paid for the indulgence of being a small-town editor, Bill Reinking liked to say. Just this moment, Ben spotted him there at the back of the office in the job shop, running the addressograph himself. As ever, his father looked like a schoolmaster out of place, peering foggily through his bifocals while he fed the dogtag-sized subscription plates into the small machine for it to stamp those names and addresses onto the out-of-town mail wrappers. Ben remembered now: the office help, Janie, had moved to Arizona, where her husband's tank corps was in training.

Past his own reflection in the glass of the door, Ben watched his father at his lonesome chore until it started to hurt. *This part doesn't get any easier either, does it. Two bylines under one roof. At least we both write with the pointed end, he taught me that.*

With that he stepped inside to the subtle smell of ink fresh on newsprint, calling out as cheerfully as he could manage: "All the news that fits, again this week?"

"Ben!" The addressograph made empty thumping sounds onto wrappers until his father could shut it down. "Surprise the living daylights out of a man, why don't you. We weren't expecting you until the weekend."

"Well, guess what, the Air Transport Command turns out to be full of surprises. It's only a forty-eight-hour leave, not the seventy two I put in for." He tried to cover the next with a shrug. "And there's something I have to do out of town tomorrow. Other than that, I'm the perfect guest."

"Like *Gone With the Wind* without somebody to neck with," his son said and laughed in a way he did not recognize. "Long."

Wondering how many more times this could happen in one lifetime, early that afternoon he had stepped out into the familiar blowy weather of Great Falls and pointed himself toward the same old tired bus that again and again had taken him to college and from college, to the war and from the war.

This time around, a person could tell there was a war on from the melancholy wheeze of the bus driver. On easier journeys home, he had been accustomed to forking over his fare to this narrow-shouldered fatherly man--an asthma sufferer, from the sound of it--in the drowsy waiting room of the Rocky Mountain Stageline depot. Now there was a sallow woman in that job who issued "God bless you real good, sonny," along with the ticket, and the ex-ticket agent was puffing around out in the loading area, dragging mail bags and the civilians' suitcases toward the belly of the bus. The war effort, preached on posters everywhere you turned these past two years since Pearl Harbor: it wore on people, without doubt, although that did not seem what the sloganeers intended to convey.

Ben
~~He~~ tried to slip his duffel into the bus and the seat next to him so he could lean against it and possibly nap during the familiar trip, but the hunched driver grabbed it away and insisted on stowing it for him. "Save your strength for the enemy, Lieutenant," he panted.

Which one?

"It's highly classified, but since you asked so nicely--I set the record for making hardship trips home."

There. He had managed to laugh at himself, if nervous laughter counted; maybe he wasn't utterly losing his grip on who and what he was. It still amounted to too much hardship, though. *Compassionate leave. Vic wouldn't have had any trouble laughing over that, poor buddy--I get the leave and he's stuck with the compassion and a folded flag in what's left of his lap.*

"Can't ever get used to the size of that stadium," he heard come his way, the wheeze in that observation alerting him to its source. Always wary of this sort of thing, he kept on staring out his side of the bus, as if the remark was an announcement the bus driver routinely offered up at this point on the route.

"Big old sister, ain't she," the driver persisted. "They don't build 'em like that any more."

For a few seconds longer, Ben carried on pretending that the remark had been addressed to everyone on the bus, or for that matter, to passengers immemorial. Then, as he had known he would, he pulled his gaze away from the dominating smokestack and turned it to a very different landmark coming up, the mammoth Treasure State University stadium. The other Great Falls industry, football.

He felt his throat dry out. If the pair of years since were any evidence, he was in danger of unwanted conversation about TSU's fabled 1941 team until his last day on earth. But this time, thanks be, he lucked out. The bus driver had given up on him. Better than that, evidently had not recognized him.

was meant to invoke the doorstep homefront, the breadbasket America served by mid-size dailies and small-town weeklies such as his father's; the vital breakfast table readership, with its sons and daughters in the war. But it never left his mind for long that a threshold also was where people wiped their feet on something.

Not this time. The cherished name, the bit about the ringless hands at the P-39 controls, all that was still in there. *Foxed the bastard. Can't every time, but*

-

His father had been watching in surprise. It wasn't like Ben to nuzzle his own prose. "Maybe I had better go through that piece again myself. What did you sneak in there, an invitation to neck on the bus?"

"Bad business, giving away a trade secret to an editor," Ben intoned, his expression saying he couldn't wait to. "My minder back at Tepee Weepy went for a decoy. I threw in a graf about Red stars over Montana, and he cut that clean as a whistle." He described to his father the East Base paint shop where the giant red stars of the Soviet Union were sprayed on the wings and fuselages of new bombers and fighter planes before they were delivered north. "No way they'd ever let that graf stand, I figured, and maybe I'd get away with the rest of the piece. It worked out."

"Shame on you," said his father, reaching for a pencil and paper. "I don't suppose you'd remember that particular paragraph?"

Ben recited it as his father jotted. When he was done, the older man sighed. "I'll need to be a little careful with this. Probably half the county thinks there's a Red star on me, I wrote so many editorials in favor of Lend-Lease."

She had not told him this part yet, but by asking around the airbase he'd learned Cass Standish also had a reputation for bringing in her flights safely no matter what the weather or visibility. (*"She can navigate in zero visibility like a wild-ass Eskimo,"* a crusty tower officer had provided the apt quote, although Ben had to clean it up.) He stirred up inside just thinking of it. For the life of him, he could not see why the Women Air Force Service Pilots were not allowed to deliver the P-39s, and for that matter the B-17 bombers and anything else that flew, onward north to the waiting Russian pilots in Alaska. In a saner world, where his TPWP minder in Washington wondrously would not exist, his piece about the flying women of East Base would outright say that. Getting something like that across between the lines was becoming a specialty of his.

Still mesmerized, he stood in the parking lot with his hands in the pockets of his flight jacket and yearned up at the fighter planes as only a grounded pilot can. Beyond that, much beyond that, he yearned for Cass. How many kinds of lust were there? The night before last, the two of them had been in a cabin in back of that roadhouse over there, uniforms cast off and forgotten, romantic maniacs renting by the hour. The whispered prattle of love talk, after: *"So it's true what they say about redheads." "I'm wrongly accused. It's ginger, not red." "Ginger? That's a spice. No wonder."* Now, for one wild instant he wished Cass would peel off out of the formation and buzz the roadhouse and him at an airspeed of four hundred miles an hour in tribute to that night and its delirious lovemaking.

That was hoping for too much. The flight swept over with a roar, the

P-39s as perfectly spaced as spots on a playing card. Watching them glint in the sun as they diminished away toward East Base, Ben jammed his fists deeper into his pockets. As quickly as the planes were gone, frustration filled him again. He drew a harsh breath. He knew perfectly well he was thinking about these matters more than was healthy, but it stuck with him day and night any more, the overriding hunch that for him the war's next couple of years--and, who knew, the next couple after that, and after that--might go on and on as his first two years of so-called service had, yanking him away on non-combatant assignment to some shot-up corner of the world and then depositing him back here for this kind of thing, time after time. And, ~~worse now~~ the worst part, Cass always out of reach. At this rate, he could foresee with excruciating clarity, her letters to him would add up to a string-tied packet in the bottom of his duffel bag. Somewhere in New Guinea there would be a similar packet, wherever her soldier husband chose to tuck them.

Lovesick. Try as he would, he could not clear away the relentless feeling. Whoever stuck those two words together was a hell of a diagnostician. An incurable case of Cassia Standish he was definitely suffering from, its symptoms rapture and queasiness simultaneously. *Vic would think I've gone off my rocker.* Getting himself involved with someone married. Not just married: married to khaki. No surer way to risk loss of rank and beyond that, dishonorable discharge, the Section Eight "deemed unfit to serve" bad piece of paper, him and her both. *Sometimes* I *think I've gone off my rocker.* "My, my," Cass had kidded him, reaching out naked from bed the other night to stroke that new silver bar on his

Nick Danzer on the destroyer *U.S.S. McCorkle* in the Pacific.

Dexter Cariston at the camp that was not supposed to be mentioned.

Stanislaus Havel and Kenny O'Fallon in graves under military crosses.

And Vic, whose chapter of the war had to be put to rest with this journey.

Every soldier, in the course of time, exists only in the breath of written words. The gods that govern saga have always known that. There were times Bill Reinking stood stock-still in this newspaper office, hardly daring to breathe, as he tore open the week's Threshold Press War Project packet and pawed through the drab handouts until he spotted the words *The "Supreme Team" on the Field of Battle...by Lt. Ben Reinking.* It awed him each time, Ben's unfolding epic of them, impeccably told. Taken together, they amounted to an odd number--eleven--whose combined destiny began one afternoon in 1941 on a windblown football field, and from there swirled away into the fortunes of war. Montana boys, all, grown into something more than gridiron heroes. One by one, the Treasure State teammates--the much-heralded entire varsity now enlisted one way or another--were individuals rehearsing for history, in newsprint across America. The one with the TPWP patch on his shoulder, with the mandate from somewhere on high to write of them all, now pocketed away the dogtag-sized piece of metal cold in his fingers, as his father wordlessly watched.

The bitter arithmetic was not anything Ben could put away. "Two dead and Vic a cripple, how's that for being a 'chosen' team? If this keeps on, we can play six-man."

hate to bring up a remote possibility, but just maybe you were picked out for this because you're the natural person for it."

"You don't know how the military works," Ben scoffed. But there was no future in arguing his TPWP servitude with his father, not tonight. "Speaking of that." He reeled off what he needed for his trip out of town in the morning.

"I wish we'd known," dismay took over his father's voice. "Your mother has been putting on the miles, these rehearsals--"

"~~Never mind~~. Dad, don't look like that, it's all right. I know where I can always get it."

His father sighed. "We both know that. Why don't you go tend to it before he closes for the night? Then you can give me a lift home so I can ride in style for a change."

Ben walked briskly two blocks up the street and stepped into the Medicine Lodge. The saloon was as quiet as if empty, but it was never empty at this time of night. Inert as doorstops, at the far end of the bar sat a bleary pair of sheepherders he recognized--Pat Hoy from the Withrow ranch, and the other had a nickname with a quantity of geography attached. Canada Dan, that was it. Puffy with drink but not falling-down drunk, the two evidently were winding down a usual spree after the lambs were shipped, when there was half a year's wages to blow. Ever conscious of his uniform, Ben had a flash of thought that except for polar explorers, these befogged old herders off alone in their sheepwagons somewhere would have been about the last people to hear of the war, back in December of

1941. It did not seem to be foremost on their minds now, either, as they and a third occupant ~~in the saloon~~ expectantly looked down the bar in Ben's direction like connoisseurs of the tints of money.

"Goddamn," Tom Harry spoke from behind the bar. Ben was beginning to wonder why the sight of him made people mention damnation. "You're back again, huh? I thought you'd be up in an aereoplane someplace winning the war single-handed, Reinking."

"Nice to see you again too, Tom." With a ghost of a smile, Ben patted his way along the rich polished wood of the bar as if touching it for luck. The Medicine Lodge was not much changed since his high school Saturdays of wrestling beer kegs and emptying spitoons and swamping the place out with broom and mop. "Saturday night buys the rest of the week, kid," Tom Harry would always say as he paid Ben his dollar or so of wages. Hundreds of such nights produced a saloon that by now had a crust of decor as rigorous as a museum's. Stuffed animal heads punctuated every wall; the one-eyed buffalo in particular was past its prime. The long mirror in back of the bar possessed perhaps a few more age-spots of tarnish than when Ben had been in charge of wiping it down, and the immense and intricate oaken breakfront that framed it and legions of whiskey bottles definitely had more dust. Still pasted to the mirror on either side of the cash register were the only bits of notice taken of the twentieth century: a photo of Tom Harry's prior enterprise, the Blue Eagle saloon in one of the Fort Peck dam project's hard-drinking boomtowns, and a 1940 campaign

poster picturing Franklin Delano President Roosevelt so cheerily resolute for a third term that it would have made any Republican cringe.

Taking all this in, for the narrowest of moments Ben could almost feel he had never been away from it. Illusions had to be watched out for. He got down to business, which meant Tom Harry. "Do you still sell beverages in this joint or just stand around insulting the customers?"

The sole proprietor and entire staff of the Medicine Lodge glanced to the far end where the raggedy sheepherders were gaping hopefully in Ben's direction. "Hard to do, on some of them. What can I get you?"

"Whatever's on draft," Ben said before it registered on him that he was home now, he didn't need to nurse away the evening on beer. "No, wait, something with a nip to it--an Old Fashioned, how about." *Still in the mood, Cass.* The other night in the roadhouse when they were priming themselves by playing coma cola roulette--each buying the other some unlikely concoction off the mixed drinks list before adjourning to the cabin for the night--she'd wickedly ordered him up one of these, saying it might put him in the mood for an old-fashioned pilot like her. Now he dug into his wallet. "Give the choirboys a round. Catch yourself, too."

"Thanks, I'll take mine in the register. Save you the tip." Schooners of beer flew down the bar, the whiskey and paradoxical bitters and sugar was magically mixed, Ben watching fascinated as ever at the skill in those hands. Tom Harry could never be cast as a bartender, he decided. He overfilled the part. The slicked-back black hair, the blinding white shirt, the constant towel that

with the one where he sat now. He knew there was no denying the influence of bloodline, but by quite a number of the readings he could take on his life so far, Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country, out there in the dark, served as a kind of parentage too. Whatever he amounted to, this was where it came from.

The keeper of the bar returned, still wagging his head over the jellied egg binge. Ben twirled his glass indicatively on the dark wood. "Any more of this in the well?"

"The war must be teaching you bad habits," Tom Harry grumbled as he mixed the refill.

"Speaking of those." Ben watched for a reaction, but could see none. Standing there ~~lightly twirling~~ swishing the towel, the saloonman showed no sign he had ever been acquainted with practices such as providing working quarters for prostitutes, bootlegging, and, now with the war, operating in at least gray margins of the black market. "Here's what it is. I need a car and a bible of gas coupons."

"Where you think you're gonna drive to with those--Paris, France, to get laid?"

"You ought to know. Probably all over hell, but I'll start at the Two Medicine."

The uncomprehending look on his listener was a reminder that not all of the world knew about Vic, at least yet. He again told what the minefield had done.

"What a hell of a thing to go through life like that." Eyes reflective, Tom Harry wiped slowly at the bar wood after Ben told him. "~~Knew~~ own that kid since he

down if a person blew his nose in its vicinity. 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, as the Treasure State team had learned to refer to the guff put out week by week by the 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 had chosen to let it just smirk there in the shadows of *marauder* and *scalped.* He and Jake Eisman and most of the rest of the team had wanted to go to Bruno and tell him to shape up his mouthpiece buddy Loudon, but Vic only said he was used to that kind of crap.

Conscience makes tough company, Ben found again. Concocting would not do--this was Vic, and the last time he would be written about, possibly ever--and besides, in the zipper pocket of the flight jacket was what he was supposed to give to the old man who had raised his friend; he would have sworn he could feel the weight of the thing in there, feather-light though it was. No, at the very least he had to ask around. *This is such a famously friendly neighborhood, right, Vic?*

Ben resisted the impulse to whip out his higher set of orders and wipe the smirk off the clerk with them. He didn't want that reputation until he knew more about what this damn base had become. Stoically he listened to the clerk recite the daily schedule of the shuttle bus between the base and downtown Great Falls. Meanwhile a fresh-faced private with an armband marking him as the runner from the orderly room had come in, and was hovering nearby. He broke in:

"Lieutenant Reinking?"

"I was when I got here."

"General Grady wants to see you."

"Who?"

"The commanding officer of the base, sir. Wants to see you."

"As in, this minute?"

The runner nodded nervously.

Ben slung his duffel behind the desk where the clerk had no choice but to watch it. Before turning to go, he asked: "Do you have a Lieutenant Eisman bunked here?"

The clerk showed a sign of life. "Sure do--the football All-American? Ever see him play? I bet he didn't even have to run, he could just walk through the other team."

"Tell him the moving target is back." Ben glanced at the ~~day~~ orderly-room runner waiting edgily to escort him to the headquarters building. "Lead on, Moses."

As if some signal had been given, East Base began to hum with activity while the runner ~~walked~~ led him through the military maze of buildings. Fire engines

"These females were wished onto me, and so were the Russkies," the commander blared; for a moment Ben wondered if the man was deaf from too much propwash. "That doesn't mean everybody and his dog has to read about them." He shot a non-negotiable look across the desk. "Those 'Supreme Team' write-ups of yours, bunk like that, that's all right. Good for the war effort. Lieutenant Eisman has a wild hair up his ass whenever he's on the ground, but he's a good flier--write your brains out about him for all I care. As long as I'm in charge here, that's the kind of thing I want to see, due tribute for my men who fly these planes to Alaska. Is that understood?"

"Duly noted, sir. I'll be doing a piece on Jake Eisman as soon as-- "

"That's all, Reinking," the commander swung around in his chair to peruse some imagined event out on the flightline. "Go see the adjutant," came the imperial drift of order over his shoulder, "he'll fix you up with desk space somewhere."

Where does the military find these types, Central Casting? Ben let silence do its work before he cleared his throat and uttered:

"But sir?"

The general's chair grudgingly swiveled in his direction again.

"The situation is," Ben stated as if he had been asked, "I'm under orders to do other stories, too, wherever I see them." He had been in front of enough base commanders to have perfected a polite stare that nonetheless underlined his standard message: "Orders from Washington, sir."

"Lieutenant, shit's sake, we're all under orders from Washington!"

shine of newness, however. Toussaint chuckled again. "Sold a cow to get the gun to hunt elk. Don't know if that's progress."

He gestured hospitably. "Pull up a rock, Ben." Ben settled for a log end. Dark eyes within weathered folds of skin were contemplating him as if measuring the passage of years. "Haven't seen you since Browning," Toussaint arrived at. "You were catcher."

Ben smiled. "~~End.~~ It's called 'end' in football, Toussaint."

"Did a lot of catching, I saw."

A dozen catches, in that final high school game against the reservation town; good for three touchdowns. Gros Ventre always pounded Browning into the ground in football, just as Browning always ran up the score sky-high against Gros Ventre in basketball. That game, though, Ben and his teammates had a terrible time handling a swift Browning halfback named Vic Rennie. "Vic damn near ran the pants off us."

"He knew how to run."

Ben's heart skipped when he heard the past tense. Had word reached Toussaint already? It couldn't have. He bought a bit more time with an inquisitive jerk of his head toward the far-off Rockies. "The last I knew, the Two Medicine country had elk. Why hightail it all the way over here to hunt?"

"Those buffalo."

Toussaint spoke it in such a way that Ben nearly looked around for shaggy animals with horned heads down in the high grass.

discard pile. The new cards might as well have gone straight there, too. *Lucky in love doesn't seem to count in poker either, Ben.* Even so, when Della upped the ante, she stayed with her. Della raised her again, which mercifully was the limit. Cass met the bet and, fingers crossed, produced the jacks.

"Pair of ladies." Della laid down queens and scooped up cash. "Thank you for the money, y'all, it'll go for good causes, widows and orphans and the home for overmatched poker players."

Cass looked at Mary Catherine, and Mary Catherine at Beryl. Simultaneously they reached to their piles and each flung a dollar into the cuss pot. *"Piss in the ocean, Della!"* they chorused.

"My, my," Della drawled, cocking a delicate ear. "Do I hear a whine in one of the engines?" Cass had to hand it to her; shavetail latecomer or not, she was sharp as a porcupine on most things. The full lieutenants, Beryl Foster and Mary Catherine Cornelisen, had earned their wings in the very first contingent of WASPs, as Cass herself had. The three of them together had endured the bald old goat of a flight instructor at Sweetwater, Texas, who claimed women pilots would never amount to anything because they couldn't piss in the ocean--the Gulf of Mexico, actually--from ten thousand feet through the relief tube like the male pilots. If that had been deliberate motivation toward every other kind of flying skill, it worked in their case. Sometimes the aircraft they ferried from the plant were finished products and sometimes they weren't. Mary Catherine once had been going through a cockpit check on the factory floor when the engine of the shiny new fighter burst into flames; pure textbook but against all human

another when he showed up to interview her and the other WASPs, as was to be expected after that run-in in the hangar. The atmosphere started to thaw as soon as he discovered she gave a straight answer, no matter what the question, and she found out he knew his business about flying. He'd done his homework on P-39s, was familiar with the Cobra's reputation as a tricksome aircraft, with the engine mounted in back of the cockpit creating a center of gravity different from more stable fighter planes. And he had looked into the Lend-Lease lore that what was gained from the radical design was ideal room up front for a 30-millimeter cannon poking out of the propellor hub like a stinger; the Russians were said to adore P-39s for strafing, just point the nose of the plane at German tanks and convoys and blaze away. Cass drew a grin from him when she agreed it was a *flighty* aircraft, one you had to pilot every moment, but she confessed she didn't mind that about the Cobra, weren't you supposed to pay total attention when you were in the air? As to the funeral ticket always there in that big engine right behind the pilot's neck, she offhandedly said the answer was to not get in a situation where you had to make a belly landing. That drew somewhat less of a grin from him. The true tipping point came, though, when she climbed into a tethered P-39 to show him the cockpit routine, automatically slipping off her wedding band as she slid into the seat and he wanted to know what that was about. Somehow willpower--*won't power, too,* she ruefully corrected herself--went out of control from then on.

"My husband is too busy to mind about something like a ring, he's in New Guinea."

"With the Montaneers? So is one of my football buddies--I was there a little while back."

"You were? Is it as bad as they say?"

"I'll bring you the piece I wrote there, you can decide."

All that. Then before they knew it, nights at the roadhouse or his room at the Excelsior. She had done anything like this only once before, during the spree in Dallas after winning her wings, when that well-mannered tank officer as viewed through a celebratory haze of drinks looked too good to resist. That was strictly a one-nighter, and she had no illusions that Dan Standish refrained from similar flings when he was loose on leave in Brisbane and Rockhampton among the Sheilas of Australia. Supposedly it was different for men, their urges painted as almost medical, "the screw flu"; to hear them tell it, nature was to blame. But what about the strain of being a woman in singular command of a squadron of nerve-wracking planes and pilots both, and Ben Reinking happens into your life, nature's remedy for desolate nights if there ever was one? In the world of war, turn down such solace just because chance made you female? It had started off as only friendly drinks, Ben still asking her this and that as he worked over his piece about her squadron, the two of them sudden buddies over the topics of planes and New Guinea, until all at once he was revealing to her that he'd been wounded during his correspondent stint there. Every word that followed had stayed with Cass ever since:

"Where?"

"Place called Bitoi Ridge. Kind of a jungle hogback, in from the bay at Salamaua."

"Modest. I meant on you."

Ben paused. *"I don't generally show it off."*

She bolted the last of her drink, but there was a challenging dry tingle in her mouth as she spoke it: *"Never make an exception?"*

And ever since, the part she hated: if she wanted to hang onto her marriage and officer's rank, they didn't dare get caught at it. Tell no one. Show nothing. Staying casual as you hid a lover was a surprising amount of work, but now she managed to shrug at Beryl's remark. "I've just always done it, Bear. Dan and I knew a mechanic who slipped off a ladder, caught his ring on a bolthead. Pulled it right off."

"The ring?" Della was deep in admiration of the newspaper photo, where the flip of her blond hair showed to advantage. "So what?"

"The finger, fool."

"Yipe. Guess I better stay single, keep on playing the field."

"Is that where you head out to with that warrant officer who has the jeep," Mary Catherine wondered, "the nearest field?"

"Nice talk, Mary Cat. I don't see you around the nunnery." Della tucked the newspaper into her ready-bag. "Maybe I ought to set my sights higher, a war correspondent. Anybody find out, is he up for grabs?"

"He's engaged," Cass made up on the spot. "Head over heels for the lucky girl, from the sound of it. Everybody, strap on those chutes in case this moron pilot isn't any better at reading a fuel gauge than the weather."

Mary Catherine couldn't resist a last dig on Della. "You're losing your touch, Delly. You might have known that dreamboat of a correspondent is taken." 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 WASP 1 squadron. It spooked him--possibly more than it should, but it spooked him nonetheless. Fog induced crashes. That 1200-horsepower engine 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~~ an orderly-room runner on this one.

"All over is the right place to look for me," Ben admitted. "What's on your mind, soldier?"

"Didn't they tell you, sir? I'm your new clerk."

Caught off guard, Ben shot a glance at the desk in the corner; it had been swept clean of everything except the typewriter and the Speed Graphic camera, making his own chronically overloaded desk look even more like a dump. "What happened to Wryzinski?"

"Nobody told me that, sir." The anthem of the enlisted man.

Ben had just been getting used to Wryzinski. "Right, why did I even ask. Tepee Weepy taketh away and Tepee Weepy giveth." He offered the new man a handshake. "What do I call you?"

"Jones, sir."

"Nobody's named that," Ben responded, grinning to put him at ease. "It's taken."

"I don't quite catch your meaning, sir."

This was going to require some care, Ben realized. "Let's do this over, corporal. First off, I'll try to remember to wiggle my ears when I'm making a joke and you try to pretend there is such a thing as a joke. Second, drop the 'sir' when there's no one here but us, and that's all the time." The makeshift office that had been tossed to Ben--in earlier life it was some kind of overgrown storage bin, for

onions from the smell of it, at the rear of the mess hall--at least provided seclusion. "Maybe then we can get along reasonably well, okay?" The plug-ugly face indicated it was determined to try. "So, Jones, enlighten me--what did you do in civvie life to condemn yourself to being assigned to me?"

"College. Religious Studies, ahead of seminary."

Ben examined him. Jones looked as if any study time he had put in likely would have been with Murder Incorporated. "No kidding. At any place I ever heard of?"

"Out at the university." This drew him closer scrutiny from Ben. "I was a freshman in 41. Yelled my head off at every game, lieutenant. What a team you guys were."

"Then you know what this is about," Ben indicated the overloaded small office. "Go ahead and move into that desk. I'm just on my way over to the wire room and--"

"Sir--I mean, lieutenant? I was just over there. Figured I could at least check on things until you showed up." The incipient clerk looked uncomfortable. "There's a slew of messages, but they said for your eyes only. They told me to, uhm, get lost."

They told you to go screw yourself six ways from Sunday, didn't they, Parson Jones. Welcome to the East Base version of close combat. "I'll have a word with them about giving you confusing directions like that. Just so you know, I need to sign off on all messages. Don't ask me why, I don't write the

regulations." The war clock ticking in his head, he suddenly asked: "Any skinny about where these came in from?"

Jones pursed his lips as if calculating where gossip fell on the scale of sin. "Uhm, I did pester the teletype operator until he'd tell me that much. Pacific theatre, lieutenant."

Friessen and Animal Angelides and Danzer. Rest camp in Australia and troop ship in convoy and destroyer on noncombat station. Those should be okay; routine reports this time of day. Relieved, Ben grabbed up the materials from his desk that he had come for and turned to go. Jones still stood there fidgeting.

"Lieutenant, I better tell you, I don't have the least idea what I'm supposed to be doing here. I never heard of this TPWP outfit until I was assigned to you."

By now Ben could have recited it in his sleep, the same spiel he had given Wryzinski, and Torvik before him, and Sullivan before that, that the government was in the habit of setting up special projects for certain war priorities. There was one for lumber production, and one for the artificial rubber called guayule, and a rumored strange one going on out in the desert at Hanford, Washington, that no one would talk about officially, and who knew how many others. "In ours, we produce boilerplate for the newspapers, to put it politely. You do know how to handle a typewriter and a camera, right? Where is it you were stationed, before?"

"The Aleutians. I was on the base newspaper at Adak, the *Williwaw*." A mistily nostalgic expression came over the thug face. "They really had the weather up there. It was great for Bible study."

"I'll just bet." If the Aleutian Islands were known for anything, it was sideways rain. That remote Alaska outpost was about as distant as possible from Montana and any logical assignment to this office. Another of those chills blowing through a gap in the law of averages crept up Ben's spine as he inspected the unexpected corporal again. The war tossed people like scraps of paper to far corners of the world, except those who happened to have attended Treasure State University in '41; those it was busily sifting back to Great Falls. Jake Eisman, first. Then himself, and now this clerk with nothing standing out on his record except piety. Would coincidences never cease: the tangled situation with Cass, and all of a sudden a Ten Commandments officemate who would definitely know which number the one against adultery was.

"Tell you what, Jones, things are kind of slack at the moment and it's late in the day, " he resorted to, wanting time to think over this latest circumstance, "so why don't you just get settled in the barracks. I'll collect the messages and we'll start work in the morning--with any luck, the two of us will have the war won by noon."

Jones cleared his throat. "Sir? We have company."

Another soldier was standing in the office doorway wringing a cap. This one wore an armband.

"I have been reprimanded," the base commander set fire to each word. "Because of you, Lieutenant Reinking."

Standing at attention in the same old spot at eyechart distance from the desk nameplate that read GENERAL GRADY, Ben mentally tried out *"I was just trying to do my job, sir,"* and decided silence sounded better.

The general continued, at volume. "A certain United States Senator from here read your article on the WASPs. Ordinarily that wouldn't matter a shit's worth, but he's a busybody on a committee the Pentagon has to get along with. It seems he wants to know why, if women have the training to fly these airplanes of ours in American air, they can't cross a meaningless line on the ground called the Canadian border and do the Alaska run. The interfering old fart."

"Sir?" Ben risked. It drew him a glare, but also a nod for him to speak if he dared. "Could you maybe fill me in as to why the WASPs can't fly north?"

The general said sardonically, "I thought you were supposed to be bright, Reinking. I use the Alaska run to weed my pilots. It's the next thing to combat flying."

He whirled in his chair and slammed a hand to the wall map behind him. "Shit's sake, man, just look at the terrain! The hop from here to Edmonton, anybody in ATC can fly that with one eye closed. But then comes the real flying, every goddamn Canadian mountain there is and then the Alaskan ones. That flight is long, the weather is bad half the time and worse the rest, the Fairbanks airport is no cinch--do you see what I'm driving at? Those who can hack it on the northern hop"--the general reached high to resoundingly slap the Alaska portion of the map--"I see to it that they have a good shot at transferring over to be fighter or bomber pilots. Those pilots, perhaps you have noticed, lieutenant, according to

United States Army Air Corps regulations need to be m-e-n." The general spelled it out for him ever further: "Letting the goddamn WASPs onto that run would get in the way of that."

"I see, sir." *Does the Senator?*

General Grady slumped back in his chair as if under the weight of that thought. "Not that it matters, now that I have to screw the mongoose on this"--Ben did not let his face show how much he savored that description--"but what do I have to look forward to next from you, Reinking? I am supposedly in charge of all personnel on this air base, yet you have orders from somewhere on high that lets you flit around here doing whatever you damn please. Exactly who is behind this kink in the chain of command?" The general leaned far forward. "The President? Joseph Stalin? God?"

A colonel with a Gable mustache, actually.

Ben's war then had not yet become an endless maze of map-plastered base offices and florid commanding officers discomfited by his existence, but it was about to. That last spring morning in 1942 at the pilot training base outside Nashville, reporting as ordered but so mad he could barely see straight, he stepped into the briefing room the visiting colonel had borrowed. He still was reeling from the epic chewing out inflicted by his training squadron CO, minutes before. *"So, Reinking, is your father possibly a Congressman? He's not? Then where the hell does your pull come from? I'm supposed to produce fighter pilots. I get somebody who looks like the second coming of Von Richthofen, and ten days from*

graduation he chickens out. First thing I know he's detached to the goddamned puzzle palace in D.C. A colonel flies in from Washington just to fetch you--if that isn't pull, Reinking, I don't know what is. Have a nice safe war, and get out of my sight."

Torn between outrage and trepidation, Ben approached the waiting colonel prepared to plead this as a case of mistaken identity. His rigid salute went unanswered, the officer waving him to stand at ease. That and the way the Pentagon man casually perched on the edge of a desk instead of requisitioning it said he was not a military lifer, Ben deciphered. Instead he looked like someone off the cover of *TIME*, the slicked-back hair, the dapper pencil-thin mustache, the executive attitude; there was always a smokestack or an assembly line over the tailored shoulder on the magazine cover.

Colonel Whoever-he-was meanwhile had given Ben an equal looking-over and now said, as if it was the first of many decisions, "Light one if you've got one. Or try one of my Cuban rillos?" He held out a pack of thin dark baby cigars.

"I don't smoke, sir."

"Still in training, good." The colonel flipped open his lighter and puffed a cigarillo to life. His sudden question caught Ben off guard. "Did you happen to hear the Ted Loudon show last Saturday?"

Loudmouth? You couldn't pay me enough to listen to that creep. Ben stuck to, "Can't say that I did, sir."

gestured with the cigarillo as if striking that word--"or rather you, lieutenant, do this."

No uniform of authority Ben had come up against in the many months since held a candle to that. Now he looked at the red-faced East Base commander and informed him he was not at liberty to divulge who was behind this kink in the chain of command, as the general called it. In the same dead-level tone of voice he added: "General Grady, since you ask, my next piece is about a teammate of mine wounded in action. He has one leg left."

Warily the base commander took another look at Ben. "That's a shame, I'm sure. What about the article you said you'd do on Eisman?"

"His turn is coming. Will that be all, sir?"

The flight board still was not doing Cass or him any favors. Chalked slots swarmed with on-time departures and arrivals across the entire vast trellis of routes into and out of East Base, every B-17 and P-39 and all the birds of the air evidently having enjoyed a day of fine weather for flying, with the lonely exception of Squadron WASP 1 still sitting in murderous fog in Seattle. Swearing to himself, Ben banged out of the Operations building. He hit the communications section next, to send off the piece on Vic, remembering to threaten the wire clerk with certain demotion and possible dismemberment if he didn't keep a civil tongue toward Jones.

never imagined looking forward to a bed without her in it, but the three white letter--RON--up there for blessed 'REMAINING OVERNIGHT' did the job.

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

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."

"Could be. Anyway, screw Grady, let's drink to Luther and Sadie." With that, the state's senior senator and possibly just as senior spouse were accorded their due in scotch.

Cass belted hers down while his was barely to his lips, and scooted to the dresser to fetch the bottle. This time Ben saw not only a lovely lively woman who happened to fit into a Cobra cockpit, but a destined ace pilot of some kind. Captain Cassia Standish and her squadron given the go-ahead to fly in wartime airspace outside the U.S., even if it was only across a couple of Canadian provinces so far: 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 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 deep-down serious about life; any way she looked at him, he amounted to a first-class passion ration. 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?"

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 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."

"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

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."

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 deliberated 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 seasick 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 unit 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

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 its 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."

"--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 caustically. "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 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."

Wasting no time, Cass moved off to spread the blanket in a snug spot against the rocks and wink at the shy kids clustering in curiosity. Ben took the chance to steal a look around. The site was right. From up here, the bowl of the stadium was a green swatch amid the prevailing gold and silver of the Homecoming crowd; the band members at midfield blaring out the TSU fight song were the size of toothpicks and faceless, as he and Cass would be to anyone bored enough with football to gaze up here at the denizens of Hill 57. He could relax about that, but he felt keyed up every other way possible. *Game day. Weren't they all, one way or another, with that bastard Bruno?* The other paint-marked sidehill stood almost directly across from him, steeply rising out of the broad coulee where the facing buttes drew back to let the wind into Great Falls: the Letter Hill. He could not take his eyes off the chalky stone insignia there, the broad splay of the **T**, the coil of the **S** gripping its stem, the hanging swoop of the **U**. Every book on scriptwriting warned against the seductions of the sweeping overhead shot--Sam Goldwyn supposedly said that anyone who wanted to spend his money to go that high to look down ought to take the free elevator at the Empire State Building--but the conjured scene coaxed insistently into Ben's movie eye: a long line of figures in football uniforms, strung out on the trail up the Letter Hill as haphazardly as a caravan in distress, toiling toward the interlinked letters high above. Fade to dusk, and one lone runner still struggling against gravity.

The sound effects were not of his choosing. *"Treasure State University is proud to welcome its special guests to Homecoming, 1943!"* The

this moment forward, people. You have to want this ball. You have to lust for this ball. You have to *love* getting this ball and handling it as if you are the only ones on the face of God's green sod it is entrusted to." Pausing for emphasis or maybe it was breath, Bruno nursed his disgust in front of them for all it was worth.

There was more than one audience for this. Ben risked a glance toward the near sideline where Ted Loudon, Bruno's pet sportswriter and nobody else's, was taking in the coach's every word hungrily. *Why? He'll keep making up whatever he wants to about "the team that can't find itself" anyway.* Loudon even trigged himself up in camel-colored topcoat and snapbrim hat in imitation of Bruno but fell short as a fashion plate due to newspaper pay.

"Listen up, people," the coach intoned as if they had any other choice, "do you know what you want to be as a team? Slick. Operating together smooth as shit through a goose. I want teamwork from you so slick the sissies across from you won't see be able to see straight, you hear me?"

Nearest across the scrimmage line from Ben, Purcell uncomfortably did. The lanky sophomore was blushing red-hot at the coach's choice of language. *Where the hell was he raised, in a Sunday school?* A walk-on from six-man nowhere, Merle Purcell had been turning pink since the first day of practice when he stepped into the locker room wearing a droopy high school sweater that showed he had lettered in football, basketball, and track. Instantly he became known as *the three-letter man* and crude suggestions were made as to what those letters stood for. He wasn't necessarily hazed any harder than any other

messing up a play, no timeouts to fix shoulder pads, no anything else that could conceivably offend the exacting eye on the sideline--but what sane person in a football uniform was going to stand out there arguing singular and plural with the gridiron lord and master?

Not Ben, not quite yet. *Not in front of everybody. He'd run the legs off all of us up to those big white sons of bitches just to show me.*

His involuntary glance toward the butte looming out there beyond the end zone stands was not the only one. The Letter Hill was roundly hated. Of all Bruno's raging innovations this year, trickier drills, tougher calisthentics, full-length slambang practice games that pitted the varsity against the scrub team twice a week, the punishment runs up to those pale letters halfway into the sky were the hardest to take. Penalty laps around the field were a custom as old as football cleats, but nobody had signed on to clamber up a junior mountainside any time a volcanic coach blew off steam. Dex would be his bet, for the first to shove the Golden Rule in Bruno's face and walk off the team, followed immediately by Animal and Jake. Today could be the day. Even the Butte hardcase at left guard, Kenny O'Fallon, looked mutinous. Sig Prokosch, the other guard, built like an engine block and usually as imperturbable, showed similar signs. Stan Havel would stay, hiking the ball was the one thing he was fluent at. Moxie Stamper and Larry Danzer were Bruno's cubs, they couldn't be driven off this field by any means known to mankind. Carl Friessen could tip either way, easygoing but with a razor streak of sensibility underneath it. Ben himself--*God damn it, this isn't football, it's Russian roulette.*

can talk each other into playing some actual football next week. *Seven days*, people!" he flung over his shoulder as he stalked toward the sideline.

The team, half of whom had flubbed chances to teeter Moran out of bounds, stood rooted in surprise that Purcell was the only victim among them, Ben more caught by it than any. Then and there, he gave up on waiting for the right moment, there did not seem to be such a thing around Bruno. Of course Loudon had been absolutely sopping all this up on the sideline. *Just what we need,* a slobbering columnist spending the next week ranting about the sputtering TSU football machine and its noble mechanic of a coach trying desperately to fix it. Sportswriter be damned, Bruno and his Letter Hill had to be dealt with somehow, the faces of the team were saying as much to Ben.

Four-fifths of them, rather. Already jogging to the locker room, Moxie Stamper looked piously murderous, while Purcell, the object of that, went slinking off the field in the opposite direction. The other eight teammates hung on around Ben. "Purcell got the shaft on that," Carl Friessen stated the case from the linemen. "Could have been any of us on any old thing."

"Moxie underthrew that ~~ball~~ pass," Vic said quietly.

"Maybe not by accident," Dex fitted on to that.

Jake and Animal were not saying anything, worse than if they had.

"All right, I know. I'll try my goddamnedest to make Bruno hear us on this," Ben promised. "But I want to do it out of range of Loudmouth."

It did and it didn't. That always seemed to be the case where Purcell was involved. Resolutely Ben indicated to the troublesome figure slumped on the bench waiting for his Letter Hill fate. "It's him. That was his first play on the starting team, remember, and he didn't have any time to settle down. Besides, Moxie didn't get quite enough zip on that ball." He watched the eyes that should have seen that, but the coach yielded nothing. "The guys pretty much think you ought to go easy on Purcell this once."

Bruno's scowl gave off cold. "Is that what they think." He looked at Ben oddly. "I'm surprised at you, sticking up for Purcell. You're a grab-ass buddy of his, are you?"

"Not so as you would notice. The Hill is on everybody's nerves, coach, we all think you should lay off it now. You've made your point." *And made it and made it.*

"That again." Bruno managed to sound put upon. "Your touching concern for Purcell is misplaced. The dumb damn kid comes out and runs the Hill himself Saturdays and Sundays, you know that."

This was true enough. Gawky Purcell trying to build himself up with a struggling solo run to the base of the letters was a common if sad sight. Ben stuck to the obvious. "That's different from doing it when he's pooped out after sixty minutes of a practice game, and with full pads on."

There still was something strange in Bruno's expression as he faced around to Ben. "You're an interesting case, Reinking." The impression was he could have said vastly more on that score, but that was not what came out: "It's

And out there in a dried-up homesteader cemetery with tumbleweeds banked against a wire fence, they climbed off the team bus and gathered at the grave, outnumbering Purcell's relatives and townspeople. Ben sensed something as soon as he spotted the metal call-sign initials on the radio microphone at graveside: KOPR, statewide coverage. What unsettled him more was the sight of Ted Loudon instead of a radio newsman stepping to the mike before the funeral service got underway. In a rapid-fire patter he obviously been practicing, Loudon reeled off phrases of pathos: *"Not since the sad demise of Notre Dame's George Gipp in the prime of his playing life has football seen a tragedy such as this....Now in the eternal annals of the game, The Gipper is joined by The Ghost Runner, for that is what Merle Purcell's teammates called him for his fleet-footed elusiveness on the gridiron....Every lad of the TSU team is here today to do him honor..."*

Having grown up around journalistic boilerplate, Ben knew beyond the shadow of a doubt Loudon's same words would show up in tomorrow morning's sports column in virtually every daily paper across Montana. The copper company owned those as well as the statewide radio network. For whatever reason, Purcell was getting a sendoff from the powers that be.

Stepping up to the mike, Bruno dramatically cleared his throat and the ears of countless listeners. "We at Treasure State University, and indeed this great state for which is named," he boomed his words out as if to make sure they reached from border to border, "have suffered a loss before the football season of record has even begun."

Afterward, Ben could look back and see the team had been trapped. By the trappings draped all over TSU home games from then on, if nothing else. The stadium-shaking stomping roars of *"Merrrle!"* led by the student section as Twelfth Man pennants flew in their hands. Purcell's awkwardly dressed-up parents unmissable in the guest seats of honor. While up there in the KOPR booth, inflated to sportscaster by the heady vapors given off by his prose back there at graveside and the days of headlines after, Loudon rattled on about the uncanny inspiration driving the team to destiny.

Did the eleven of them buy into it? Not fundamentally. But there is always a *but.* Among themselves they were of two minds about ~~felt the pull of~~ the so-called season of the Twelfth Man, seized upon by Bruno and Loudon and their helper bosses to make a football saint out of a yokel kid who blew a gasket on his heart doing something he shouldn't have. There were times in the huddle when Moxie, having had to motion the crowd to settle down so his signals could be heard, would crack something like *"Never knew Purcell had lung power like that"* and draw cynical laughs. Yet as the victories piled up, something unaccountable had to be credited. Even Ben, their elected skeptic, could feel it. They all, every one of them, were playing every minute as if their lives depended on it. This season was like no other; it was that simple and that complicated. They could try to ignore each weeklong buildup of expectation or joke past the game-day din all they wanted, but Purcell's fate up there on the hill over them sobered their talent to a certain purity. Death was death, no matter how you cut it. Ben did not quite have the words for it yet, but somewhere deep he came to understand that for these

inexplicably singled-out young men he was among, one short of a dozen, what had happened to that remindful twelfth man was like an alarm clock going off murderously early in someone's room next to yours.

"Hey." Long thoughts left him at halftime as Cass passed the scotch bottle back and forth under his nose like smelling salts. "Better revive yourself, your team could stand a shot of something, too."

"Nothing a wholesale bunch of touchdowns couldn't cure." He'd have felt better about the shellacking TSU was taking if Bruno still were the coach. Naturally the bastard had parlayed the '41 season into the job at a California football powerhouse. *Scum always rises.*

A covey of waist-high Indian boys blasted past, tussling and trying to tackle one another. Ben glanced down the line of white-rock seating to see how his and Cass's welcome was holding out. Opera glasses clapped to their eyes--somewhat unevenly in the case of the most serious beer drinkers--the Hill 57 grownups were engrossed in the gyrations of the marching band and the cheerleaders. He did justice to the scotch and passed it back to Cass.

She had been watching him. "Old times getting you down?"

At her words, emotions rose up in him like contending creatures and the nearest one won out. He slipped a hand to the back of her slacks. "New times don't have that problem. You want to see the rest of this travesty of football?"

"Gee, do I have a better offer?"

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 looked like either 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, ~~eight~~ three tons," Jake made an expansive gesture, "do you have those back home?"

"*Tonna,*" Katya reported and translated the tonnage, 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-

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 in a bad dream 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

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. Commander'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 him. How many time zones away from Cass Standish could a man stand to be? Her husband was seventeen away, if that was any guide. *And look what's happening to him.*

would help to approach her level. "Bill, I think people are ready for another round."

"Next year I'll just hand out bottles instead of glasses."

As his father went off to liquor duty, Ben set himself to escort his mother sociably around the room as she no doubt wanted. But she didn't move toward that and her tone was forgiving--he tried to think for what?--as she said: "Are your ears burning? We were just talking about you."

"And here I thought that was frostbite from the bus ride," he endeavored to make it sound teasing. "So," he watched his mother for a further moment to see where this might go, "what did you conclude?"

She had not expected that he would treat her remark as more than a pleasantry to warm him up for the meeting and greeting ahead. But then Ben was inadvertently dramatic tonight, the last healing traces of scrapes from that plane crash like character lines drawn strong on his face. "If it were up to me," she decided to venture, "I'd say that you look like you could use more than a night off. I'm worried about you, you've been all over the map without letup. Doesn't that strange unit of yours ever have furloughs?"

Ben drained the last of his drink. "The war doesn't take furloughs, Mother, so TPWP sees no reason to. I'm theirs for the duration, lock, stock and typewriter."

She looked at him critically, hoping Carnelia Muntz didn't cross paths with him while he was like this. "Are you tight?"

The Pacific was anything but pacifying as he picked his way along a shore completely foreign to him. To one side of his narrow line of march, giant logs gray as archeological bones had been tossed by storms into an endless pile he could not see over, while just beyond the driftwood barricade the forest came crowding in, thick and bristling as bear hair. On the ocean side, a short distance offshore towered dark contorted seastacks like the Great Wall of China fractured by eternal assault. The tide, thick cream-colored surf changing eerily back to milk as it slid up the beach, seemed particularly determined to hem him in; every step of the way he had to monitor the tideline from the corner of his eye or the hissing white water would flood over his boots. Meanwhile the footing shifted from gentle sand as black-gray as gunpowder one minute to rugged gravel the next and then to roundbacked rocks, without rhyme or reason that he could see. *And this is the easy part*, Ben reasoned with himself.

He had hiked his full share of the arch of North America, the high hunting country that crisscrossed the Continental Divide back in Montana, but this was his first time to explore any of the other national extremity, the coastal sill where the land mass wrested itself from the sea. Out here in the state of Washington was the American shore at its most remote, dangling like a coarse fringe from the huge cape where the Strait of Juan de Fuca angled into the continent. Its isolation spooked Ben. He'd slogged the beach for three hours from the barely extant

lead, aren't they." A considering tilt of the head. "Kind of funny to think of him at the other end of this water, somewhere." Ben noticed he did not include Danzer, on destroyer duty in what was equally the Pacific, in this musing.

Reflection evidently over, Sig fixed his attention back toward Ben. He for once looked bothered. "They tell us the Japs even have their little kids in school making those balloons. Think that's so?"

"I don't really doubt it."

Sig's expression changed for the worse, which was saying a lot. "There's no limit to what people will do, I guess."

Just then they were coming to a creek mouth, and the Irish setter tugged at the leash.

"Rex thinks he's got something," Sig murmured as he swiftly unslung his Tommy gun. In the next motion he handed Ben the ~~weapon~~ .45 pistol from his holster. "Just in case."

Ben took in the situation uneasily. Where the brown-colored creek snaked out of the forest, vegetation proliferated. The dense greenery, too thick to see into, could handily hide a rubber raft and a raftload of touchy Japanese. The American jungle: he had never expected to be going into combat here. Sig showed no such concern.

Weapons ready, the pair of them stayed out of sight as best they could behind driftlogs and approached the verge of the overgrown patch, led by the stalking dog. The question ran in Ben's mind, what armaments would Japanese submariners bring to shore with them? *Probably a hell of a lot more than one*

"Took the words right out of my mouth, grabby," Ben put his own best face on it. "I'll be a moving target, but letters--"

She reached over and flicked a blunt-nailed finger against one of his knuckles hard enough that it smarted. "I'd just as soon you didn't call yourself that."

Shaking the sting out of his hand, he made a bid for truce. "Before I get any deeper into trouble, how about we have another drink and I show Madame to our room?"

Playing along, she leaned her arms way out onto the table of the booth and propped her chin on her hands before purring: "And will the accommodtions be up to Madame's expectations?"

"I'll have you know," he gave back haughtily, "the hotel room, the last one available in Seattle, is actually larger than a closet. By a foot or two, at least. It even has a special feature. A Murphy bed."

She hooted. "One of those that folds down out of the wall? Genius,what's to keep it from folding back up into the wall just when things get interesting?"

"Murphy the bed has experience longer than a flatfoot's lunch hour," he gave it the tough-guy treatment, "at such matters as this. The first time Murph lays his mattress-button eyes on the likes of you, he's gonna say, This is a lollapalooza I could happily fold away with forever--"

"See!"

somewhere on the coast of France and I'm out here with the albatrosses. Thanks a whole hell of a lot for the heads-up, Tepee Weepy.

In the wardroom's explosion of speculation that followed the Allied supreme commander's brief pronouncement, Danzer murmured aside to Ben: "A gentleman's C, on that pep talk by El Supremo?"

You're the one who would recognize one. "You were spoiled by Bruno," Ben came back at that. "Half-time dramatics don't sound that good with real blood involved." This was not a time he wanted to be standing around trading smart remarks, however. Like a change in the weather sensed in the bones, he could feel the time coming when the dateline on what he wrote would read SOMEWHERE IN EUROPE. "Moxie's ack-ack outfit is in that invasion force," he thought out loud, "you can about bet."

Did he imagine, or did Danzer draw back a little in surprise at those words? Ben shot him a curious look, but the Dancer was elusive there in his naval crispness. He still was as lean as when he lined up at opposite end from Ben and as apart. "You knew he was stationed in England, didn't you?"

"Merry Old Moxie," Danzer said as if that constituted an answer. "You're bunking in the sick bay. I'll show you to it."

Nicholas Edwin Danzer. 'Ned' when he was growing up in Livingston, but 'Nick' as soon as he hit Treasure State University and figured out what rhymed nicely with 'slick.' His family has the Paradise Gateway Toggery, outfitter to moneyed tourists on their way to Yellowstone Park. The snappy

periodic glimpse--not that your talents can be entirely captured at any one time, Nick--of someone all throughout the war. Rather like time-lapse photography."

Before the executive officer could hold forth further, Ben put in "Right now I'm the one lapsing," barely covering a yawn. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen"--he tried to intone it without irony and could not be sure he succeeded--"I'm going to have to hit the sack."

The one advantage of bunking in the sick bay was privacy, which he craved in the crowded confines of the ship. *Just me and the aspirin and the sawbone's slab.* Those and the unsettling sense of being cast backward in time.

Hands under his head, he lay there on the berth and mulled. It had been, what, nearly a year since his impatient period of mending in a similar medical compartment on the ship off New Guinea. The swollen thoughts of that time returned to him, as haunting as they were contrary. A main one, borne back by the dinner episode: why couldn't Carl Friessen have come out of the hand-to-hand combat on that bloodslick trail with just enough sacrifice of flesh to retire him from the war? The million-dollar wound, shrapnel in the back, a stray bullet in the lower leg, that sent a soldier home for good. His own encounter with a bullet seemed to him the two-bit variety, scarcely deserving of a Purple Heart or anything else, yet the twinge in his shoulder was a message of what might have been. At the time he was disturbed with himself for wanting any of the Supreme Team out of the war; Friessen, Vic, the others were in it of their own choice and who was he to wish

carefully calibrated harm to any of them? With what he knew now, he should have called down the heavens in support of such wish.

That and ten cents would buy a person a dime's worth of difference in this life, wouldn't it. He swung up off the bunk, determined to leave the mood there, and crossed over to his typewriter on the cubbyhole desk. First, though--another habit back from that other sick bay stay ~~a year ago~~--he flicked on the radio tuned to Tokyo Rose. As ever, the sultry voice was there, alternating between taunting American soldiers all over the Pacific and playing the likes of *"Tuxedo Junction,"* the rhythm that began swelling out now. The Japanese were good at such propaganda, he acknowledged; the German counterpart, Lord Haw Haw, sounded like P.G. Wodehouse construing Bertie Wooster. Swing music outdid a drone any old night. Something to keep in mind, would-be scriptwriter, he told himself. He tuned the sound just low enough to be background, and settled to his routine.

His things were laid out on the slablike medical table and he reached over for fresh paper and rolled a page into the typewriter. He took his time at this, which would have astounded Jones or anyone else back at East Base who had ever seen him put a typewriter to work. On TPWP pieces he wrote as fast as the keys could tolerate, never needing to glance down--one of the blessings he owed his father was those boyhood sessions at the training typewriter in the *Gleaner* office, with bunion pads hiding the letters on the keyboard. But nights on his movie script, which were many, he deliberately slowed to a sculptor's pace, letting the imagination feel its way toward the shape of trueness. The scene he was working on took place on the Letter Hill. The character based on Purcell was the last

Ben tensed, glad his face could not be seen in the dark. *Oh, goddamn. Here comes the load of crap.* Slouching down in his seat in a way he had not done since he was a kid captive to the screen back in Gros Ventre, he took in Bob Hope rattling off jokes and the McGuire Sisters spunkily harmonizing. Then the soundtrack music trumpeted off in the direction he was expecting and dreading, and here came the voice like hail on a tin roof, resounding back from the season of the Twelfth Man into the darkened compartment.

"Hello and a hurrah, for you fighting men and women everywhere! This is Ted Loudon with your USO sports report. Once again, the United Services Organization and the man at the mike, yours truly, are in your corner as we bring you the events of--"

Loudon had the knack, Ben had long ago divined, of spreading himself like a weed. Newspapers, airwaves, celluloid, the so-called sportscaster was everywhere but the backs of matchbooks and that was probably next. Ben set himself to endure another kaleidoscope of cliches, still trying to figure out Danzer's purpose in thrusting this in front of him. *There's no football this time of year. Is he just throwing Loudmouth at me to see what will stick?* Meanwhile in close focus there on the wardroom wall, Loudon himself was grandiosely shepherding an over-the-hill heavyweight boxer onto a hangar stage at the big air base in Newfoundland. In the space of the next breath, he was spouting his way through Opening Day of baseball season, replete with himself among the wounded troops in the box seats at the Washington Senators game.

Then the projector beam gave a wink of light between scenes, composed itself into gymnasium bleachers full of cheering soldiers, and onto a basketball court surged a pair of teams, one wearing no jerseys and the other wearing beards that reached to the chest letters on theirs. *"For the troops at Fort Dix gathered in the USO fieldhouse, it's basketball, down to hide and hair!"* Ben jolted up in his seat. *"Yes, folks, it's the Carlisle Skins versus the House of David! These barnstorming teams have entertained America from coast to coast, playing a brand of ball that their ancestors would not recognize but they have adapted for their own."* Eerily he watched five fleet ghosts of Vic Rennie racing up and down the hardwood floor, the Indian team in just its trunks running and shooting like boys let loose. For their part, the big bearded men on the other team set up passwork plays of geometric grace. In between the pure basketball there were stints of showmanship nonsense, as one of the bearded giants held the basketball in one hand over his head and a couple of the shorter Indians jumped and jumped and couldn't come close to reaching it, then in the next sequence the Indians sped upcourt passing to one another so swiftly through the windmilling House of David players that the ball seemed to be in two places at once. It was all circus to Loudon, who in his patter managed to ignore superb run-and-gun plays to concentrate on exaggerated pronunciation of names like Hunts at Night and Buffalo Scraper, and for that matter, Perlmutter and Rosenthorn. Numbly Ben blocked out all of that he could, summoning instead the intrinsic memory of Vic with his hopes set on the Skins, on the playing career beyond football that would

take him anywhere but Hill 57. Until his leg disappeared from under him. And then his life.

I get it, Danzer, you bet I do. Luck looks after those with shiny shoes, not the ones in mocassins. You've got the recipe for cynical.

The instant the lights went up at the end of the main show, Ben ducked out. He didn't know what the movie night protocol was, coffee and cookies and conversation afterward or what, but he didn't care, he simply wanted time alone. Sleep was nowhere in the picture, he was too worked up. No sooner had he closed the sick bay door than he was across at the radio to flip on Tokyo Rose for some distraction. *Might as well make it a full night of propaganda.*

He settled to the cubbyhole desk and his typewriter as the Rose of Tokyo pleasantly promised doom ahead.

"Poor American boys. Your ships go up in flames every day and your planes are shot from the sky every hour of that day. There are too many islands where your death waits for you, while slackers at home sit out the war. Go home, G.I.s, before a bullet brings you the sleep that lasts forever." Out wafted the eternal strains of Brahms' *"Lullaby"*.

"Sweet dreams to you too, Rosie," Ben mocked back but kept the music as he twirled a half-finished page of script into the typewriter. A warm awareness different from other writing nights kept coursing through him. As much as he hated to admit Ted Loudon could possibly amount to any kind of inspiration, that rapidfire voice worked as a goad, evoking the Golden Eagles stadium, the cleated team poised to charge onto the football field, the gilded season that led to so much

"It's about an accident of nature, then," the chiseled voice quickly recovered, at least. "Two of them. That freak kid himself and what happened to him on the Hill. I'm surprised you can't find anything more worthy of your talent, Ben."

You think you're surprised. Purcell does the trick on Slick Nick: that's *a surprise.*

Sitting there gratified at discovering a way to get under Danzer's skin, Ben still was finding it murky territory to try to explore. True, in the famous 41 season Purcell became the most glorified scrub there ever was, but still a scrub; he made the team only posthumously. What was there about the raw kid from nowhere to upset, even now, the receiving end of that impervious passing combination, Stamper-to-Danzer? "Stomp and Dance, the touchdown prance." Ted Loudon always went nuts over that, he had plugged it into his column all season long. *You had your share of fame, Danzer, did you want Purcell's leftovers too?*

Something had colossal staying power from back then, but what? The time since had changed the mortal balance in too many ways that Ben had seen, but not in this case. The Dancer was still scoring plentifully in the game of life, the Twelfth Man was still dead. Whatever grasp the specter of Purcell had, let Danzer squirm under it, he decided.

"Don't judge my script too soon, Nick," Ben flicked the page resting in the typewriter. "Maybe it'll turn out to bring back valuable memories for you."

coming out now as the impatience of a fighting man ready to march into Tokyo and trapped amidship on a transport scow going nowhere fast.

Another of those glinting glances that Ben could practically feel as Angelides turned from the railing. "So what you're in for with us is the Marine Corps tradition of practicing a thing to death." He bared his teeth in a mirthless smile. "Next worst thing to Bruno and his stinking Letter Hill." He jerked his head for Ben to come have a look over the side of the ship. All along the hull a hefty web of ropes hung down from the deck to the water.

"You want to see a bunch of trained grunts who can climb down a cargo net in their sleep, that's us," Angelides was saying conversationally. "Samey same, over and over on maneuvers like this--the landing craft takes us in, dumps us in the water up to our peckers, and we storm the shores of Eniwetok one more time. It's a wonder the Red Cross isn't there selling us coffee and doughtnuts when we drag up onto the sand." He fixed the kind of resigned gaze known as a thousand-yard stare on the practice island. "Aw, hell, it's pretty much necessary. A lot of our guys are cherries, replacements after Tarawa. Anyway, Lefty, you get to see this good stuff yourself tomorrow at 0500," the Marine topkick batted Ben's shoulder with the back of a hand as if to make sure he'd be awake, "and then the real thing whenever the hell some general makes his mind up."

"You sound like you can't wait, Animal."

Angelides cut him a telling look. "You know what, any more I go by Andy. It's just easier around the guys in the unit."

Ben seized the chance to trade. "Funny, that's how I feel about Lefty. It's been a long time since I lined up at opposite end."

Angelides belly-laughed his agreement to the deal. "I guess this retires us from football for goddamn sure."

The squawk of a loudspeaker in some tuck of the ship broke in on them. Overhead came the shufflefoot sounds of sailors doing whatever sailors do. Ben waited for those to pass before testing out: "The real thing when it comes--you know where?"

It drew a shrug. "Scuttlebutt says it'll be Guam."

That was how Tepee Weepy figured it, too, Ben knew, or he probably would not have been on this troop deck with this particular member of the Supreme Team at this moment. No other target in the island-hopping campaign would rate bigger headlines. Guam had been surrendered in the war's earliest days when American garrison troops in pie-tin helmets found themselves facing a Japanese invasion juggernaut; there wasn't an admiral or a general in the Pacific who didn't want it back with a vengeance. Ben felt he needed to share his reading of the situation. "Andy? Say it is Guam. The big brass will pull out all the stops if it is. But the Japs aren't saps. They aren't about to say, 'So sorry, here, have your famous island back.' It could be a bloodbath."

Angelides looked at him solemnly and turned to go below. "I prefer showers."

how." He rumbled a humorless laugh. "A lifeboat for the wet-ass infantry, you could call it."

Ben gazed at the rubber boat, Angelides' seagoing ambulance. He thought of Prokosch, the width of the ocean away, on watch for the enemy floating in to a creek mouth. Rafts. In the middle of the most mechanized war in history. *What are the odds? Huck and Tom against the gods of war.*

Back aboard the troop ship, the entire lower half of his uniform stiff with salt from the surf, Ben had barely made it to his bunk when a seaman stuck his head through the main hatchway and bawled: "Reinking? Lieutenant Reinking?"

"Over here, sailor."

"Message for you, topside."

DANZER PIECE A DANDY. WILL BE EXCELLED ONLY BY YOUR NEXT, SPOKEN AS WELL AS WRITTEN: NEW FIELD FOR YOU TO STAR, ARCHIVAL RECORDING OF BEACHHEAD INVASION. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS ASKED THIS FAVOR AFTER ARMY, NAVY AND AIR CORPS ALL NIXED IT. TPWP KNOWS POSTERITY WHEN IT FALLS IN LAP, THUS RECORDING EQUIPMENT BEING RUSHED TO YOU. FOLLOW MARINES ASHORE AT WHATEVER ASSAULT BEACH WITH EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT AND ALL POSSIBLE SOUND EFFECTS. HISTORICAL RECORD, ORAL AND AURAL, IS THE GOAL.

P.S. TECHNICAL AIDE ACCOMPANYING EQUIPMENT, DON'T FRET.

Ben read it again with just as much disbelief as the first time through. *Where do the bastards come up with these ideas? They're turning me into the khaki version of Loudon. A play-by-play of an invasion.* Starring, naturally, a certain keyed-up sergeant and the outfit he would lead against enemy fire.

The ship's radioman and the code clerk both were watching him with apprehension. "Any reply, sir?" the coder asked as if he very much hoped not.

"Yes. Send: POSTERITY DOESN'T KNOW WHAT IT'S GETTING."

When he went back down into the hold to tell Angelides he was going to be famous of a kind, the bunk compartment was in such uproar he figured the poker game had drawn blood. It turned out to be simply mail call. Squirming through clamorous Marines clutching letters and packages from home, he worked his way to his bunk hoping to hear his name called, but it was all already there on the blanket, postal riches in a heap.

Flat on his back in the next bunk reading the sole V-mail letter that had come for him--from his uncle--Angelides commented: "You're a popular guy. I must have answered up for you twenty times."

"The stuff's been chasing me all over the Pacific, thanks for nabbing it," Ben rattled out his gratitude. As if fondling gifts he sorted the pieces of mail into piles. The long-awaited treasure, Cass's letters. Weeks' worth of *Gleaners*, his father's fillers at the bottom of columns peeking out: *The only hope a person can be sure of is his own hatful.* Envelopes with his mother's well-schooled penmanship. A couple of

blunt cheery notes from Jake Eisman done in pencil and beer. So many patches of his life, suddenly catching up with him. Almost reverently he slit open the letters from Cass and ~~speeded~~ sped through the first one and the last, saving the others to savor more leisurely.

Ben, love--

How does a person write to a writer? I feel like a backward kid with crayons. Maybe I can start with saying how much there is of you to miss. I can't turn around without remembering some crazy thing we did together. You've only been gone a week and I already have such a bad case, what is this going to be like from here on?...

...Nine weeks gone, letter no. 9 to you, and I at least know you're okay so far by reading you in the paper. You look good as ever in print, but no substitute for the warm body. Must sign off for now, we take off for Edmonton in an hour. I'll waggle my wings toward Hill 57 as we go.

Keep low out there, you with the typewriter.

Cass

Her P-39 met the first of the rough air at the Sweetgrass Hills that afternoon.

It was an ordinary Edmonton run, although Cass long since had absorbed the cockpit wisdom that flying through thin air is never exactly ordinary. On a summer day of this sort, however, from fifteen thousand feet above these borderland plains between Montana and Alberta, usually you could see around the world and back again. But right now in the telltale tremor of air above the humpbacked hills her eyes would not leave the sight of the weather making itself,

the letters over again, knowing all the while there was another recipient of her lines of love or whatever approximated it.

Life was a sum of unlikelihoods, but in his wildest imagining he could not have seen ahead to this, sharing professions of love ~~with~~ from another man's wife. Were those letters to a long-absent husband somewhere at mail call on a jungle island like these? They couldn't be, the soul issued assurance. Why wouldn't they be? said the demons of the heart.

Only belatedly did he become conscious of being observed in his troubled seance with the set of letters. He tried not to show the extent of his embarrassment, and missed by far.

Angelides gruffly offered up: "This appears serious."

"I have to hope she is," Ben trying a doomed grin along with it.

Angelides waited, attentive to more to come.

"I'm in a fix, Andy. She's married."

The sentences escaped from him before he knew it. He hadn't told Prokosch when he had the opening. Never would he have told Danzer. He had not even confided in Jake, repository of life's complications that he was. Angelides in alert stillness on the next bunk he would have trusted with his life, but the confession he had just made came under another category entirely. *I'm not equipped for this.* Ben creased the letters closed. "Keep it under your hat, okay? I can't take any pride in being a homewrecker. If that's what I turn out to be, even."

bad surprises sewn in; just ask the poor suckers stationed on Guam in ~~1942~~ 1941 when the Japanese imperial army showed up.

By now Ben's silence was saying much in itself. "You're sure," he tried with Angelides, "you just want grunt life to go on and on?"

The bared smile. "You can't tell by looking? It fits me like a cork in a virgin."

Word came that a piece of cargo with highest priority and his name all over it awaited at the airfield, and when Ben went to fetch the dreaded recording equipment, it was attended by the wearer of the most disheveled uniform on Eniwetok.

"Hi, lieutenant. Gosh, it's hot here."

"Jones!" Elated to see that familiar ugly puss under the crumpled fatigue cap, he fought back the impulse to ask a torrent of questions about East Base, especially the WASP side of things. "Old home week, right here in equatorial Eden. I can't believe Tepee Weepy took a fit of sanity and sent you along. I can use all the help there is." Saying so, Ben circled the recorder in its carrying case distrustfully. It basically resembled the bulkiest suitcase imaginable. He looked around the cargo shed for the technician whiz promised with it, then realized.

"Jones, I hate to take your name in vain, but please don't tell me you're the tech aide, too."

"That was the order that came down," this stanza of the enlisted men's repertoire practically sang from the bedraggled corporal. He puckered in

contemplation and came up with a morsel of solace for Ben: "They did give me the manual and I read it on the flight over."

Oh, great. He can pray over the machine when it goes flooey. "Let's get this thing to the ship," Ben said in resignation. "Posterity beckons."

The Marine assault force command plainly regarded the TPWP pair and their recording assignment as a nuisance, and just as plainly had been ordered in no uncertain terms to put up with them. Angelides was mostly amused. "Seems dumb-ass to me--who needs more proof people are shooting at us out here?"

The machine when Jones opened its case and started trying to figure out its workings was not the Pandora's box Ben had anticipated, it was worse. It ran on a battery as heavy as a concrete block. It had delicate reels and a delicate needle. It was corded to the hand microphone at not much longer than a dog leash. His brow creased, Jones at length looked up from the so-called portable recorder. "You know what, lieutenant? If we're going to pack this thing from here to shore, what we really need is--"

"--a jeep," Ben admitted like someone coming down with a headache. "Excuse me while I beg my way through the Marine chain of command."

Across the next couple of days, with Jones in earphones as he fiddled madly with the recorder's dials, Ben stood on the fantail of the troop ship and practiced until his vocal cords were tired. Speaking into the microphone required an entirely different mentality from what he was used to at the typewriter. How

did Edward R. Murrow do it? For that matter, how did that moron motormouth Loudon do it?

"Eniwetok's harbor is jammed with ships of the assault force," he stared around at the obvious and could only recite it in strained fashion. Wanting to say: *Cass, you should see this. You can't imagine the steel mills it took to do this, wall an entire island with ships.* "The Marines aboard this one say they are ready for the real thing after weeks of practice landings here." *They say it in the filthy language of war, naturally--pilots aren't the only ones with the vocabulary, Cass. Poor Jones goes around the ship looking like his ears hurt. Angelides these days has a mouth on him like a blowtorch. Invasion is a hellish thing to go through. Nobody is actually ever prepared to die, are they--it's not human nature, the imagination can't handle obliteration. And so the guys below decks talk tough, so the fear doesn't have a chance to speak up.* Again aloud: "Equipment of all sorts is in the cargo bays waiting to roll aboard the landing craft. Artillery, half-tracks, jeeps--"

"Sorry, start again," Jones muttered, repeatedly, from where he hovered over the temperamental recorder. *Oh God, Jones, so to speak. At Guam are we going to stick our necks out from here to Thomas Edison and only get a reel full of blank air out of it?*

When at last they got done with the rehearsal reel and played it back, Ben winced over his voice. He sounded dry and stiff as sticks rubbed together. As for the quality of what he was coming up with to say, if he had it on typing paper in

Ben wrestled the hefty equipment case out and into the back of the half-track and climbed in after it. The gunners there turned and met them with dubious looks. One cracked: "Hitchhikers, huh? That gorilla sergeant says we're gonna make history taking you along."

"That's the theory," Ben vouched. His voice sounded tight, and he rubbed his throat to try to relax it. Jones squirmed down beside the recording equipment, manipulating plugs and scanning dials as though they were compasses in a stormy sea.

The minutes of waiting before launch dragged by. The gunners slouched amid their stocks of ammunition and smoked, which maybe helped their nerves but not those of the pair at the recorder. At last the dispatching officer, lordly on the troop ship, gave the signal and their landing craft and the one with Angelides' group of Marines putt-putted away like ducks abreast.

The half-track a metal box within a larger floating metal box, Jones and Ben could not see out during the short yet endless voyage. Engine noise and wave slosh and ominous clatter from the gunners as they made ready seeped through the crashing intervals of the bombardment. As best as Ben could tell, the shelling so far was all one-way, the naval barrage suppressing whatever waited on shore. At least the landing craft was not being blasted out of the water. Yet. *Waipu was a breeze, we walked right in,* Angelides' recapitulations played unrelentingly within Ben, *Tarawa was total hell, they threw everything at us,* the one experience against the other. Either outcome, he had to somehow summon into the microphone in his hand. Jones had traded his helmet for earphones--Ben

peace is not how any man hopes to come out of this day." Tallying such details in words as exact as he could make them was crazily vital to him right then, something other than fear for the mind to try to hold onto in the midst of battle. Jones' suggestion of a script turned out to already exist in him, accumulated from as many combat zones as the correspondent patch on his arm had taken him to. The lore of war. An unsought education. Spectator to himself in this, he talked on into a seeming abyss of time, the assault occurring in unreal slow-motion, infantrymen moving at a heavy-legged slog against the water and the coarse shelf of reef. He clung to the tailgate with one hand to help his own footing, the half-track creeping over the rough coral at the same methodical pace as the wading Marines on both sides of him.

"Off to my left the rank being led in by Sergeant Andros Angelides is strung out wide. Bullets are hitting the water around them." So far, though, the rubber raft rode high and empty near the medical corpsmen as it was towed. Ben described that, the infantry lifeboat voyaging into the sea of hostilities. Leading the wave of men ahead, Angelides surged steadily along, turning sideways occasionally to present less of a target as he looked things over and bawled an order. Keeping up the running commentary with whatever arrived to him--the distinctive whumping sound of a Japanese mortar round; the carcasses of landing craft burning on the reef in back of the men in the water; the confused mix of smells, fine fresh salt air, stinking exhaust fumes, gunpowder odor from the half-track's cannon firing furiously--Ben consistently tried to estimate how far the first of the Marines were from the beachhead. By any measure it was too long a way

"Not now. Wings on my brisket, bars on my collar, I'm a pretty good imitation of a fighter plane jockey on these ferrying runs, you bet I am. But what happens the minute the boys come marching home? Is the good old Army Air Corps going to treat WASPS like guys? No sign of it so far." Cass jerked her glass up to her lips, found it empty, and set it down disconsolately. "I want the war over as much as anybody, but the war is what keeps me in that cockpit. There's a pisser, isn't it? And Ben?--us, chronic us? How do I know I could keep up with you after the war? If we did stay together? You're probably going to be famous--what am I saying, you're famous or next thing to it already--"

"Only as long as bullets are flying."

"--and all in the damn world I'm good for is handling one half-assed kind of fighter plane."

He lurched his chair forward. "Cass, we can't put together life after the war until the sonofabitching thing shows us it's going to be over, but we can stick together until we can figure out--" breaking off, he peered across at her and demanded, "Are you bawling? Because if you are, I'm afraid then I'll have to."

"Damn you, Ben Reinking," she said, fierce but snuffling. "I haven't had a crying jag since I was eleven years old." She wiped her eyes, then her nose. "Until you."

For some moments he gulped back moist emotions of his own. Why of all the people in this war did the two of them have to be on the receiving end of something like this? What was wrong with backing away from this and snapping up an Adrianna instead, sweetly available and nowhere near as troublous? What

was wrong with him? "This is just crazy hopeless," he said at last, his expression pretty much fitting that description itself. "I'm stuck on you even when we're doing our double damnedest to have a fight."

"Swell," Cass sniffled, "that's me, too." She straightened herself up so sharply it jarred the table. "There's another kink to this, you know," she went on, wiping the tears away with determination now. "Dan's not the only one they keep throwing out there to get shot at, is he. I don't pretend to know squat about what the types in Washington have you doing. I just herd airplanes. The wear is starting to show through on ~~that "supreme team" set of~~ those stories about the team, though, isn't it? I don't need to tell you that's getting to be an awful lot of dead heroes. Your guys are catching hell. And you're always going to be plunked right out there with them, Ben, you and just a pencil and paper, brave as anything--"

"I don't feel brave. I'm just doing it."

"--while every fool on the other side tries to draw a bead on you. Look what just happened to your pal the Marine. It could have been you. I am never going to be in favor of that part of your Tepee Weepy doings, you'd better know."

"Listen, they've got me under orders the same way you are, and I--"

"It isn't quite the same." She slapped the table for emphasis. "You've got some clout, you've got the name you've made for yourself."

"That works once in a while. And generally doesn't. I was about to say, if I ever get the chance to drop the "supreme team" stuff, I'll do it in the next breath. For right now, the worst thing I've got to do is cover Angelides' funeral." He tried to move along to a better face on things and did not quite get there. "Maybe

"Hah. It's back to chauffeuring bombers to the Russkies again tomorrow," came the glum reply. "I have to make up for all this inspiring funeral duty, don't I. Aw, shit, what am I saying? Sig and Animal would've done it for me." Jake's gaze went distant, then came back. "Anyway, Benjamin, it was good to see your folks there this morning, huh? Your mother is a real pussycat."

Ben looked across. Jake did not appear to be kidding.

"Your dad didn't miss a lick of what was going on," the one-sided conversation from the passenger side of things persisted. "Figure he'll be writing about the funeral?"

"I'd bet my bottom dollar on it."

The Packard crested the long pull up from the Two Medicine River and slowed as if made shy by the sudden cliff-faced mountains--Jericho Reef, Phantom Woman Peak, Roman Reef--that stood up into view in the direction of Gros Ventre. It was considerably more car than Bill Reinking was accustomed to, and he drove in a skittish way that had Cloyce itching to take over. Montana men did not believe that a woman's grasp in life included the steering wheel. It mattered not that she'd had use of the family roadster whenever she wanted, at the country place among the orange groves, when she was sixteen. As her husband nursed the high-powered automobile around another curve, she told herself yet again this was only to be expected; a shopworn luxury car running on black-market gasoline, both provided by a saloonkeeper (and presumably worse), was

just the sort of thing that came with Gros Ventre, with marrying the complete town when you wed its newspaperman.

They had not said much on this trip back from the packed foursquare church across the tracks from the Devon depot out east of Shelby, Bill busy in his head, Cloyce in extensive thoughts of her own. Try as she would, she could not get over the Prokosch boy's watery-eyed mother and father, in sagging funeral clothes that they looked like they'd been sacked into. There but for the grace of something or other--despite what the preacher said in the funeral service, she could not credit an all-wise divinity in charge of every life and death in this immense war--wept Bill and herself, if Ben had not survived Guam and those other places. Even yet she could feel fate narrowly brushing past, back at the start of this unnatural week. She had been out in the back yard coddling her roses with root food, the shade of the cottonwood trees pleasant in the already warm summer morning. Around the corner of the house came Bill, a telegram in his hand. If she had not already been kneeling, she would have been thrust to her knees by the sight of the yellow message form known for carrying the savage words: WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON--

With his head dipped to make out the dappled yard through his bifocals, Bill did not spot her soon enough, then froze at the look on her face. He fumbled out the sentences in contrite haste:

"Ben is back from the Pacific, he's all right. He has funeral duty. Twice."

"Is he coming home"--it caught in her throat to say it--"as usual?"

any goddamn thing. The hearing may take a while before they're whimpered out. Don't look for me home till supper, my love."

As if reminded of the unremitting passage of time, he yanked out the dollar watch that had regulated his day through four terms of political infighting at the highest levels. There never were enough hours in the day, especially in wartime. Even so, he stayed sitting a little longer to dab more verbal ammunition into the cowhide notebook, his wife covertly watching. He still was ~~steamed~~ riled up from Sunday when Adrianna was home on overnight pass and they had listened to *Meet the Forces,* the special broadcast of the recording of the Guam landing by Bill Reinking's son. That young man was quite something. He did the job there in the hellish water in fine style. It about took your heart out, particularly what happened to that Marine sergeant, but the Senator had also heard something gutwrenching before that in the description of the quarter-of-a-mile wade from the so-called landing craft to the beach. He'd had his staff check, and that was as close in as those craft could maneuver against the reef. Accordingly he would peel the hide off the Navy at this afternoon's hearing--the gold-braid ninnies had taken half a dozen tries and most of the war so far trying to develop landing craft that could actually put men and trucks and tanks onto a beach instead of depositing them into the surf, and look at the Guam result: dead Marines thick in the water.

He clapped the notebook shut, ready for political battle even though it seemed unending. Targets in the military popped up almost faster than he could keep up with. He still steamed over those Air Transport Command nitwits who

"Morning, Captain."

Yawning his way into the office, Ben met those words and looked back down the corridor apprehensively. No such intruding rank in sight. "You're getting absent-minded, Jones," he chided as he came on in and situated into his desk chair for another day on the calendar of limbo. "The captain's the guy around the corner, runs the mess hall, remember?"

The next surprise of the morning was the corporal's Wanted-poster face breaking into a grin that went halfway around his head. "*The worthy shall be risen,*" he quoted as if he had been waiting for the chance and passed across a ditto set of papers. "Your promotion orders came in today's packet. Congratulations, Captain Reinking," he delivered with nice emphasis. Leaning closer, Jones squinted around as if to make sure they were alone in the dinky office. "The personnel clerk let me in on something. General Grady is going to pin the new bars on you himself at next commander's call."

"Jesus ten-fingered Christ! What's he want to do that for?"

The expostulation turned Jones prim and enlisted. "No one shared the General's thinking with me."

"Any other surprises from our lords and masters?" Ben immediately went to, trying to sort by eye the thin contents of the daily TPWP packet spread in front of Jones. "Like maybe the Prokosch piece miraculously set in type?"

unlooked-for promotion (major, lieutenant colonel: he gulped at the thought that there were only two more ranks between him and the ghostly brass who operated TPWP) and Ben could not tell whether it was the altitude or the servitude that was getting to him.

"All right, corporal," he braced up with a deep breath, "what journalistic exploit do we face today?"

"A twelve-year-old kid here in town invented a military vocabulary crossword puzzle," Jones recited. "Tepee Weepy wants a picture and a thousand words."

"One across, an unexploded shell, three letters," Ben said tiredly. "Dud."

Hill 57 had its hackles up, bunchgrass stiffly trying to resist the wind, as Ben started down the rutted path at the end of that afternoon. In off-duty civvies, he had on the canvasback coat he had worn that time here with Cass but was wishing for the flight jacket, at the rate the wind was breathing down his neck. As ever he had to be mindful of what the gusts might bring; Great Falls collected weather from all around. Over toward the Rockies, the waiting clouds were thickly gray and flat-bottomed as if ready to be sponged against the earth. The benchlands surrounding the leafy city were another picture entirely, with half a dozen squalls around the horizon, isolated showers that almost stopped at fencelines. By his estimate, the cylinder of none-too-warm autumn sunshine here between the storm systems just might last long enough for what he needed to do. *It better. Could be the last chance at this.* How many times now had he watched

"Tell me if this is too crazy, Ice. But out there on the tin can with Danzer, I got to wondering why he was so rattled when I brought up Purcell's name. Remember that last practice, when our mad genius of a coach for some reason yanked him and stuck Purcell in? What if that wasn't just some lame-brain substitution, what if Purcell was being seriously promoted to the starting team?"

"You figure Bruno was as tired of the Slick Nick act as the rest of us were?" Jake's jackrabbit mind took a moment to go back and forth over that. "Possible, I suppose. The Dancer could catch the ball and keep it, both, though."

"But Purcell could run circles around him, and if Bruno could knock the dropping habit out of Purcell he had something better."

"Yeah," Jake agreed without quibble. "The kid was a ring-tailed wonder except for that one thing."

"Then all that sonofabitch Bruno had to do," Ben savagely rewrote that central page of the past, "was not be so hepped up about his damnable Golden Rule and simply play it straight with Purcell: 'Hang on to the ball, Merle boy, and you're the varsity end for the season. You'd like to be our eleventh man, wouldn't you, kid? It's yours for the taking.' It shifts the whole thing, Ice. No twelfth man. No supreme team crap, then or now."

"Possible," Jake had allowed again. "I can't see Danzer running his heart out on that hill."

That hill offered no more answer today than ever as Ben drew his eyes over it. So be it, one more time. He stood up, the wind keenly waiting for him, and started down to the shoulder of the coulee between that mute slope and Hill 57's tarpaper collection of shacks.

Picking his way through the bunchgrass and prickly pear cactus, he approached the solitary shanty at the coulee edge with no real hope. Other than its usual jittery honor guard of gophers, half a dozen at a time constantly popping from their holes and then receding as he neared, the ramshackle place appeared as short on hospitality as it was on all else; dilapidation never welcomes company. No smoke from the chimney again, although a fresh cord of charity wood was stacked against the tarpaper siding. Every Hill 57 shack he could see had one, the firewood considerately chopped into sticks not much bigger than kindling so heat could be eked out of rusty stoves as long as possible. Even so the woodpiles would not last through the winter and the Indian families would have to scrounge or freeze. He marveled again at the pride of Vic Rennie, trudging down cold to the bone from this prairie sidehill slum for four years, never asking anything from the sumptuous university when there were any number of Treasure State football boosters who would have given him a warm place and other favors on the sly.

Ben walked up to the weatherbeaten door and knocked strongly, the sharp sound like a punctuation of echo from another time and place.

"Catch her sober, after she gets over the shakes. That's the trick with a wino. Wait until allotment money's gone."

"End of the month, you mean?"

"Middle. She's a thirsty one."

Three months in a row he had made the try, and Toussaint's formulation notwithstanding, not even come close to catching the aunt whom Vic had lived with here. Rapping on the door was bringing no result this time either.

Well, hell, does she live here at all or doesn't she? He tromped around the corner of the house to see whether any firewood had been used from the stacked cord.

And practically sailed face-first into the mad-haired figure moseying from the other direction.

They each rared back and stared.

The woman looked supremely surprised, but then, so did he. Scrawny and askew, she swayed there all but lost in a purple sweater barely held together by its fatigued knitting and a dress that hung to her shoetops. The mop of steel-gray hair looked no less of a mess on second inspection. Fragile as she appeared to be, Ben felt wild relief he hadn't collided with her; in the raveled sweater her arms seemed no larger around than the thin-split sticks in the woodpile. The scrutiny she was giving him during this was more than substantial, however. She had eyes black as the hardest coal; bituminous is known to burn on and on, those eyes stated.

"Spooked me," she recovered a voice first. "Been visiting Mother Jones." She jerked an elbow to indicate the outhouse behind her. The coaly stare stayed right on him. "You aren't from here."

"No. From the base."

"Greetings, captain." A touch of gray had come to the Gable mustache, and the crinkles at the corners of the commanding eyes appeared substantially deeper. Otherwise, the colonel from Tepee Weepy perching there on the desk edge, as tailored as a rajah abroad, appeared to be taking up in mid-session from two years earlier.

"Jones"--Ben held out a hand in that direction-- "may I see this week's manifest of VIP arrivals again?" The corporal plucked up the list and passed it to him as if it was about to blow up.

"Spare your eyes," the colonel advised. "Officially I'm not here."

"Here or not, sir," Ben struggled with everything wanting to uncoil within him, "you're mightily in our thoughts."

"I believe I detect a tone of concern over your recent assignments in that," the colonel responded casually. In that same tone of voice: "Take a break, corporal. Make it a nice long one."

Jones got out of there fast.

A puckish gaze from the visitor followed him. "Your clerk looks as if he stepped straight out of the homicide lineup, have you noticed?"

"Jones is washed in the blood of the lamb, sir."

"Admirable, I'm sure." The colonel went right to business. "One of your supreme team articles--very nicely done, let me say--has been conspicuous by its absence in the newsprint of the land, hasn't it, captain. Your piece about Seaman Prokosch. We had to spike that piece, and I must tell you it will remain spiked."

"I didn't figure you were saving it for the gold-leaf edition."

"You have every right to be testy about it," the colonel granted. *Testy, my left nut. How about mad as hell? How about terminally pissed off, Mustache Pete?* "However," the practiced voice from Tepee Weepy rippled on, "the balloon bombs are a classified secret and no mention can be--"

"Colonel?" If there was such a thing as whiplash inside the head, Ben suffered it now going from rancor to disbelief. "What's 'secret,'" he blurted, "about those? The Forest Service has people in lookout towers all over the mountains watching for the damn things, the airbases out on the Coast are trying to shoot them down, anyone out here with ears on his head has heard about Jap balloons. We aren't giving away a thing that a dozen states don't already know, by saying a guy of ours met up with one."

"This was not a TPWP decision," the colonel's voice rose a notch for the first time. "It comes from highest levels--there is a complete news blackout, in all American newspapers and radio broadcasts, about the balloons. Censorship has been applied for two reasons, we were told in no uncertain terms--to prevent panic by the public and to keep Japan in the dark about the balloons' effects." He favored Ben with an informative glance. "For what it's worth, captain, the Japs' 'secret' weapon is not starting forest fires anything like intended--the incendiary devices appear to be faulty somehow."

"But not the explosive part," Ben cited darkly. "It worked just fine in blowing Sig Prokosch to bits. And why won't it do it every time some poor fool

who doesn't know any better comes across a strange gadget on the beach or out in the woods? Somebody who hasn't read about it because we kept it from them?"

"That calculation, as I said, is not ours to make," the colonel uttered with the patience of bureaucratic practice. "Your understandably heartfelt article on Seaman Prokosch needs a bit of fixing, is all. Simply approach it from the angle that he was killed in a munitions mishap, let it go at that, and then--"

Ben broke in:

"Like the old newspaper joke of describing a hanged man as having been found dead under a tree, do you mean, sir?"

It drew him a look of mixed regard and reassessment. One more time, the colonel cautioned himself that these westerners were prickly.

The congressional hearing a few days before had been sailing along smoothly, the colonel concealed in plain sight amid the row of brass and braid and blue serge in back of the director of the Office of War Information as he testified, when a voice twanged out from down the line of senators.

"Mister Chairman, might I put in about two bits' worth of questions, just to earn my keep?"

"I yield to my friend, the gentleman from Montana."

"Thank you kindly." The Senator pulled at his weathered beak of a nose for a long moment as if tugging loose whatever was stored in his head, then addressed the OWI chief. "There's one setup here in the scheme of things

Well, here it is, and with something strangely like the spin of a compass in himself Ben began trying to set his mind to it, *that ticket to Somewhere in Europe. Moxie, you win the sterling pencil pusher for a change.*

"--you'll need to tidy up with your clerk, finish up any pieces you're working on, you may be gone a good while--"

Or a bad one, colonel, given the history of this.

"--and when the time is nearer, we'll let you know your departure date--"

Oh, swell, let's add waiting to the game.

"--for your old stomping grounds, the Pacific."

Ben was floored. *What, again? Capital Y why?* Danzer had been written about not all that long ago, there was nothing sane to be further said about his cushy boat ride through the war. It just did not make a lick of journalistic sense that he could see, returning to-- Wait a minute: return. *Oh goddamn, no.*

"Sir, begging your pardon, I don't want to seem out of line or anything, but damn it," everything in him blew, "are you sending me out there again just so Tepee Weepy will have an eyewitness when MacArthur wades ashore at Manila or Zamboanga or Leyte or wherever the hell he's going to do it? When that happens there'll be correspondents and photographers up the gigi, the general will have to wade through the cameras and reporters as much as the surf, and I don't see why I--"

"Calm down, captain. Watching Douglas MacArthur walk on water is not going to be your primary mission."

"Then what is?" he asked dubiously, still suspicious that somewhere in MacArthur's entourage as the great man returned to the Philippines would be Danzer flourishing a white tablecloth and a feast of pork.

"The story is still developing, I'm not at liberty to tell you." Reaching into the attache case at his side, the colonel extracted a file of clippings and dropped it dead-center on Ben's work place at the desk. He smiled just enough. "It might not hurt, though, if you were to do some bedtime reading about the Montaneers."

Beyond floored, this time Ben stared at the colonel in shock. The man might as well have said to him, *"Learn the rules of dueling, you're going to Dan Standish's outfit."* All else being equal, he could have understood that the regiment that had been unendingly fighting up and down the jungle hellholes of the Pacific and now doubtless was destined for the invasion of the Philippines constituted a legitimate story to be written. All else was not equal, not even close, bedtime reading had already happened any number of times and it was indubitably the Braille of unclad lover to unclad lover while a Montaneer was out there in the jungle stuck with a matching wedding band. Still stunned, Ben grappled with two instant convictions, that coming face to face with Cass's husband in the Montaneers' next island assault was by all odds a long shot, and that in the perversity of this war it absolutely would happen.

He stood there stone-still, watched expectantly by the colonel, haunted in every direction he could look. The quantities of death he had seen in the world of war. All the times of sitting to the typewriter to turn teammates' foreshortened lives into handfuls of words. Bruno's eleven, fingered by fate when the coach's

"Busy hands keep a guy out of trouble," Jake proclaimed piously. "Sometimes." They clinked bottles. "That's one more reason you've got to keep yourself in one piece, you know--I've got a date with that movie of yours." The big man grinned crookedly. "I want to see you fry Bruno's nuts for him."

The autumn that everyone at East Base hoped would be the last one of the war kept confusing itself with winter--a snow squall for the first day of fall, then clouds that looked like they were lined with lead chronically hanging low over October's advance across the calendar. He was late arriving to the roadhouse, due mainly to weather delays of incoming flights with Very Important Persons aboard, Jones and his camera having needed a final tutorial in brazening it out when generals and admirals scowled at the presence of the lens.

It's all yours now, corporal old kid, Tepee Weepy be thy guardian angel. As for himself, he kept trying to think only of these last hours with Cass before he climbed on the plane in the morning. Kept trying and failing. These few weeks since she came back from training her squadron to the new fighter planes had been time after time of glimpsed and gone, the P-63s flying north with the red star on their sides whenever he looked up, the stolen bits of love-making with her here at the eternal roadhouse or in his dumpy hotel bed too desperate and brief. All he had told her, all he could stand to tell her, was that he was being shipped out to the Pacific on assignments he would be filled in on when he got there. He meant it as a mercy, in not saying anything about being tossed in with the Montaneers in whatever bloody pocket of the ~~Leyte~~ Philippines invasion ~~held them~~. Whether or not it was

A jeep was coming toward him at more speed than it should have been on the wet runway, its wipers sloshing madly. Between swipes when it pulled up, he could make out the stumpy figure of Jones at the wheel. An isinglass window flapped open and the corporal delivered the non-news:

"They scrapped your trip, captain. Better climb in."

So soaked he did not really want the company of his own clothes and skin, Ben squished into the passenger seat. "Tepee Weepy's orders--they sent the message in the clear, just put it on the wire," Jones was saying as if having been present at a miracle. "Boy oh boy, captain, it's hard to figure these things out, isn't it?" He squinted back and forth from the windshield to Ben. "I went around to the clerk in the situation room and bugged him until he'd tell me what was up. You'd think we'd have heard about something like this, but Washington wanted the lid kept on the news, and so I guess we couldn't have had any idea of--"

"Jones, cool down and don't skid this thing into a parked plane. Now, in English if you can, what *is* up?"

"The Philippines. All heck is breaking loose out there."

endless days and nights, the man on watch believed he had done nobly--not heroically; that was a dimension he did not care to approach--at his post inside at the battle status board, keeping straight the tremendous number of ship names and their whereabouts during the constantly changing struggle. Now, sweaty and fatigued as he was, he felt entitled to a markedly more triumphant watch than this was turning out to be. By now Leyte Gulf was signed, sealed, and delivered for the American side, as would be the campaign ribbons and the commendations to go on one's service record. Yet there was the *St. Lo*, not that far off, still exploding like a gunpowder factory every few minutes.

Then he glimpsed the plane, in the low-hanging murk of smoke from the burning carrier. The half-hidden aircraft was skimming almost down onto the water, one of the carrier's own trying to ditch, he thought at first. But no, as it emerged incredibly low and fast out of the pall of smoke its wing markings flashed into view, the red ball of the Rising Sun bringing flame to the bridge of the *McCorkle* , the last thing Nick Danzer would ever see.

YOUR CHUM KIA CONFIRMED. SORRY. STORY NEEDED SOONEST.

What was there to say? His first thought when the bells began going off on the TPWP teletype had been that surely it must be a case of mistaken identity. How was it conceivable that Danzer, of them all, would not maneuver through the war without so much as getting a toenail broken, until he came home a medal-polished version of the Dancer? But that notion or any other could not withstand a suicide plane.

Helplessly clutching the teletype message as if it had attached itself to him, it took him a little time to stop trying to outstare the blind numbers it brought with it. The Pacific war, its odds askew, now had chosen both Animal and Danzer for death out of what should have been statistical security. One wearing a uniform for what he could put into it, and the other for what he could get out of it, and it made no difference to the creeping wall of oblivion. *"We've had the casualty figures from other wars run....Many more soldiers survive than people think, and our figures merely back that up..." Sure, colonel, tell that to Bruno's eleven, marked down to four all of a sudden. When the hell is it ever going to let up?*

The job brought Ben out of that, the newspaperman's allegiance to the story. Faced with writing a farewell to Danzer fit for the world to read, he felt like a mechanic without tools. The task was there to be done, but how? The report of the kamikaze attack was coldly without details. There was not even a service record to cadge from, the grim file with the red tag on the upper corner; the war's initials for combat death simply were banged onto teletype paper along with reams of other military lingo quantifying the Leyte Gulf carnage. It was times like this when the making of words turned into frantic manufacture, and Ben started out of the wire room sickly dreading what it would take to bring an obituary version of Slick Nick out of his fingertips across the next some hours.

Behind him, the TPWP teletype bell rang five times again.

As Pacific amphibious landings went, Leyte was not as murderous as Tarawa and Peleliu and Guam had been, nor Iwo Jima and Okinawa yet to come.

But murderous enough, predictably, where the hard-luck Montaneers were involved.

On Leyte the bloodiest combat moved inland a lot sooner than in most other island assaults, with the Japanese line of defense swiftly pulling back from the usual hellish beach to higher, even more horrendous jungle terrain. The day the sailors' long-range battle out in the gulf drew to an end, the Montaneers after most of a week of costly attacks managed to secure a strategic but otherwise worthless ridge called Dry Gulch Hill. Probably there was a Dry Gulch Hill on every island where the Montaneer regiment had seen action ~~New Guinea, Hollandia, Biak~~ but none had been more treacherous than this. This one was about as high as a football field is long, a desolate muddy hump that had been given an artillery haircut, leaving only palm snags and a general air of determined destruction. With a completeness like that of fog, the stench of corpses of Japanese soldiers rotting in the sun hung over the trails up the hill. The fighting had moved on, and high on the most recently battered section of slope the first two stretcher bearers to arrive were at work amid the wounded and worse than wounded under an embankment that had become an aid station. The one in charge glanced around as a second pair of bearers came slipping and sliding up the trail, cursing the red mud. "Where you been, sightseeing?"

"Stopped for cigars and caviar, what the hell do you think?" the lead man snapped back. "Murray's carry strap gave out and we had to pull up to tie the sonofabitch together. What's the picture here?"

"I'm doing what I can to keep blood in people," back there amid the warless parachutes of the smoke jumper camp, *"instead of letting it out of them."*

Fine, well and good, Dex, that was your decision, as large as life itself. But then? What got to you? The hundredth time some yokel along the Seeley Lake road shouted "yellow belly" at you? The feeling of odd man out, nagging at you in those nights you struggled to sleep? You were made of stronger stuff than that, though, you could shrug those off even if they did get under your skin. No, it took something that hurt you down to the bone, and I was a witness to it coming. You died of gossip. Mere goddamn gossip.

Slumped against the wire room wall, the two messages crumpled and then uncrumpled in his helpless hands, Ben numbly added and subtracted elements in the weighing of both lives. Gossip was never mere if you were a mercantile prince, an heir with rivals to the prideful fortunes of the Cariston name, was it. And if you sliced conscience with a blade of disdain like Danzer's, there was nothing unnatural about skewering a rival not even going through the motions of serving in uniform, right, Slick Nick? *Talk about enemy action. The war didn't invent that particular one. Goddamn Danzer, I did what I could to head him off while I was on the ship. But all he had to do was wait until people forgot that shark piece a little bit and then have his wolfpack of haberdashers start the gossip about Dex, the conchie who would not serve his country in uniform.*

And Tepee Weepy fit into this--where? TPWP and the colonel, simply lost in the forest of good intentions? He felt entitled to doubt that. Yet as furiously as Ben searched for its red hand in it all, he could tell that Tepee Weepy's influence

was not necessarily there this time. To his certain knowledge, it had kept hands off Dex all the while he was at the conscientious objector camp; if it had ever tried to push him into military service, the politically connected Cariston dynasty would have shown the Threshhold Press War Project what real pull was. No, go over it every way he could find, it kept coming out the same: Dex surely must have enlisted on his own, and matters took their own course from there. A medic for the smoke jumpers, he offered himself as one for the infantry. Another Montanan built rugged enough to tackle jungle life, off he went to the next jungle awaiting invasion. All Tepee Weepy had to do was sit back and keep track, these past several months, and at the right time send Ben out to the Montaneers and there was the story, Dexter Cariston in change of uniform and conscience. It was heartless, but only heartlessly professional.

Feeling like he was in a vise the size of the TPWP teletype, Ben headed for the nearest wire room clerk. He grabbed up the paper pad, made two quick jabs with a pencil, and handed it over. The teletype operator blinked at it. "I can't just send a punctuation mark."

"You goddamn well will or you'll be peeling spuds until your thumbs fall off."

Sourly the ~~telex~~ operator hit the single key.

"?"

The reply came in a matter of minutes.

GOOD QUESTION, YOUR ANXIETY ABOUT PRIORITY UNDERSTOOD. FILE KAMIKAZE PIECE FIRST. CARISTON TO HAVE FUNERAL. NO REMAINS OF DANZER; YOUR STORY THE LAST WORD. SEND SOONEST.

He had to give it a number of tries, but by late that night he had a thousand words that managed to say between the lines that it had taken the largest naval battle in history to corner the Dancer.

The eleventh day of the eleventh month came white and gray in Helena, sticky snow in the early morning hours and sullen overcast for the afternoon. At the cemetery, Ben and Jake were encased in the coarse military overcoats besides their dress uniforms, but it was cold on the feet. They picked their way through the slushy snow toward the graveside where the Cariston clan and what looked like half of Helena were assembling, Jake grousing at the weather and the war and funerals and the Alaska duty he still was stuck with. "Nome sweet Nome, they ought to give the place back to the Eskimoes," he was ending up with. "Thanks for getting me out of that frozen dump for a couple of days for this, I guess."

"Habit by now." The words came from Ben as chilly as the fog of breath around them, and Jake looked at him with concern. He didn't notice. He could feel everything about this day crushing in on him, this icy conclusion of Dex's life to be written, and what waited later. Armistice Day with the world caught up in an even worse war was in itself not anything to help a mood. Fingers stiff and

in 1918? The numerous Caristons with their set Scotch faces were not a family one could see into.

When the burial was done, they shook hands with the family and said their condolences. Jake showed surprise when Ben begged off the gathering at the Montana Club afterward, saying the two of them had something else they had to tend to in town before heading back to East Base.

"Something better than good whiskey at the fanciest place in Helena?" Jake asked righteously as they left the cemetery.

"You'll see," Ben said.

He took him along to meet Cass.

They met out at the edge of town in the Broadwater Hotel, which was not far from the Fort Harrison military hospital. Its landmark turrets and spreadeagle porches caked with snow, the elderly hotel looked under the weather in more ways than one, having seen better days and ritzier assignations. Cass, in uniform, was waiting in a faintly Victorian parlor off the lobby.

Standing to greet the pair of them, she led off with a pinpoint smile to Ben. "I see you brought some reinforcement along, good." She and Jake knew each other by sight from East Base life, but shook hands pilot to pilot for the first time. "Ben was just telling me about you," he said with ponderous neutrality.

Cass looked more worn out than Ben had ever seen her. "I don't have as much time as I'd like"--she gazed at him and then included Jake--"I had the nurse

tell Dan I was going to the drugstore. He's most likely asleep. He sleeps huge amounts since he was brought back."

They sank into the nearest plush triangle of chairs. In the awkward settling in, Ben went first: "What are they telling you at the hospital?"

Cass steeled herself and began. "Dan got shot through the shoe top. Doesn't sound like much, does it?" She looked at the two men who were sound of limb as if reluctantly translating this for them. "Wouldn't you know, though, the bullet caught the leg dead center. There'll need to be a bone operation and a skin graft and--we don't know what all yet." She shuddered a little, not just for effect. "No wonder they call the place Fort Hairy." Rushing now to get this part over with, she listed off: "As soon as he has enough life back in that leg, they're sending him to California. There's some specialist there--he takes a tendon from somewhere else and patches it into the leg. Dan will have to learn to walk."

The thought sat there, until it was Jake who rumbled, "That's a rough go, for both of you."

Cass tried to grin gamely. "I'll have time. They're kicking me out of the service around Christmas." Seeing Ben's expression become even more tortured, she quickly went on: "All the women pilots, not just me. They're inactivating the WASPs." She toughed it out for a few sentences more. "The boys are coming home. Nobody needs the female of the species in the cockpit from here on."

Was there anything the war could not warp? After all of Ben's times of wanting Cass out of fighter planes with half a ton of engine riding at the back of her neck, now he sorrowed for her over this, too.

treatment. Then we got to talking, just stuff. Next thing we knew"--by now his voice was down to where pain comes in, and it hurt to listen--"we couldn't live without each other. It gets into your blood before you can turn around, Ice."

Jake seemed to gathering his thoughts around that before finally saying: "Even porkies find a way to make love."

"I'll have to think about that."

"It takes two, Ben."

With Jake's words lodged in him he sat there lost in himself, seeing her in every phase of their time together--Cass over him, under him, clothes on, clothes off, making a face over coma cola, the long talks, the quick jokes, the wedding ring that only came off in the cockpit pocket of a P-39. "Her husband's outfit regularly got the raw end in the Pacific," he heard himself saying as if under ether, "there wasn't a whole lot of chance he would make it through the war. But I never damn once hoped for that. Not once. You can't and stand yourself." He halted. "There was no lifetime guarantee on me, either. The eleven of us haven't been any insurance agent's dream, have we. Why shouldn't she hang on to her marriage when every time she turned around I was being sent someplace where people were getting knocked off? I can't blame Cass."

The car moved on in the silence of the canyon, the cuts of the road hemmed to the river now with seams of snow. This was territory for black ice and Jake tapped the brakes a few times to gauge the road surface. Between, he asked:

"So I was the chaperone, back there at the hotel?"

"You guessed it."

END SUPREME TEAM SERIES NOW? GETTING LONELY, JUST WE THREE.

The final line was trickiest of all to come up with, possibly because it was hard to write with fingers crossed.

WHAT IF TOKYO ROSE AND LORD HAW HAW KNOW HOW TO COUNT.

"Don't you want me to put a question mark on this, sir?"

"It's not a question, soldier, it's a supposition. Just send it."

Nothing came back that day, no matter how much Ben hung around the wire room and mooched coffee and sprang alert every time a teletype bell went off. *Come on, you TPWP SOBs. Answer. Call off the damned series. Or are you going to tell me and the couple of thousand newspaper editors watching for this byline you set me up with that eight dead heroes aren't enough?*

The days after that, he sent Jones to check for a reply so many times that at last the corporal just gave him a funny look and started off before he could get the words out. Finally, at week's end, a wire room clerk stuck his face in the doorway and said there was a five-bell message waiting.

TPWP MINDFUL OF HAW-HAW AND TOKYO ROSE. FULLY INTEND ENEMY PROPAGANDA WILL NOT SCORE BIG ON SUPREME TEAM. SERIES WILL BE MODIFIED. DETAILS FOLLOW SOON.

Ben read and re-read the sheet of wire copy for what it said and did not say. That damned "modify" again. The Tepee Weepy meaning of SOON was also clear as mud. He plainly enough had their attention, though, with that dig about what the master propagandists in Berlin and Tokyo could do with the obliteration of any more of the team. *So, okay, that does spook them and it's up to me to keep*

Get it, colonel and your partners in manufacturing the news? I damn sure am sick of guys from the team turning into dead men whenever the sonofabitching war feels like it, whatever the odds are supposed to be. If you can't pull strings to save Jake's skin and Moxie's and for that matter mine, then kick me out with a dishonorable piece of paper for refusing orders, see if I goddamn care. I may be blackballed for life, but at least I'll be in one piece. He sent this message knowing he really was playing a thin hand now, but gambling that Tepee Weepy had its own stake in keeping him in the game.

ILLNESS UNDERSTOOD, the answer clattered back within minutes. PLAN IS TO HONOR STAMPER, EISMAN, YOU, AS SURVIVORS OF SUPREME TEAM SAGA. FEELING BETTER?

Hovering at the clerk's shoulder, he sent right back:

SOME. WAITING TO SEE WHAT MEDICINE IS INVOLVED.

The wait this time stretched his nerves to the sagging point. It was growing dark enough outside for the five bells of the TPWP wire machine to constitute a vesper serenade before the return message began coming in.

MANDATORY BURN THIS AFTER YOU READ.

I guess I have their attention. "Loan me your lighter and nab a clean butt can for a bonfire." The clerk sighed and complied.

The whacking teletype keys seemed to spell out the message with particular emphasis now.

STAMPER IS FINAL STORY, BLAZE OF GLORY, ALL THAT.

"Quick, shoot this off to them." Ben was grabbing for the notepad.

whitened town. Flakes were coming down featherlike, yet every so often the wind dislodged a branchload from the cottonwood trees, producing a commotion like white dust rising back up, more clods falling within it. The all but silent crash of snow lent an otherworldly quality to this night, the first of many such the two of them were going to have to get used to.

"Where do you think he is by now?" Cloyce asked in a hushed voice.

Bill cleared his throat. "The Long Island field, maybe." All during the day he had studied Ben's route on the wall map of the *Gleaner* office every time he glanced up. New York. Newfoundland. Greenland. Iceland. England. Europe and whatever that portended.

"At least we did get to see him," she mused, as if still trying out for her role as mother. "Even if it was slim pickings as holidays go."

It was not a Spam Thanksgiving as she had warned Ben in his last-minute phone call that it might need to be, but it was venison pot roast, dry and gamy, procured by Bill in some manner that he would not divulge. The guests' dishes similarly tasted of improvisation: Carnelia Muntz's tomato-soup-and-olives aspic, without the olives; Mae Vennaman's dried apple pie, craftily achieved with saved sugar coupons. A decidedly mixed review, Cloyce told herself, but better than none. The duration sat right up to the table with them all, and the talk among the older people, which was everyone but Ben, kept coming back to whether the war would be over by the end of the year. *"Sure,"* Ben had replied, *"I just don't know what year."* It had drawn a laugh from everyone except his parents.

Now Cloyce gauged her husband and what was stacked in front of him on the desk. "You've been reading it again, haven't you."

Nodding, he reached around and squared the pages of the script. "You're the expert, but I'd call it one hell of a movie."

"You're right, it's a wonderful work." She paused, the tip of her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "They actually did that to the Purcell boy?" It both was a question and not.

"They did. Ben has a first-hand source."

"I just wish he hadn't been so dramatic about leaving it with us," she murmured. *"Mother, Dad—if I don't make it back, do what you can with this, okay?"*

Bill Reinking smiled gently. Just sitting there in her nightgown, she looked ready for a director to sing out *Action!* "I can't imagine where he gets it from."

She gave back a soft laugh, then looked out into the sift of snow again. "I would give years off my own life to have kept Ben from being sent into danger all the time." She turned her gaze to Bill. "I did try, you know."

"How would I?" His head dipped as he looked at her through the very tops of his glasses. "You never said so, Cloyce."

She smiled the slightest bit. "That's what comes of living with newspapermen. If I'd told you, it would have gone right into his ear." The smile flicked off. "As you can tell, I couldn't get the job done. All those family friends in Washington, Bill? People my parents were thick as thieves with in the old

days? Not a one of them," her tone deadly level, "would find a safe spot for our only son." It was not like her to curse, but she found the coldness of voice for it now. "The short-memoried bastards."

Bill touched the script again. "If--we have to do something with this, do you think you can?"

Her chin came up. "That's different, thank goodness. The Carteret name still means something at Zanuck's studio and some of the others." She nodded slowly. "I can get them to read *The Ghost Runner* and that's all it will take, I guarantee you. Ben's movie will be made, it's too good not to."

Cloyce saw her husband's mood uncloud just a bit and smiled further encouragement to him. "Ben will get to tend to that himself," she said firmly. "I told him I was counting on him for New Year's again."

He was cooling his heels in a few hours' layover in Newfoundland when a clerk tracked him down.

"Sir? Are you the TPWP captain? I'm from the wire room. Message there for you."

Wondering *What now?*, he let the soldier lead him to the communications building. The teletype sheet was ripped and ready, waiting for him. He read it, went outside and threw up in the snow.

A week. And I didn't have so much as a goddamn hint about it. Jake's plane had been missing on the flight between Fairbanks and Nome for seven days,

the official time for giving an aircraft and its crew up for lost. Oblivion of the worst kind; it was not known whether the B-17 bomber perished in the Alaskan mountains or the Bering Sea. Ben felt as if his soul had been operated on, an essence of life cut out of him. *Why Jake? Why now?* There in the Newfoundland cold, he tried to grapple himself together. Back in to the wire room. Dull jots on the message pad, handed to the clerk to be sent to Tepee Weepy.

I NEED TIME.

Tersely TPWP arranged a layover until the next morning's flight to Europe.

He spent a terrible day, wrestling the words out.

Sky-high in his hundred-mission crush hat, loud as a good takeoff, Lt. Jacob Eisman flew through life amending the laws of gravity as he went. He was Jake to the world, and jake with us, those who knew him in all his big ways.

A line, two, would come, and then he would have to abandon the typewriter, go outside to clear his head in the elemental Newfoundland weather.

He came to this war from a thousand years of one-sided battles, his family becoming American--All-American in the finest truest use of those words--out of a past ridden over by Cossacks too many times. And by one of the quirks war is so good at, he piloted bombers to Russian comrades waiting in Alaska, back door to Siberia, in the airborne supply line to the Eastern Front where the largest battles in history are being fought.

At the end, he sought out the base library to look it up.

An officer, stubby and bright-eyed, stepped in front of him. Amid the wardrobe explosion of uniforms it took Ben a moment to identify this one as British, the sainted Royal Air Force.

"Captain Reinking, is it?"

The mellifluous accent issued from a boyish ruddy face with a nose on it like the round end of a hammer. From that ballpeen nose on down, the blue-clad officer was built about as square as a man could be without a loading pallet under him. "I trust you had a good flight? I'm Leftenant Overby. Assigned to you, it seems. Your liaison to the sector communications branch."

Ben did not like the looks of this. By this stage of the war, he had caught the enlisted men's aversion to fresh-faced lieutenants; that first syllable dangerously rhymed with "new" and green looeys were trouble in combat. He wasn't looking for combat, but he wasn't looking for whatever trouble might come with this British version of shavetail, either. "Lieut--leftenant," he acknowledged this one with a dubious nod.

"I'm instructed to see to your needs," the pleasant tumble of words ensued again, "show you the ins and outs of the ticker room, and all that. Oh, and your mother branch--TPWP, if I have the alphabet mix right?-- sends its regards. Let's see, I copied it off: 'END ZONE IN SIGHT. BRIEF TIMEOUT. HUDDLE UP, SCORING PLAY IS ON WAY.'" The RAF man glanced up at him with polite reserve. "A bit over our heads in the code department, I'm afraid, and we do hope we managed to descipher it correctly. Make sense to you, does it, captain?"

The lieutenant sent him a quick hard look. Down went the pack, and he took off his cap and ran a hand contemplatively over a dome of bald head. With the cap absent, Ben could see Overby was a good deal older and more seasoned than he'd first seemed. A lip was being chewed dubiously in the ruddy face. "It's a bit of a step--a fair number of miles, forth and back."

"I don't care how far it is."

"Not a problem, then." Overby set his cap as if aiming it on a compass heading and moved off with the travel pack, leading Ben to a hard-used jeep. "Away we go, captain."

The jeep rattled along a cobblestone road so worn down that the Duke of Wellington's troops might have marched on it. Ben realized Antwerp was farther away than it had appeared from the airfield, the murky constant half-fog of the low country making it tricky to judge distance. Overby at the steering wheel seemed intent on making up for the lost career as a Spitfire pilot; every time he took a curve at a leaning angle, Ben missed Jones and his old-maid driving.

"The heater's up as much as it will go," Overby informed him as if he had asked. "Comfy?"

"Enough." Actually he felt highly uncomfortable with the weighty .45 automatic strapped on his right hip. When the Britisher or whatever he was proffered the weapon, web belt, and holster to him before setting out, he'd tried to turn it down with "I'm a correspondent, I don't pack a gun."

"I'm afraid you're in for a lot of bother if you decline to," Overby had launched into. "Top command's orders. The military police are instructed to pick up anyone off-base without at least a sidearm, and it must be loaded at all times. Of course, it is an individual decision whether or not one puts the gun to use, but that is a different cup of tea from whether one must carry--"

"Okay, okay," he had cut off the discourse, "give me the damn thing. You're responsible if I shoot my foot off." Now he was back to trying to figure out how much to trust this Overby. *Assigned to me in what way? To keep an eye on me for Tepee Weepy so I don't mess up their hoopla for Moxie? To lay down his coat for me every time I cross a mud puddle? To pull out his red pencil when I--*

Brakes screeching, the jeep pulled to a stop, facing a moving wall of military trucks and a frowning MP directing traffic. They had come to a ring road, at what looked to be a couple of miles out from the edge of Antwerp. "Convoys run day and night from the port," Overby raised his voice to be heard over the rumble of the trucks. "You're seeing the main supply line to the front." They watched the big Army 6x6's carrying food, fuel, medicine and munitions roll by as if on an assembly line until at last there was a slight break in the traffic. The MP danced aside in the intersection and motioned hurry-up, and the jeep shot across.

"You were posted to England," Overby picked right back up, evidently duty-bound to make conversation, "earlier in the war, captain? You saw something of the Blitz, then?"

"That's right, lieu--leftenant. Look, can we go by first names?"

"Assuredly, if you prefer." He tapped an attache case lodged between the seats with *Lt. Maurice Overby RAF* stenciled on it.

"Same song, second verse," Ben said. "Does that translate to 'Morris' or 'Moreese'?"

"Either, actually. Whichever I try to specify, half of the human herd get it wrong anyway."

"I'll go with 'Moreese,' it makes me feel like I'm in distinguished company." He still was trying to solve the RAF subaltern's mannerisms. "I wouldn't say I can always tell Hackney from cockney, but you don't sound like anyone I was ever around on bases in England."

"Oh, heavens no," accompanied by a scoffing chuckle at any trace of Englishness. Maurice was navigating past spates of Belgians on bicycles, men and women both and nearly all as thin as living scarecrows, close enough to reach out and touch. "New Zealand's my home--the real country, south of the Bombay Hills. Place called Christchurch."

"Well, sonofagun," Ben pulled his attention away from Belgium moving past on spokes and wheels, "Erewhon, huh?"

"You know of it? This is magical!" Maurice showed genuine enthusiasm for the first time. "Not many people can locate 'nowhere' spelled backwards, more or less. A devotee of the works of old Samuel Butler, are you then, Ben?"

"Not especially, read him some in college. Odd facts run in the family."

"I know it's only a book done#where I was bred and raised," nostalgia wafted from behind the steering wheel, "but still, old Sam caught the country around Christchurch to the very blades of grass. To this day, freshets off his pages play against my pores."

"Maurice? Not to put too fine a point to this, but what in hell did you do in civilian life?"

"I professed," the occupant of the jeep driver's seat said as though it was perfectly obvious. "I was professor of rhetoric and argumentation there at Canterbury College. The war rather took care of that. The Japanese were closing in on Australia, and New Zealand looked to be next, so I joined up to fight for the homeland"--he looked aside at his uniformed passenger--"didn't we all. Naturally, the instant I had my commission, I was seconded to London. Plopped into the RAF, plopped again into the communications branch, put in charge of a pencil. Daft of the higher-ups, but there you are." He glanced over again. "You're a considerable word man yourself, as I understand it, the byline and all."

Ben shifted the aggravating .45 on his hip. "Tepee Weepy seems to think so or they wouldn't keep sending me to places like this."

"Tepee--? Oh, ha. Very good."

In what amounted to a blink at the rate Maurice drove, they passed one last open field and were in the city, aged three-and four-story housefronts with steep crenulated gables and tall skinny chimneys suddenly everywhere. An unwilling spectator to any more misery of war, Ben had to spectate nonetheless. Antwerp had gone gaunt during the occupation years, the German army had seen to that.

A gunnery sergeant was poking his head out of the pit. "One incoming, cap," he called out. "Five minutes."

Moxie took charge before the words were out of the air. "Acknowledged, Smitty. Get on the horn to fire control and the spotters"--Ben could not help but hear come into the voice the snap of cadence used for good effect in football huddles--"tell them smoke break and grab-ass is over. And chew out the loaders on Charlie gun while you're at it, yesterday they were slower than a three-legged race." He glanced at Ben and Maurice as though they were an afterthought. "It's time to shoot something down. If I was you two, I'd get my butt in back of those sandbags over there."

The pair of them hustled behind the head-high stack between gun pits, Ben asking: "They can track the things that far out?"

"Radar, yes, but it's not so much that," Maurice replied, checking his wristwatch. "When the Germans are at this, they launch one every quarter of an hour. They're quite Teutonic about that habit, in the worst sense. Oh, right, that prods the old memory box. Here," he dug in a flap pocket of his uniform for something, "as a healthy measure, carry this with you when you're out and about."

Ben looked in bafflement at what he had been handed. It appeared to be a pocket watch, but with only one hand and no crystal.

"It's a cocotte clock, in case you're wondering," the explanation was diplomatically put. "A chef's timer, actually, but French prostitutes use these to keep track of the various phases of their services. I have done the necessary research." Maurice paused dreamily. "Ah, Paris. What was that term you used--

buttons the giddy night in Seattle...*One of those that folds down out of the wall? Genius, what's to keep it from folding back up into the wall just when things get interesting?* Cass snuggling next to him in the shelter of the Hill 57 rocks, the Homecoming game losing their interest...*Do I have a better offer?*

"Hey, we're not hearing any fooling-around report out of you, Ben." Moxie was feeling better and better as the beer and the night went on. "Haven't you hooked up with anybody yet?"

Silence was no longer an option, with the two moony faces turned to him. "I did for a while. She's a," he swallowed hard, "a nurse, too--of a kind."

Nine time zones away, Jones was trying to make a readable press release out of East Base's announcement of another one thousand Lend-Lease aircraft successfully transported into Russian hands. He hummed a snatch of hymn when he was alone and bored, and he was humming now; there were six previous announcements of this sort and even he did not regard this as the freshest of news. He was trying to decide whether it was worth it to change *seven thousand* to *the seventh thousand* when he became aware someone had paused at the office doorway.

He glanced around, and for this officer rose nicely to his feet as he had been taught to do at home.

"Help you with something, captain?"

"If you're feeling full of Christian charity," said Cass with a lump in her throat.

He remembered in all ways. The heart never forgets anything; the flesh remembers indiscriminately. *There were all those times I caught myself wishing you'd get a tiny one--just another scar--and be out of the war for good. But if Dan's is any indication, the price is awful damn high. I take him over to Fort Hairy once a week for the bone doc to test how his leg is coming along, and he hates that routine. He's on crutches in between--he hates that, too. Sometime after the first of the year, they'll ship him to the specialist who'll patch that tendon in and then all the time in rehab, as they call it. We go around and around about whether I stay with him in California for all that. I say of course I will. He says like hell I will, he can be a cripple just the same without me around, go do something useful with myself. In some odd way I think he wants to be with other Montaneer guys--you know what a bloody mess Leyte has turned out to be, bunches of the worst wounded from his regiment are ending up there in San Diego--more than with me. I'm not crying on your shoulder, Ben, I just needed to tell somebody who knows up from down when it comes to a man and a woman.*

Enough of that. This is the last time you'll ever hear from Capt. Standish-his eyes misted instantly at that--*in WASP uniform. They're inactivating us the middle of the month--happy holidays, P-39 birdwomen, huh?--and the squadron will scatter to the winds. Mary Cat is going into schoolteaching. Della has her hooks into a major in Ops, and he's ga-ga enough she'll probably get him to marry her. I have my hands full with Dan, but I've been wondering whether to try to get on with the Forest Service after a while, flying smoke patrol. It'll be the*

same old thing, though, will they hire a woman pilot? Maybe it'll all sort out okay after the war. But that's too far away to think.

He pinched the bridge of skin between his eyes waiting for the worst of the thought to pass: if there is an *after*. Then he blinked back into reading the last of the letter.

I suppose I could tell you I miss you something awful. But too much truth is maybe not a good idea, given the situation. You are always going to be a part of me, despite the gold string on my finger that ties me to Dan. I couldn't Dear John him while he was out in the Pacific, and I can't do it to you while you're over there. I think of you more than is healthy, and I just want you to know I regret not one damn thing of our time together.

It is getting late, and it's snowing like sixty--the O Club windowsills look like igloo territory--and I have to get back to the apartment. Now all this is off my chest--no wisecrack about that sort of thing, you--and on its way to wherever you've ended up. Take care, Ben--I don't need another hole in my life.

Hugs and tickles,

Cass

Back and forth, he walked the narrow confines of bunker room, holding the letter as if memorizing it. For all his skills at what was said between the lines, supposition resisted him here as he read the sentences over and over.

In her feisty Cass way she wished him well, and maybe cast a major wish beyond that, but nothing under the ink had really changed, had it?

all had been eaten during Belgium's starving years of Nazi occupation, including the horses.

The graying snow on the farmyards and fields like a tablecloth on an abandoned empty table, they drove on into the flat midland of Belgium. In that world with all the noise smothered out of it, he and Maurice could talk comfortably. Moxie had told him they were goofy for going out on this. *"You haven't seen enough battlefields to last you for one lifetime, Rhine King?"* Not enough ones gone quiet. "I don't know if these are the same roads Wellington and Napoleon had," Ben remarked as he pointed out the next turnoff, "but you're sure as hell making better time than they did." Maurice handled the jeep as if captaining a yacht, swinging wide on the curves and making up for it with unfurled speed on the straight stretches.

"Ah, well," the figure presiding at the wheel said loftily, "one likes to get there in timely fashion, forth and back."

Not for the first time in honor of the New Zealander's locutions, Ben chuckled. "Is that a Southern Hemisphere way of looking at things, like the bathtub draining the opposite direction?"

"Hmm? Not at all, it's simple logic. One cannot, Ben, go *back* before one goes *forth* , therefore--

Ben pursed a smile. "Spoken like a professor of argumentation."

"We shall see how I am as a battlefield muse." Maurice patted the attache case between them. "*The Trekker's Guidebook to the Historic Battle at Waterloo.* Gift from my father, right off, when he learned I'd been posted to Belgium."

member of her squadron out of a thousand by the way the hat sat. She inspected them one last time as they stood at attention.

"Della, half step right. M.C., half step left. That's Beryl's spot between you."

With a deep breath she gave the command, and the squadron marched along the flightline to the hangar where the inactivation ceremony would be held.

Work on the unpainted bombers and P-63s stilled for a moment as the women mechanics in hairnets and overalls looked around from the wings and platform ladders they stood on to the WASPs crisply saluting the waiting general. The gathering was not large. A perfunctory honor guard, rifles at rest and flag drooping in the still air of the hangar. The fresh-faced Canadian liaison officer, down from Edmonton for the occasion. Jones with a Speed Graphic camera, blazing away with flashbulb after flashbulb; he had worshipfully let Cass know there would be a set of photographs for each pilot.

The general at the portable podium his aide had set up shuffled his papers as if this were one more chore, glanced up at Cass as if she were personally responsible for his being saddled with Grady's Ladies all this while, and gruffly began.

Standing at attention determined to show him not so much as a quiver, she wondered if there would have been a ceremony at all if the general hadn't had to read out the special letter of commendation--*the renowned flying women of East Base....service above and beyond the call of duty*-- from the Senator.

sometimes did. "First thing, I need to futz around in the mail room a little." His wife made a face as he left the table; she didn't like *futz.*

Nor the mail room, for that matter. She never set foot into the alcove library where he felt most at home in the otherwise womanized house. And the ~~Negro~~ colored maid was not let in the room, not since the time she tidied by stacking everything together. With the satisfaction of familiarity the Senator again gazed around at the musty bookshelves, the favorite framed *Chicago Tribune* political cartoon showing him as a bowlegged wrangler roping a runaway bull with the head and face of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and last and most comforting of all, the outmoded military trestle tables waiting with seven batches of newspapers, eight to a pile. The weeklies from all fifty-six Montana counties, right here in the Potomac swampland ready for his perusal whenever the spirit moved him. Of all the senatorial perquisites there were, this one especially tickled him. He knew his staff drew straws to see which of them, at the dawn of each week, would have to take a taxi down from the Hill with the bulging mailbag of newspapers and lay them out in prescribed order, and the fact that they despised the chore only made him snort to himself in amusement. Montana was big as hell and just as tricky to represent, and he long since had figured out that having the local view of things fetched into this room for him beat trying to chase down the moods of constituents across a six-hundred-mile swath of earth.

Actually, there was more to it than that. In dismal bunkhouses and drafty line cabins when the century and he were unconquerably young, this gaunt old bone-sprung prairie Caesar had read his way up in the world via weekly

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(TPWP priority dispatch--Antwerp--byline Reinking)

German armored columns pierced the Allied lines in a surprise counterattack today along the Ardennes front. The German offensive, spearheaded by ~~Panzer~~ tanks, took advantage of a ghostly infiltration by English-

the extent of the strategy, "it makes quite good sense from the Hun point of view, doesn't it. Therefore HQ here thought wise to put the word out--your words, actually--before Supreme Headquarters clamped down on the embarrassing news that the Germans caught them with their ~~pants~~ trousers very much down."

Practically dead on his feet, Ben moved off from the TPWP teletype, clapping Maurice on the shoulder as he passed. "Tepee Weepy and me, always glad to be of service."

Moxie was taking the Battle of the Bulge personally. Wound tight, he sat on the edge of his bunk as if about to spring. "Those sneaky kraut SOBs. They're going for broke." It was the best military analysis Ben had heard yet. "Goddamn it, Reinking, are we still going to get out of here tomorrow?"

Propped in the doorway, Ben answered with each sentence taking effort. "If the USO bunch gets here, I don't see why not. The brass will have to get them back out, and they can squeeze us onto the plane. Maurice keeps checking, the flying looks OK--the Luftwaffe isn't so much in this, it's more a hell of a ground attack." He looked at the man rooted to the bunk and before he knew it heard himself saying what he was thinking: "You know, Mox, there's no law that you couldn't get off your duff and see what you can find out--"

"I am. I have." Moxie shifted to one side on his perch, then right back. "I was about to tell you. I hunted up our ack-ack intelligence officer, we go back a long ways together. They figure when Supreme Headquarters gets its head out of its butt, they'll be able to stop the Germans about halfway here. Ten days or two

Ben steeled himself and headed toward the familiar snapbrim hat in the small huddle near the stage steps. Bareheaded bored newsreel technicians stood on either side of Ted Loudon. The taller one, evidently a cameraman, was saying reluctantly: "All right, we can shoot that if we have to. What's the name of the damn place again, the Roxy?"

"Where do you think you are, back in palookaville?" Even in what passed for conversation, the sportscaster's ~~Loudon's~~ pace of talk any more was the fastest an ear could keep up with. "It's the Rex, you're in a country with a king, get it? So what I want is--" He caught sight of ginger hair and an impassive longitudinal face. "Ben Reinking! Captain Reinking. Captain on the gridiron, captain in the service of his country." The idea seemed to entertain ~~Loudon.~~ the contriver of the Supreme Team and much else. "What a piece of luck you're here to be on the show with Moxie, two heroes for the price of one." He waved off the newsreel crew. "You know the drill, boys. See you when you get back. Ben, you still look like you're in great shape. Bet you could still run down one of Moxie's passes. Hey, I wonder if--"

"Ted, no funny stuff with a football for the show. We're in a goddamn war zone and Moxie and I both are on our last legs and--"

"Sure, sure. Anyway, how's it feel to make All-American? Catches you up with Eisman." Loudon's flat inexpressive face did not match the voice. "Hell of a thing with him and Danzer, isn't it--beyond dead, turned into part of the atmosphere." It took great effort, but Ben did not respond to that. "You guys as a team were something else," Loudon was going on, exuding sincerity. He did a

slight jerking motion of his head to one side as if making a check mark with his chin. "Something else."

Ben jammed his fists in his pockets to hide their readiness. "Look, Loud--Ted, how about showing me what pony trick you want me to do on the broadcast, so I can go get some rest."

"Sam?" Loudon yelled across the room to the show director. "Doing a walkthrough with my guest star. Come on up, Ben." ~~Loudon trotted up the makeshift stairs.~~ The singing-and-dancing sister act was rehearsing on the stage, in gowns that looked spun from cotton candy. "Excuse us, ladies," Loudon pushed past with Ben following, "All-American coming through." At the far end of the stage was a folding mockup of a stadium broadcasting booth, pennants painted on and *The Loudon Lowdown* lettered large amid those. Rapidly the sportscaster rehearsed Ben in coming onstage when the 'Supreme Team' cue was given and slipping into a seat behind the microphone in the fake booth. "It's tight for three," ~~Loudon~~ he jabbed a thumb at the empty seat on the other side, "but we'll make it work. Moxie'll be along later, he's getting dressed up. Hey, wasn't that tough about Bruno's team not making the Rose Bowl? One lousy touchdown short in the Stanford game."

"Tough."

"Anyway," ~~he~~ Loudon thrust a copy of the script at Ben, "look over my questions so there're no surprises. Keep your answers short. Hell, I don't need to tell you the ropes--you're a star in your own right." The checkmark with the chin again. "That Guam broadcast. Whooh."

stream of men, women, children--some so blackened with blast dust and dried blood you could not tell which they were. Army doctors and nurses swarmed around the stretcher cases, scissoring off clothing, shunting the prone patients into surgery or wards. Constantly dodging out of the way, Ben hunted down the medical staffer keeping track of the military wounded and dead, learned most of the victims were Antwerp civilians so far, and Moxie's and Inez's dogtags were not among those the staffer had copied onto his clipboard list. *Okay, they're among the missing,* Ben tried to reason himself into, *that's a different list.* They could still be at the theater, Moxie by nature would take over any rescue task he could, she was a nurse--

The decision churning within him, Ben zeroed in on an ambulance driver outside under the archway smoking a cigarette. Throat dry--*Comparatively few direct hits compared to what?*--he stepped out into the wintry Antwerp night, calling to the driver: "Sarge, the movie theater that caught it--are you going back in?"

The driver stiffened but the cigarette stayed cupped in his saluting hand. "Probably all night, captain, why?"

"I'm riding with you."

The driver shrugged, not wanting any more trouble on the night. "If you want, you can hop in back. Hang on to something, we give it the gas going in."

Out the back windows of the jouncing ambulance he could see spikes of light driven into the blackness, searchlights on the hunt for buzz bombs.

pointed across to the collapsed front of the theater, a chunk of the marquee with the enormous maroon letters REX sitting in the street crookedly but otherwise strangely unharmed. "They weren't even going in, the movie had already started. These old buildings"--his hand shook as he motioned up at the ornamented guildhall gables--"Loudon had that major scout these out, he told us it would make a terrific backdrop. So, we were just doing a second take, everything going fine, when the bomb hit."

Ben stared into the empty air where the balcony of the theater would have been, the projection room, the offices above, and then to where it had all fallen into a crumbled heap of bricks and broken wood and bodies.

The cameraman followed his gaze and hesitantly told the rest. "We were across the street here, it made a nice angle shot, the marquee there... Mike's my sound man, he was knocked over by the blast. I got thrown around pretty good myself. Just as everything started to, to come down"--the man wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and managed to speak again-- "the captain grabbed his cap off and threw it to us while he pulled the nurse to him with his other arm and covered her with himself. I don't know how he did both at once."

"He was an athlete," Ben said dully. The cap in hand, he turned and walked off to catch a ride to the base in one of the ambulances.

"Hey, captain, uh, sir?" the cameraman called after him. "Do me a favor? Lug this film back for me?" He gestured up at the night sky, quiet at the moment, tracer-lit a minute ago. "In case something more happens here?"

Ben took the film can and kept on walking toward the ambulances.

Climbing out at the hospital bunker, he handed the cap to one of the medics. "Give this to the guy taking down names. Tell him Nurse Mazzetti was with the captain."

The long tunnel of bunker corridors resounded to his footsteps as he headed for the Wonder Bar, his mind cold and clear. Inevitability was claiming him.

The wall of oblivion had moved closer one more notch, its tenth, Moxie the next to last off the living list. The others, back at the start--O'Fallon, Havel--and on up the black climb of odds--Friesen, Vic, Prokosch, Animal--and off the chart of any foretelling--Dex, even Danzer, Jake--teamed one final time in his resolve. He was giving himself over. With Moxie gone he was the eleventh man, the perverse odds now solely out to get him and they would, he could see them piled overhead as if he were in the bottom of an hourglass looking at the deathly sand above. He knew it would happen according to the war's whim of time, when he would go out into the Antwerp night after doing this. If a buzz bomb did not find him this night, something else ultimately would. A leftover booby trap in whatever hiding place he sought out. A guildhall wall, wearied by the constant return of war, collapsing on him. The Germans barreling into the city, if the Bulge was not turned back, and dooming him in their pogrom of able-bodied defenders. He accepted, he couldn't not, that the war would see to him, one fatal way or another. But first, this. He could find no reason in himself not to rid the world of Loudon. The .45 still had bullets in its clip.

Ben entered the hubbub of the Wonder Bar. Several members of the USO troupe were beside the stage signing autographs for early-comers, the confectionary colors of the singers and dancers glossy against the olive drab of the G.I.s. Loudon and the major, in conference at the show director's desk, spotted him and waved him over frantically.

"Ben! We've been looking everywhere for you." Loudon's words came faster than ever. "It's Moxie, he's--" The expression on Ben stopped him. "You heard. You're upset. Can't blame you."

Ben dropped the film can on the desk with a clatter.

"This is what's left of him."

Beneath the snapbrim hat the eyes guardedly ~~Loudon's eyes~~ darted down, then back to Ben. "Awful, what happened. We've got to make this into a tribute to him. Sit down, why don't you, we'll work over the script with--"

"I need a few minutes with you, Loudon. Just us. Now."

"Use my office," the major offered, all solicitude.

As soon as the door was shut, Loudon started again. "My God, who could have imagined this. Moxie the tenth one, I mean, there's no story ever like it." The chin doing the checkmark, confirming to himself the Supreme Team saga. "You and me--well, no way it can be called lucky, watching it happen to all those poor guys, but at least we saw to it that they'll always be remembered." He sat down at the major's desk and beckoned Ben over. "Okay, the script, we have to make changes." The undercurrent of excitement still was in his voice. "Got your copy?"

Supreme Team's wholesale bad luck. A crazy laugh broke from Ben. No, he realized, the sanest one in a long time.

"Okay, we both have it out of our systems," Loudon was saying, nervous at that laugh. "Now let's forget all that and get busy on the script, airtime will be here in--"

"I'm not going on the show."

Loudon gaped at him.

"The Supreme Team is yours, it always was." Ben found he could say it calmly. "Give it a funeral any way you want."

"Listen, Reinking--Ben." ~~Loudon's~~ The famous voice rose. "We don't have to be pals about this, we just have to do the show. You'll get your gravy from this as much as I will. Everything's set up for us. The network time. The news cameras. The whole USO--"

A rap on the door and the major was in the room almost before the sound. "I couldn't help hearing the ruckus. Something I can help with?"

"It's him," Loudon flared. "Says he won't go on the show. Drive some sense into him, major."

"You most certainly are going on the show," the major scolded Ben as if he were a Sunday schooler. "I've looked over Ted's script, you're everywhere in it. Let's not complicate things for him."

"Let's."

The major took another look at Ben. "Captain, I order you to pick up that script and prepare for the show." Loudon at the desk whacked his hand down on his copy to second that.

"Not a chance, major," Ben said, stepping away. "I am a TPWP war correspondent, I have a story to write about what killed Moxie Stamper, and I am going out that door now and write it."

Commotion had spread to the other side of the door, from the sound of it. The major raised his voice, "Quiet, out there! We're in conference in--"

He stopped short at the sight of Maurice Overby striding in, military policemen in white helmets and white spats on either side of him, two more taking up a station at the door.

Maurice paused, glanced at the major's angry face and Loudon's angrier one, and raised his eyebrows at Ben. "Have we come at an inconvenient moment?"

"I don't know how you got wind of this, lieutenant, but you're right in time," the major recovered. "Have your MPs ready." He leveled a deaconly finger at Ben. "How does arrest for disobeying an order from a superior officer and a Section Eight sound to you, Reinking? If you don't--"

"Actually, sir," Maurice broke in as if to save the major the trouble of sayng more, "I'm here on orders from considerably higher up. I speak of the general. We"--Maurice swept his hand around graciously to indicate the military police contingent--"are to place Captain Reinking aboard a plane. In the word from HQ command, 'soonest.'"

I hope I heard that right. I hope I'm not dreaming this.

Loudon's face went from bad to worse, a good sign to Ben. "This man can't go anywhere," the major protested. "He's to be on the show or else--"

"I beg to differ, sir." Not without a bit of flourish, Maurice produced a set of paperwork. "He is being sent forthwith 'stateside,' again in the phrasing of the order. I have that order here should you wish to examine it, major." The major did not touch it. Maurice nodded to the MPs, who moved in around Ben like bodyguards. "So. If you'll make your farewells, captain, we can be on our way."

Ben looked straight at Loudon and said as if it was a vow, "See you in the movies, sucker."

Within the wedge of MPs, the blue-clad RAF officer and the flight-jacketed American cut through the gathering crowd in the Wonder Bar and swung out into the long bunker corridor where the footsteps were their own.

"Maurice, am I ~~dreaming this~~ completely wacko," Ben asked urgently out the side of his mouth, "or were you bluffing back there?"

"Not at all," came the benign reply. "I might admit to providing a pinch of dramatic effect in the matter, but that's all. No, you are in mightier hands than mine. Your TPWP people had to come clean in their 'urgent' message a bit ago to convince HQ command you're worth high priority. A home-state Senator--is that the phrase for a political old tusker in America?--raised rather a ruckus about the number of soldiers' lives your Montana has contributed to the war. I believe you know whereof I speak." The New Zealander turned a solemn gaze on him, then resumed. "All in all, it has become in Tepee Weepy's best interest to fetch you

back alive and in one piece as speedily as can be." Maurice patted the side pocket of his uniform jacket. "I procured you a copy of all that, it should make pleasant reading on the plane. I don't mean to take the cherry off the top ahead of you, but I do think you'd like to know, Ben--you're to be mustered out as soon as you're back at that base in Montana and write the piece about Stamper."

At the mouth of the bunker was a stocky MP with a two-way radio clapped to his ear. He held up a hand like the traffic cop he had probably been in civilian life. "Hold it here, everybody--ack-ack is tracking one in."

In the shelter of the concrete archway, Ben and Maurice and the armbanded soldiers watched the sudden cat's cradle of searchlight beams over Antwerp. The arcs of white frozen lightning swung and swung, hunting, until fastening onto a glint far up in the black sky. Flashes from gun batteries pulsed on the low horizon, and as the flying bomb seemed to slow and hesitate, tracer bullets converged toward it like the ascending lines where the arches of a cathedral meet. Then the buzz bomb lost course, faltering off in a drifting glide, away from the battered durable old city.

"One less to worry about," Maurice pronounced briskly. Turning to Ben, he tapped his watch. "Fifteen minutes. The plane can take off in ten." Choked up, Ben could only shake hands wordlessly. The stubby lieutenant gave him an unreserved smile. "Fare thee well, Ben Reinking. Happy ride home."

The jeep thrummed under him on the steel grid of runway as it raced toward the plane, the guardian MPs riding shotgun front and back, the war behind him in the darkness. With luck--it was an amazing feeling to trust that word again--