the way it is,” Jake provided in all reasonableness.

That much was unarguable, and the rest came down to the skills the two of them could muster in what they had been trained in. Ben took another look at the trees and swallowed hard, but got the words out: “Go for broke, Ice. You’re the pilot, rumor has it.”

Jake clapped him on the shoulder. “And you’re the sandbag, so here’s how I want you to do it.”

Back at the hangar apron, they ran through the maneuver in the silent plane a number of times. The Canadian ops officer puffed out his ruddy cheeks when Jake told him what was intended, but the truth was, he wanted the high-and-dry

floatplane off his airfield as badly as they did. "Have a go," he bestowed ultimately and went off to alert his ambulance crew.

Ben climbed in behind Jake, keyed up and as ready as he could ever make himself be. No sooner had Jake put on his headphones than he motioned to the co-pilot's seat as if it was an easy chair.

"Sit down and relax. We need to wait half an hour, the sissy in the tower won't clear us for takeoff until they get here."

"Who?"

"The volunteer fire department from town. They're particular about their trees up here."

Ben settled in the seat, put up the collar of his flight jacket and tried to nap. The world of war marched through his head, ridiculous incongruities on parade. Years in uniform dwindled to this, two men trying to get an aging floatplane off a gravel runway some thousands of miles from the nearest combat. Survival perhaps dependent on a meatwagon and a fire engine in somebody else's country. The contradiction that an airplane amounted to anyway, a machine nominally too heavy to stay airborne due to the colossal engines needed to keep it airborne. Cass, all her P-39 flights with those hundreds of pounds of mechanism in back of her ears. A miracle every time. How long could miracles go on?

Jake was shaking him. "Here we go."

Ben snapped to. This time, he saw, the Canadian officer had positioned the medical rescue squad near the far end of the runway, with the firefighting equipment added.

"All right, Ben my boy." Jake sounded reconciled or ready, it was hard to tell which in the startup throb of the Widgeon engines. "Third time is the charm."

“It beats ‘Three strikes and you’re out,’” Ben had to grant. He squeezed Jake’s shoulder as he edged up out of the co-pilot’s seat. “See you in the wild blue yonder, Ice.”

He went to the rear of the cabin and crouched. Up front, Jake fed the throttles even more and started down the runway at full force again, the squishy plane wheels doing their determined best to plow into the gravel. Imagination ran rampant in a situation like this, but with his weight back there shifting the center of balance toward the tail, it did feel to Ben as though the plane poised itself a trifle higher, at a more alert angle, up there at the nose.

Noise poured over him and the ride was so rough he had to brace himself with both hands on the floor; otherwise, he stayed in football stance, ready to go at Jake’s signal. He could tell they were nearly to the point of the runway where the drag of the wheels drew the plane into the gravel on previous tries. The part of the mind that deals with such things considered whether the battered metal of the hull would hold up through another high-speed skid or whether it would split open and he and Jake would smear against gravel at seventy miles an hour.

“NOW!” Jake roared, his hands busy with the stick and the throttles, and Ben leaped catlike toward the cockpit, grabbing onto the crank that controlled the wing flaps. As fast as his hands could go he dropped the full flaps, and an instant later, hoping Jake’s brainstorm had something to it, yanked the lever that pulled the landing gear up.

Its support gone from under it, held barely above the runway only by sudden upthrust of air from the flaps, for a terrible moment the Widgeon seemed to hover in defiance of gravity, like a leaf on a last breath of breeze. It then gave a slight lurch upward as if startled. *Don’t stall!* was the single thought in both men’s minds. Jake did something, although Ben wasn’t sure what, and the plane stabilized. They were airborne, at least at the elevation of a few feet. Now the line

of trees was approaching fast. Delicately Jake fingered the controls and yelled, "Sandbag!"

Ben flung himself to the back of the cabin, half rolling into his crouched position again, trying to make himself heavy. As he did so, the nose of the plane lifted with the shift of balance, but he still could see green spears of treetops everywhere in the cockpit window. "Hang on!" he heard the shout from Jake.

Instead he gave a little jump from his crouched position, and when he came down the front of the plane teetered a bit higher, still staggering toward the treetops.

He did it again, the Widgeon's nose once more bobbing up ever so slightly. By now the wall of dark green branches was rushing at them so close and hard the effect was hypnotic. This was it, he knew, that daylight nightmare of Cass's engine hurtling forward to crush her but in this case two engines to rip loose and plow flesh, one each for Jake and him. His mortal organs getting busy with their last task, Ben braced himself into the back corner of the cabin for the crash, staring uncontrollably at the ridiculous agency of his oncoming death, the tops of evergreens as serene as Christmas trees.

Then sky.

It took some moments for this unexpected lease on existence to register on him. He huddled there not daring to move lest any twitch of a muscle disturb whatever equilibrium the Widgeon was struggling itself into. Its engines still at full throttle, he could feel the floor of the plane lurching drunkenly under him, but along with it was what could be construed as--*Jesus, is it? Is it?*--the sensation of lift.

Then the engine noise settled to a guttural effort and Jake was calling over his shoulder in a shaky voice: "Nothing to it. You can come out of hiding now."

Ben stumbled his way forward and dumped himself into the co-pilot's seat. Trees still were not very far below, but the Widgeon laboriously kept on rising above the branches' reach.

He saw Jake was wearing a grin big enough to eat pie sideways.

"Kind of puckers a guy up, down there in the seat of the pants, don't it? Better get busy writing all this up, scribe, so they'll give us medals for getting this tub off the ground."

"Right, Ice. A piece of gravel pinned on with a band-aid. How about if I just sit here and let my insides catch up with me?"

They flew giddily, men given wings, for the next little while. Canada's immense share of the earth spread around them in the clear autumn morning in timber thick as fur and pocket mirror lakes and rivers flowing north.

Fondling the controls, Jake was chortling and calculating aloud how long it would take to fuel up in Edmonton and then the flying time to reach East Base for supertime beer at the Officers Club, when one of the engines went rough, smoothed out, sputtered a time or two, and quit.

"Now goddamn what?" Jake indignantly checked the instrument panel. "Take a look, it's the one on your side."

Before the words were out of Jake's mouth, Ben had craned around to give the stilled engine a looking-over. It only took an instant. The engine cowling was wet and aviation gasoline was whipping away behind it in a fine mist. "It's slobbering fuel like crazy," he reported hoarsely.

"Then I guess we don't try to restart the sonofabitch, do we." Jake rammed that throttle off. "We'll have limp on in to Edmon--"

The other engine quit.

--"aw, shit," Jake finished his sentence.

In the vacuum after that, the only sounds the wind in the struts and the creaks of a gliding plane that was too heavy to glide for very long, the pair of men stared the question at each other and made the same guess without having to say it. The Widgeon's repeated rough treatment on the gravel runway must have ruptured the fuel lines, and the gravity-defying takeoff over the treetops had encouraged leakage. By now Jake was striving to maintain altitude by madly pumping the flaps, the equivalent of using rowboat oars to try to move a barge, while Ben twisted in every direction in search of water they could set the plane down on. Off in the distance a lake gleamed, but too far for any sinking airplane to reach.

"I can't hold us in the air much longer," Jake said with strained calm. "How about we belly in on that clear patch down there?"

With gas all over us? Shielding the sun from his eyes with his hands, Ben scanned the stretch of forestless terrain coming under the plane, like a shaved-away spot on a mammoth pelt. He had to grit to give Jake the news that a windstorm had done the clearing. "It's full of downed trees, Ice. Tangled all to hell."

"That changes things. Raise Newbride, quick"--as Jake spoke, Ben already was on the radio chanting their position--"then grab the chutes. Toss me mine and the bivvie bag and you go. I'll milk the flaps as long as I can."

Having no choice, Ben clambered into jumping position, aware of the tail and the struts and other portions of the plane that he did not want hitting him when he went out the hatch. *Jump plenty far out when you jump, at least I remember that from flight school.* He gripped the ripcord ring so hard his fist hurt. Great gulps swept through him as he attempted to blot out Dex's experience of puking in mid-air. Clinging in the hatchway, he stared past the toes of his flight boots, trying to judge. The Widgeon was losing altitude like mad, he could see individual stumps and logs down there; wasn't the ground too close for jumping?

“Get out! Now!” Jake’s bellow and the sickening shift of the plane as he abandoned the cockpit sent Ben out into the air.

Two things happened almost simultaneously, the teeth-rattling jerk as the parachute opened and the uprush of a monstrously large downed evergreen directly beneath him, its rootball splayed toward him like a natural mantrap. With everything he could muster, dangling and falling at the same time, he tugged at the parachute’s lines in an effort to miss the log. At the very end of his mid-air dance of trying to twist aside, a limber root end raked up his body, swatting him under the side of the jaw and taking some face skin with it.

The next thing he knew he was on his side on the ground. The tree, as prone as he was, was close enough he could reach out and touch it. Still foolishly gripped tight in his hand was the ripcord ring.

Raw-faced and wincing from the sideswipe by the tree root, he lay there testing himself for anything broken. Except for his breath, nothing seemed to be. He was gasping his way toward normal intake of air when he heard, somewhere off across the mess of downed trees, the nasty sound of a crash. *Too big for Jake. Had to be the plane.* That started his thought process whirring. Before he even was onto his feet he was calling at the top of his voice:

“Jake! Jake?”

It took several shouts, but then a voice not all that far away answered.

“Tone it down, Ben. I don’t want my ears hurting too.”

“Where are you?”

“How the hell do I know? Over here.”

Using the rootball as a rough ladder, Ben managed to climb high enough to see across various logs to where a white drape of parachute indicated Jake’s location.

"I'm on my way. Doctor yourself till I get there, can you?" The optimistically named bivouac bag, containing a medical kit and other emergency essentials, was with Jake.

"Who said I need doctoring?"

To Ben, that response did not sound particularly convincing. Wasting no time, he bundled up his own chute in his arms like dirty laundry and began picking his way through the maze of downed trees. Mostly the forest here had been tipped over by a big wind, roots and all, like a spill of wooden matches. A good many tree trunks, though, had been snapped off, leaving stray splintery snags tall as totem poles. Here and there stood survivor trees, incongruous loners with their kilts of evergreen branches above it all. The muskeg footing was laborious. Ben was sweating by the time he rounded the last big log and there was Jake, upright but grimacing as he stood there flexing the ankle in his unlaced left boot.

"How bad?" Ben asked.

"I feel beat to hell, about like you look."

Another spasm chased across the big man's face as he put weight on that foot. "Think maybe it's a sprain, not a break. Not gonna take the boot off to find out, the way the way the damn thing is swelling."

Jake's eyes met Ben's. "Tell you what really hurts--I dropped the bivvie bag coming out of the plane. Piss-poor time to fumble. Sorry about that, Ben."

"Don't worry," Ben spoke it with effort. "We've still got our chute packs. Can you walk?"

Jake hobbled around to test that out. "More or less. We're not going anywhere for awhile anyway, I guess." Both men turned and gawked south where a pillar of smoke marked the burning aircraft. After a bit, Jake said: "That was a sad-ass aircraft, you know that?"

“Never mind that, let’s see what we’re supposed to live on.” Ben knelt to unzip the pack portion of his parachute for its emergency items, and Jake did the same. Each reached in and pulled out the first thing they found. They stared at the short machetes in their hands.

Next to come out was a tiny fishing kit, followed by rocklike pieces of chocolate called tropical bars.

“Jungle issue,” Jake said tonelessly. “Goddamn sonofabitching goddamn supply depot bastards--”

“Quit,” Ben ordered. “Eat. We’ve got to keep our strength up.” He tried the chocolate and nearly broke a tooth. “Petrified.”

“Must be what the machetes are for,” Jake muttered.

They sawed their way through the chocolate and sucked on it while they spread out the white parachute canopies as a marker for any search plane. Around them hung the ear-ringing silence of the Canadian forest. It was at the forefront of both their minds that in country this far north, it was always about five minutes to winter.

“Man oh man, this is not so good,” Jake eventually observed out loud. “Where are the Canucks with all their rescue regalia when we want them?”

Wondering that himself, Ben said, “Takes a while to fly here, you know that. We’d better get busy, just in case. Firewood. Come on, let’s get to whacking with these daisy cutters.”

They had amassed a woodpile of the driest branches they could find to cut and were digging in the muskeg trying to reach water--none too successfully--when they heard the sound of a plane.

A small spotter aircraft of some kind, it looked about the size of a moth as it pattered through the air, in over the forested edge of the windfall and ever so slowly toward them, an arm waving out the co-pilot’s window in good cheer as it

made a pass over them. No airplane created could land in the jumble of trees, snags, and logs, so both Ben and Jake knew what to expect, the drop of a bag of survival gear. Around again came the plane and again the cheery wave, but no bag was dropped.

“I wish he’d hurry up,” Ben muttered as the small plane buzzed off to circle in for another try. “Puddlejumpers like that don’t carry all that much fuel.” Jake simply fixed a solid glare at the visiting aircraft as if the emergency bag could slide down on that.

One more time, here the frail aircraft came, propeller whirling like a child’s pinwheel, and a sizable soft object was lobbed toward them. It blossomed out in a little parachute all its own, then decided to ride the breeze, straight toward the topmost branches of one of the taller standing trees nearby which Ben and Jake had paid no particular attention to, until now.

The chute neatly snagged on the worst of the high branches, tangled itself, and dangled the bag sixty feet above the cursing pair of men.

They bayed obscenities at the rescue bag festooned in the treetop like a Christmas trimming, until better sense kicked in. Meanwhile, the light plane wagged its wings--in the circumstances, it seemed more like a regretful shrug--and flew off in the direction of Newbride.

It was Jake, sounding almost pensive, who remarked, “That guy wasn’t waving for exercise, was he. He wanted us out away from this shit-eating tree.”

Taking stock of the situation, they could tell it was impossible to climb an evergreen that tall and spindly; the upper branches would break off under the weight of a man and so might the whole crown of the tree. On the other hand, the base of the tree looked appallingly substantial when the only thing you had to chop it down with were machetes meant for jungle vines.

The first half hour's worth of excruciatingly careful chopping, so as not to break the blades, produced a notch about as big as a beaver could chew in minutes. Panting and arm-weary, they had just resigned themselves to another hour or so of chipping away, when the sound of a more powerful aircraft engine reached them.

They looked up. This one was arriving from what they figured was the direction of Edmonton and coming like a streak.

Ben identified the silhouette and wondered if he could be hallucinating.

"VIP treatment this time around, Benjamin." Jake shaded his eyes. "We rate a P-39. Hope the guy is bringing us long woolies and his aim is better than that last prick's."

There were thousands of Airacobras in the sky of war, hundreds of pilots gunning a twelve-piston engine to a full four hundred miles an hour at any given time. This one roaring in on them had no business being flown by her, Ben knew in the deepest reasoning part of himself; Cass could be on the Seattle run, or on the ground at East Base, or anywhere between. But reason did not stand a chance as he craved her into creation there in the sun-glint of the rapidly oncoming cockpit. As he watched, afraid to blink, the P-39 lowered its nose and dove toward them. Jake, waving both arms, froze into semaphore position as the plane skimmed into the clearing in the forest, low as a crop-duster and fast as an artillery shell. Facing into the madcap flyover, Ben no longer knew whether to pray it was Cass or not at those controls.

The P-39 tore past so close over them they could feel the propwash. Now he was sure it was no one but her. He felt queerly responsible: Cass only would have flown a circus stunt like that to see what condition the crash left him in.

"That," Jake declared in the corridor of dwindling roar as the fighter plane climbed sharply, "is one shit-hot pilot." Both men watched the Cobra's ascent as fliers do, as if counting contour lines of elevation.

At around fifteen hundred feet the plane pulled up and settled into circling over them.

“What the hell now?”

“Writing a message,” Ben somehow was sure. “Come on, let’s get way out in the middle of this mess, we don’t want the drop bag to end up in another tree.”

Clumsier than vertical bears, they plunged through the fallen-timber maze until they reached a marginally more open patch of muskeg. They planted themselves in anticipation there, and Jake took up waving again. “The goddamn guy doesn’t have to check his spelling,” he complained as the Cobra kept to its droning orbit over them for the next some minutes. “Just tell us how they’re gonna get us out of here.”

“He will.” Ben had nearly admitted *She*. “Next pass, watch for the drop bag.”

Both of them tensed, ready to chase down the weighted leatherene bag, like a long yellow stocking, wherever it landed.

What came sailing out of the P-39 was the size of a bulging mail sack, so accurately aimed it very nearly hit them.

Jumping back until they were certain it was through rolling, Ben and Jake needed a further instant to realize it was a duffel bag. Together they pounced and opened it. They pawed through like pirates at a treasure chest. C-rations. Wool socks and gloves and watch caps. A down mummy bag. Matches. Two canteens of water. Two thermoses of hot coffee. Four cans of beer. Nestled amid it all, the message drop bag, and inside, the scrawled note:

Flyboys:

Happy to see you up and around. Proceed five miles, compass heading S/SW, to nearest lake. Bush plane will be waiting for you tomorrow--sorry I can't, but WASPS and Cobras don't swim.

Only room for one sleeping bag in the duffel, you'll have to share.

Don't snuggle any closer than I would.

Jake looked up from the note as the P-39 cut another perfect tight circle over them, as if they were the bullseye of a target the size of Canada. "Bitch, whoever she is," he said in admiration.

The only acknowledgment Ben could think of was to throw up his hands in the possible direction of Edmonton--*Go! Go!* Jake looked at him for a moment, then commenced rummaging through the duffel bag. "Here's a dilemma--coffee or beer?"

"Save the beer." Ben watched the fighter plane go. "It's going to be a long night."

The five miles took them all the next day. Jake peglegged the distance, his twisted ankle splinted with halved tree branches, while Ben humped along with the precious duffel and picked out their compass route. At noon, barely halfway and their energy depleting fast, they made the decision to cram down all the C-rations to give their bodies something to work with. Ultimately both men were staggering, but always in the direction pointed by the compass needle in Ben's hand, as they lunged out of the forest to a lakeshore just before dusk. Half a mile away at a mooring buoy, a floatplane revved its engine and began to cruise across the surface of the water. In terror that it was taking off, the two of them futilely tried to shout the roar of the engine. Then the skimming floats beneath the plane cut an arc on the lakewater like skates curving on ice, and the aircraft slowed to a chug, aiming in to shore exactly at them.

Twenty-four hours later, with Jake unhappily tractioned in a hospital bed by the Canadian medical authorities. Ben mustered himself as the C-47 shuttle from

Edmonton touched down at East Base. He ached in every possible part of himself and his face looked like he had been in a fight with a bobcat and he still had the entire slew of writing about the bomber journey to Alaska to be done. *Am I imagining, or am I losing ground faster than I can type?*

Jones was waiting for him on the runway, faithfully rumpled and homely as a mud fence. "Welcome back, lieutenant. I spent yesterday going over the regulations about escorting a coffin, but I'm glad it's you instead."

"Jones, you say the sweetest things." Even as the wind added its pesky greeting, Ben had to admit East Base looked like an oasis after where he'd been.

"Tepee Weepy radioed," Jones reported, awed at having heard the voice in clear air. "They want your first-person story of the crash right away. 'Soonest,' they said--I didn't know that was a word."

"It is with them."

"Uhm, lieutenant, I'm supposed to tell you. Commandant's orders, you're to report to the infirmary before you do anything else."

"If Grandpa Grady thinks I've had time to bring a dose of clap in from Canada--"

Jones surveyed Ben's black-and-blue jaw and skinned-up face. "Somehow I don't think it's that." He leaned in as if giving solace to a parishioner. "My guess is, he considers you a hero and wants to make sure you're all right."

"I'm touched," Ben growled.

"You maybe want to look at this while you're getting checked over--it came yesterday, highest priority." Jones handed him a wax-sealed packet. "The courier didn't want to give it to me, but I told him it was that or he could go find you in the Canadian wilderness."

"You're getting the hang of this, Jones." Throatily Ben pushed the words out past the chokehold of apprehension brought by the packet, the kind his transfer

orders to another base ordinarily came in. He didn't want to open it with Jones watching. "Meet you back at the office."

"Don't forget the--"

"--clap shop, I won't, thank you very much, Jones."

Ben stood there at the edge of the East Base runway buffeted by the wind, his thoughts whirling wildly. *If they yank me out of here now...How will I ever see her...When will the war ever quit...* He trudged toward the nearest hangar--it happened to be the one where he had first laid eyes on Cass--and ducked in out of the wind. Not a P-39 in sight; a B-17 bomber, clean-skinned and somehow the more ominous for that, was being worked over from nose to tail by a swarm of female mechanics. A hairnetted crew chief more muscular than Ben immediately slipped over to him. "Help you with something, lieutenant?"

"Something sharp, chief, to open this with?"

The brawny woman pointed to a workbench strewn with tools. Ben went over and picked up a chisel. He lightly gouged the wax, the clock of war turning in his head. How many time zones away from Cass Standish could a man stand to be? Her husband was fourteen away, if that was any guide. *And look what's happening to him.*

He reached in and instead of orders pulled out a P-file, the standard military personnel folder, with the name, rank, and serial number inked in the upper right corner. In the opposite corner the file bore a red KIA tag, denoting Killed In Action. Carl Friessen was dead.

Stunned, Ben took in the words--*On patrol to secure the Hollandia perimeter in the New Guinea campaign ...enemy ambush...* No million-dollar wound nor any other kind short of lethal for the laconic lineman he had played next to, in the faraway of two years ago. Somehow Friessen's number had come up on the wrong side of the law of averages with the earlier two, and a sick fury at the

merciless twist in arithmetic filled Ben. Making a fist, he crumpled the envelope to hurl it in the waste barrel at the end of the bench; something inside resisted. He shook the envelope onto the worktable. Another file fell out, also with a KIA tag.

This one was Vic Rennie's.