

A Prisoner's Tale

A Novella

by

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*I have been studying how I may compare,  
This prison where I live unto the world  
-Richard II, V,v.*

-November, 1944-

It snows just the same in the Alps as it does in Niccalsetti New York. I wake up in the morning and look out over the moat, past the sentries an hour into the second shift and see right into the far away mountains, see the snow coming down. I had always thought, back home, that it would be another kind of snow in Europe. Last month I had been sure there would be something different. Today, like any other day, the snow falls soft and light into the black pines and spruce and I remember the same ice back home. At times I see the Germans out there in their heavy great coats chopping away at the ice on the sentries' path with hoes from the storage shed, cursing in their strange, guttural language. The problem they have is that the sentry path along the moat ices over first, there isn't a thing the guards can do about it and so they wait until somebody slips and then the commandant orders them to get the hoes before somebody falls fifty feet into the moat and is killed. When that happens me and the rest of us sit in the library and watch them chop and swear because they don't trust the prisoners to do the work, won't let us out for anything.

They won't allow us to keep food in the kitchen because they don't want us hoarding it for an escape. Hansch has to come to our quarters first thing with the day's food: fifty grams of acorn coffee, black bread, soup makings, a pack of cigarettes for the four of us, medicine for the Russian. Dinner is usually either canned food, meat or eggs sometimes, depending on if we are re-supplied up here. We get biscuits and porridge once in a while, and sugar and milk. We get chocolate bars every month from the Red Cross Prisoner's ration pack. One time Hansch handed me a live

chicken, tied up. No joke. We had to bring it to the Russian on his sick bed to slaughter it.

This morning I sit in the kitchen and try to hear Hansch and the other guard coming along the passageway from the guard house, hear the solid sounds of their black jack leather boots negotiating the bombed out rubble of the rest of the castle, hear them swearing. Sometimes I can, other times I can't and know that the snow has covered the walk and Hansch or somebody else will have to shovel that area too, because he's the only one who uses that path. Hansch, the only permanent guard, the only guard I know, hates having to supply us every day. It's a slippery, cold trek over to our part of the castle. Gray stones the size of crates fall from the heights of the castle in the night, blocking his way, and he has to re-route. Today I check my watch and listen, don't hear him and his companion until he shoves his key in the door, shouting my name, Robert Fine, making it sound like "vine". He kicks open the door and I feel the cold blast from outside. The companion blusters in first, his sidearm hanging at his side. He looks right at me, then through me, as I snap to attention. Hansch ducks to get into the room, hugging to his chest a package of tins and bags. He brings us nothing fresh today, I can see already. He stamps snow across the floor, shakes it from his thick coat. He puts the Mauser rifle on the table and slaps his arms, sending up a cold spray.

"Yah. At ease, Vine."

His face is crimson. He's been out there all night and he'll have to shovel the walk to the prisoner's house for the second time this week. He's sick, too, wheezing deep in his chest. He stands like a bear in my kitchen: huge, woolly and damp. He sheds cold into the room as he fumbles in his pockets and finds half a cigarette in his pocket and his silver flask with it. He lights the cigarette and looks at me angrily with his tiny dark eyes.

"Fire. Where is this fire?"

Hansch always gives me trouble about the fire. We're supposed to make one in the kitchen every morning, but we don't bother. I'm the only one who cooks and makes tea around here. I think Hansch has a vision of coming into the prisoner's

kitchen and warming himself by the fire. I feel guilty for a moment because Hansch is sick and the warmth would do him good. Hansch points down at the food. "Cans. I have only cans, but much coffee. It is the same for us until our truck comes." His silent accomplice stands behind him, the pistol always present.

I spread everything out on the table. A small hundred gram cloth bag of coffee, a sack of soup makings and cans of beans and bully beef. Biscuits and oatmeal. No milk. No tea. No lard. Pipe tobacco and a half pack of cigarettes only, three for each of the others and one to spare -- I don't smoke -- I gave it up six months ago, tired of taking that pleasure at the whim of the German army. He sees my face when I divide up our meager pickings and he looks away, through the narrow leaded window set three feet in the stone.

"Is there much snow today on your side, Hansch?," I ask. I can see it out on the trees, of course, but I always wonder how much fell on the castle. I don't have that view. He sips from the flask, sputters and nods. "There is very much today."

Hansch finishes his cigarette and picks up the rifle in his great red paws. "Soon, there will be meat. Milk. Please will you tell Captain Turnell." He looks at me, preparing himself for the cold. He pulls the leather strap of the rifle over his shoulder. I nod. But he still feels bad about the food. "Tell your Captain Turnell the snow is bad for me and bad for him. It is bad for all." I nod again. "Good-bye Hansch." Hansch flings open the door and the faceless new guard tramps out first. Hansch follows him and slams the door shut. I hear the key work in the lock and he's gone, leaving me.

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The four of us have done away with notions of rank except when it comes to the things we don't want to do, then Burton and Turnell remember that I'm only a Private. I think I'd be a little less likely to do Captain Turnell's bidding if I was older. I'm only nineteen, and Turnell must be forty. Burton's thirty-two and the Russian looks like he's fifty but Burton says no, he's only forty-two.

Captain Turnell gets up the earliest of the three, at seven exactly. He usually comes down in his olive drab sweater and his brown khaki pants and his shoes. He'll wash in his private bath with the water he's left himself in the pitcher by the bed. I can hear him up there as I sit waiting in the most comfortable room we have, the library. The library has somehow retained some semblance of dignity, upon first glance it looks almost intact, except for a hole ripped in the bookcase caused by I don't know what, a grenade maybe, or something more ancient. Then, upon closer inspection, you notice that the library is scarred and shot up, there are bullet holes over the fireplace and burn marks on almost all the walls, its pictures are gone as is everything else of value but the raiders have left us the fireplace and the leather chairs and a portion of books. There is the hulk of a piano pushed into the corner, covered by a gray tarpaulin and a layer of dust and wetness. The room is exposed to the wind, true, and the snow freezes and melts against the heavy leaded windows, leaving dark tracks like claw marks beneath the inside sills but the fire warms the library well. As for the destruction, I am at a loss. Perhaps the previous inhabitants fought for their home, perhaps this castle stood empty since the last big war, or even longer than that. We have been the only prisoners here for a year. The rest of the castle is locked off to us, and we make do with the wrecked rooms above the library. We live in a tower of sorts, in fact. A square tower teetering on the edge of an ancient moat.

When Turnell arrives I hand him a tin cup full of brown acorn coffee. He sits by the fire and looks me over, inspects my worn clothes more like a disapproving father than a conscientious officer. He listens without comment to what's on the menu today and Hansch's clumsy apology, then he stands to cast an eye out at the guard. Our small rations don't bother him. Turnell once told me that even on the bad days we make out with the food. In the Stalags the standard ration was two hundred grams of

bread, seventy grams of rice, 15 grams of sugar, a teaspoon of butter, a cubic inch of cheese and a half tin of stew. I look at Turnell and wonder how he could have survived it.

Turnell stretches his feet toward the fire as a stray puff of smoke lingers in the warm, newly heated air and then wafts up to the highest books rotting by the wet wooden ceiling. Turnell won't smoke this morning. He lines up his three cigarettes on the table beside him. I know that he has a cache of cigarettes upstairs and he'll wind up sharing some of them with Burton because Burton can't save anything.

Turnell asks, "Have you checked on Arkady?"

Arkady, that's the Russian. I told the Captain Arkady slept well, I checked on him before I went downstairs. Turnell nods and is silent. He's been in three other places before this, all Stalags. His unfortunate part in the war is etched upon him, I can see it in his sharpened face and his slow movements. He has a disconcerting ability to stand in a room with another person and not speak. The way I figure it, the army teaches the officers to be that way, sort of close mouthed. And I figure that Turnell, with his sharp face and his heavy eyes and his big shoulders and quiet ways, is probably a better leader than Burton. So there you are.

I check my watch. Burton will be shrugging on his sweater and cursing the cold now. He will carefully lace his boots, fold the cuffs of his heavy, baggy serge RAF pants over them. He will come down into the library and sit in the chair by the fire, take his coffee and raise hell about the day's rations before he picks up a book to read. I figure Burton's read maybe half the books in the library. There aren't many in English, either. Mostly Italian and German. But now I have the room with Turnell and Turnell is pensive today, more pensive than usual I mean, watching Thomas, a younger guard, carefully walk the moat. One of the guards will be on the other side of the castle for another two hours, out of our field of vision. Turnell bids me to sit in one of the sad leather chairs by the fire and he sits opposite me, sipping his coffee, consuming this luxury with all the fastidious ceremony of a sacred rite. I fill him in on the weather, on Hansch's health. Turnell listens, nods, sips. Then he says, "You're avoiding something, Fine. There's something you want to tell me."

I square my shoulders and sit on the ledge of the fire place, avoid the worn face regarding me through the steam of his coffee. I point to the window, wanting to lead him into the subject and knowing that sooner or later he's going to lose his patience with me. "I've been watching the guards. Neither of them like the winter. They no longer have the spotlights from last year. Sir, they stand in the dark holding electric torches." Torches. Burton's word.

He looks away from me, still listening, already knowing what I have to say next. I put my elbows on my knees, lean forward. "Sir, I think we can get out of here. I think we can make it to the town."

"To Aosta. Ten miles or more down a frozen road. At night. After you've negotiated the moat."

"Yes. I figure we can make it by dawn. We can get a train, sir."

"A train. I see." Turnell sips his coffee, places it by his hand on the table by his chair. He cocks his head and looks at me and I wonder which objection he'll bring up first. He'll point out that the moat is too icy to climb. We won't make it down the road without an Italian patrol picking us up.

But he says, "What about Arkady? Will he be able to do this?"

I look at the fire. Turnell knows the answer to this question. What about Arkady? Arkady, who won't be able to get up for another five hours, Arkady who's legs are burned and who is so sick that I walk into his room each day expecting to find a dead man under the four green German army blankets. What about him? The question has nagged me for four days already. Turnell answers it for me. "Arkady would stay here. Of course he would."

"This is one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you."

"How far do you think we will have to go on the train?"

I shrug.

Turnell frowns. "Answer me."

"I don't know."

"I do. You'd try to get across the Swiss border. The train goes into Zurich. The border is over fifty miles from here. If they catch us they'll throw us into one of

the Stalags if they don't shoot us outright. The Stalag in Wurzach is right on the Italian border. Perhaps we'd go there." Turnell says all this without any rancor in his voice, as if he's musing over one of his philosophical dilemmas. Mentally gnawing on a long dry notion.

I tell him that I think it's a possibility. I mean the escape, not the capture he feels is so inevitable.

Turnell smiles at the word "possibility." "Have you seen how the Germans guard their stations? The dogs? The mirrors under the passenger cars? The border inspections? A train went through Moosburg where they had us billeted for a few weeks with half a platoon of South Africans. Yes. I had the opportunity to see first hand how they go over their trains."

"Then we could walk it."

"Through the forest?"

"Stay right near the tracks. Follow a road."

"Do you even have a compass Fine?"

"No."

"Just go directly north-west, best you can judge. Is that your plan?"

I say nothing. Turnell regards me with a faint grin. He picks up his coffee and sips. When he speaks again, he says, placatingly, "You just might make it. It would be three, four days of hard traveling, but you just might. If we were in Austria then you'd have a problem. But we're not. We're in the Italian Alps, only five miles from a train into Switzerland." Turnell pulls himself to his feet, walks slowly over to the window, peers down at the guard on duty. "He'll be there until five tonight, then they switch. I think your friend Hansch drinks to stay warm. The Germans put a great deal of faith in that moat." Turnell comes back to the chair. "Of course, if you make a mistake, Fine, you'll break a leg. If that happens, they may as well shoot you. Do you understand?"

"I thought I'd have company."

“Ah. Of course.” Turnell crosses his legs, the fire lighting his face, warming the gloom. “You’ll have to ask the others yourself. I am duty-bound not to stand in the way of an escape attempt.”

“What about you, sir?”

“As far as accompanying you, you have to let me think.” He keeps his eyes on the fire. “You see, I have the handicap of experience. You have the comfort of ignorance in a job like this.” Now a vague Harvard timbre slips into his voice. It occurs to me that Turnell has been making decisions for others all his life, that he might be the eternal upperclassman, ruling the freshmen with a disinterested beneficence.

“I feel Burton will take me up on the offer.”

“Why?”

We both know why.

Burton speaks of nothing but escape. It’s his obsession. For a moment, I’m surprised that it is me sitting here talking to Turnell about the escape and not Burton. The way I see it, Burton might be planning his own escape soon. But unlike Burton I want Turnell’s assistance. Failing that, I need his approval. No, his blessing.

But Turnell sits there in silence, smoke whirling around him, waiting for my answer, waiting for my justification of the escape. I feel like I’m asking my father for the keys to his Buick, not requesting permission from a superior officer to escape into the woods of Northern Italy. I try again. “Burton’s wanted to escape since the moment’s he’s arrived. Now’s our chance. And you’ve told me that the Geneva convention states, clearly states, that...”

He holds up a hand like a traffic cop. “...it says that prisoners of war are not to be shot in reprisal for attempted escape. I know. But the Geneva convention doesn’t stop bullets.”

He tells me to go on, to tell him why I should spring this scheme on an unsuspecting Burton. Now he’s the Harvard sage again, letting his befuddled student get tangled up in the nets of his own bad reasoning before coming in with the gaff. I

take one more shot, my parting shot, my secret weapon that I've saved in case of trouble.

"Sir, I think the Germans are going to move us back into Germany." I blunder on. "I think Italy is going to fall soon and the Germans will want us in their care."

"You know this, I suppose, from your vast experience in Sicily, a mere four hundred and fifty miles away."

"Yes."

"And the Italians will sit back for an amphibious armored landing. In a few months we'll have Sicily and half of Italy and be ready to sweep up through fascist Italy, through the Alps into Germany. That's what you think."

"No. We'll take Italy though. I know it. Sicily fell pretty easily, sir, and Rommel was out of the game by the time I was taken."

I had thought, originally, to have Burton by my side when I made my case for escape. Burton has been in the camps longer than anybody except Arkady. He was picked up in 1941, three years ago, when his plane went down in the North Sea, just when I heard about Pearl Harbor on the radio in my father's work shop. Burton had been happily bombing German supply ships when a Messerschmitt sneaked out of the dark heavens above and deftly blew apart the starboard engine to the Hadley Page Halifax. Burton told me, after I'd known him for a day, that "the damned thing bought it good and proper." Burton had spent twenty five hours in a yellow dingy, alone and freezing, and then spent two days on a flak ship outside of Oslo while the Germans decided what to do with him. He once told me that he didn't give a good ruddy damn about Italy or the Americans' belated bloody efforts in the war. Burton would be of no help convincing Turnell that this country was finished and the Germans would want us back in the Fatherland. So I had to make the case alone.

"Sir, the castle is meant for a few hundred prisoners. The other buildings I mean. These guards are an advance unit getting ready for new inmates. But you've been here for almost eight months and we've got no company. The first thing they'll do is let this place go if Italy goes, if they get past Rome. They'd move us back."

He seems not to hear me. “You think that the Anglo-American forces will be all the way to Aosta in one year, do you?”

“I think they’ll make it to Rome. Sir, when they picked me up I had heard all about the Germans’ problems in Russia. And the English have been bombing them pretty steadily.”

He nods and then his eyes slowly turn upward when he hears Burton clumping around upstairs. I sit by the fire, in the smoke, hoping for his blessing but none is forthcoming. He says, “I think Burton is awake. Perhaps you’d see to the Russian and let me think about this.”

“Are you going to mention it to Burton?”

And his eyes are serious now, behind the smile. “No. I won’t. Go. I think Arkady is up now.” So I leave, fill a tin cup from the kettle over the fire and make my journey to the stairs.

The part of the castle where we sleep is a living catalogue of defeat. When I reach the beginning of the hallway leading from the library to the stairs, I think of the rubble vomiting out of the destroyed chapel; I think of the wrecked woodwork along the stairs leading me to the eons of wars this castle has seen. Just The Castle. The Germans haven’t even a name for it. Some rooms seem to be suffering the wreckage of ages, others seem to be newly wounded. The chapel was destroyed long before the twentieth century, but the wreckage of the stairs I think is more recent. It is difficult to tell because the roof leaks badly in the rain and water streams down on the wood, ruining it, making it ageless.

I plod up the stairs carefully, trying not to spill the coffee. The Russian’s room is on the third floor, above Turnell’s area. He has a huge room, bigger than the library, too big because the walls have been torn out.

These upper rooms were probably storage rooms, says Burton. Once I pointed out that you’d want to have these upper rooms for the view, to see out over the trees. Burton told me I was an idiot, that a hundred and fifty years ago nobody gave a tinker’s damn about the view, people were too busy staying alive. You get attacked at night while you’re up in the tower, you’re bloody well dead. He spoke from his deep

English knowledge of castles, as if they were in his blood the way a barn or a New York skyscraper is in mine. Burton said that you use a tower for storage or for a prison and I said, well, the Germans have the right idea then. That's right he said. Bloody well right.

We put the Russian on the floor above Burton. Burton's door is shut and I pad softly by, hoping not to disturb him. I want to catch him alone today after I see Arkady, not before. So I zig zag up the stairs, pass his room, take twelve more steps and I'm in Arkady's dark chamber.

A pool of white light is at the other end of the room, a couple of yards away from his bed. I can smell him smoking in the corner, flat on his back, unable to sit up until I come. I feel a stab of pity for the man, lying there waiting patiently for my arrival. I think about him trying to light the cigarette lying down, his every movement a little misery. He turns when I walk in the room, doesn't greet me until he sees me. "Fine. Fine. Is good to see you now, Fine."

I carefully put the coffee on the chair by the bed and try to see him through the gloom. He's smiling today, the smile a dark crease in his leathered skin.

"How are you today? Is the pain bad?"

"Always it is bad, Fine. But I wake today and think, maybe is not so bad today. I wait for you to come."

"Did Burton wake you?" I gently pull back the sheets, find his heavy enamel pan and push it discreetly aside, a gift from the Stalag hospital in Gleiwitz. Arkady arrived at the castle on a canvas stretcher wrapped and strapped down in his envelope of blankets and clutching his bedpan, his hands already all knuckle. He was on the truck that brought me here, the same truck that re-supplies us every day. We were both loaded on the truck at the station in Gruppignano, me having come all the way up the country from the campo Bari in Foggia. Arkady is the first real Russian I've ever seen. But there's not much left of this Russian. His ribs almost poke through his pale skin, the neat flat bones like a bird's, like the ribs you take out of a roast. His arms are thin sticks. As for his legs, I guess his legs are a sight.

Arkady pulled himself out of a tank that the Germans hit in June, back in 1941, at a place called Vilna. I can remember all these details about my friends, where they were hit, what happened, because I feel bad about it all, because I don't let my youth exonerate me from their suffering. Back when Arkady's legs were burning in his T34 tank I had no idea where Russia was or why the Germans would want to attack it. I was in Niccalsetti, New York, enjoying the second week of my summer vacation. My attention to detail is a guilty reflex:: Burton was floating in his raft outside Norway when I was enjoying the first day of Christmas Vacation. Turnell was brought down in France on the last day of my senior summer vacation, 1942, the day I enlisted, having turned eighteen two days before, the day I knew that my parents could do without me while I did my duty, a duty which seems to me to be merely waiting for the war to end in a castle after my capture in Sicily.

Arkady tears me away from my thoughts. "Is snowing now out there?"

"Yes."

Arkady closes his eyes, smiles wearily. I examine his legs, thinking for the thousandth time that the abuse a human being can take is astonishing, obscene. His legs are smashed below the knees, misshapen and twisted forever. Turnell once told me that the intense burns across his shins and feet served to cauterize the wounds. His feet are barely recognizable, just hunks of warm, deformed meat. The toes are bowed over like wilted flowers. I touch each toe and watch his face. He knows the drill. He nods at each touch, grimacing once when I gently take the small toes in my fingers. It is a ritual now -- Arkady is past the threat of gangrene -- but he is so crippled that I fear afflictions other than rot. I worry about his blood, whether it flows all the way to his toes or whether it gets caught and clotted in the ruptured maze of arteries and veins balled around his wounds. I gently run my hands up his legs, past the bulbous, blue knees, to the burned thighs. So much meat has been taken off the thighs, burned away, that there is no more difference in thickness between the shins and the upper legs. The thighs are purple, fleshy bones with strange islands of dark hair growing here and there. He wears no undershorts, and his genitals lie against the shattered legs like a

small, withered animal nuzzling a suffering master. I pull the blankets up to cover his legs and lean over him. “Are you ready?”

He smiles, nods, reaches up and grabs my shoulders with his rough hands, his fingers digging into me like the talons of a great, fallen bird. I hook my hands underneath him and pull him up to a sitting position and briskly pull the pillows up behind his back. His eyes are squeezed shut, his lips pursed in a tight frown of pain. But once I let him go the frown loosens into a smile and the dark eyes open, the face lightens. He nods in a single slow, excruciating motion. “I thank you, Fine.” I find his cigarette in its tin on the floor and put it in his fingers and he carefully takes a lungfull of tobacco, savors the moment. “I thank you once more.”

It is what he always says. “I thank you,” as if helping a man to sit up in his deathbed to see his shadowy prison is the greatest gift I can give. I’m no doctor, not even a medico. Arkady was placed into my trust not because I have any expertise in ministering to dying prisoners. I sometimes think the Turnell has me look after Arkady because as the youngest of all the men I must have a surfeit of life to share.

I pull the blankets to his waist. He is wearing a ripe brown undershirt, a week old. He says, “This snow, I think I can smell it. The smell of snow that is falling. Is it snow where you live, Fine?”

“Yes.”

“Is much snow?”

“Yes. Lots of snow, every year. Many feet.”

“Is much like home for me, this snow. Is the great friend of Russia, this snow. The great enemy of the Germans.” He chuckles softly, afraid to move too quickly as he brings the cigarette to his lips, looks up at me. “I would like to see this snow, Fine. Very much like to see it.”

I look over at the other end of the room at the window and the bright gray clouds beyond. “I can move your bed to the window.” The window is high, almost six feet off the floor. “It will be colder over there, Arkady”, I warn.

“Yes, please. To the window, Fine.”

I take the end of the bed and begin to move him and he closes his eyes again as the vibrations disturb his legs. I drag the bed close to the window and he opens his eyes wide, gazes up at the light outside, his fists balled from the anguish of the move. "Yes," he says, "I know it is snowing now. I feel it, the wind. You go, look out there now."

I stand by the window, look into the pines. The window is set deep in the wall, leaded. I can see the trees but not directly down at the guards and the moat. "It's cold, Arkady. But there is snow in the trees now."

"On the branches, yes?"

"Yes."

"And there is many trees?"

"Yes. Many. Millions. As far as I can see."

"Is like my home, then. Snow as far as my eyes see, too." He is smiling widely, blinking in the morose light of the morning. His hands are flat over his legs, the cigarette sending up a languid line of smoke. I cross the room and fetch the chair and the coffee and the ashtray and the little gray box of matches off the floor and arrange everything within his reach. I poke my hand in my pocket and find the packet of pills from the day's rations, Arkady's pain pills. I put them next to the coffee, almost overwhelmed by the urge to feed them to him myself. "You won't be cold here, will you, Arkady?"

"No, Fine."

"I will bring soup later."

He nods slowly, his eyes still in the light. He has almost forgotten me. The move is a revelation to him. He simply says, happily, "Thank you."

"How many cigarettes do you have?" I look to the place where his bed was, see nothing. He has a green sack on the floor behind him full of his belongings, but I know he hasn't any cigarettes there because he couldn't reach the sack from where he was lying. "I will bring cigarettes in a little while."

"Just that for the pipe."

I look around, back on the floor near the bed pan, near the old place where he slept. “Where is your pipe?”

“Is here, in my pillow, Fine. Is here.” He indicates with his eyes, his arms flat and inert on the blankets. He hides his things from me like a child. The instinctive furtiveness of a prisoner.

I fumble around behind him and find the brass pipe that he crudely fashioned from a Russian shell casing, maybe a .702 cartridge. I drill my little finger into the little cedar bowl, trying to clean it. I put the pipe on the chair beside him. “I’ll come with pipe tobacco.”

“That is good. I thank you.”

His eyes are still on the window, the cigarette burning in his fingers, ignored. I try to decide whether to say something else but instead find myself departing with a strange, satisfied grunt because he’s sinking into one of his meditations now, the harsh winter light from the ancient window spilled across on his face. I pick up the now cold bed pan and leave him.

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Burton’s on the stairs, neat and dapper in his pale blue RAF uniform. I know he’s been there for a few moments, waiting for me, unwilling to brave what remains of Arkady. Burton curtly nods when in my direction as I reach his landing. An icy breath of air wafts in through the upright window beside the stairs.

“Is Turnell down there?”, he asks, his voice stiff, oddly formal.

He knows the answer to that even before I say yes.

“What’s our rations today, then?” He flinches when he sees the bed pan and he tactfully looks away as I place it discreetly on the stair behind me. I then tell Burton our ration allotment. His face looks pained. “Germans.”

He says the word the way he always says it, with all the derision in the world. Then he looks me up and down. “And how’s our friend upstairs?”

“The same.”

“Poor bugger.” His eyes drift to the bedpan, then return to me when I say, with great finality, “We have to talk, Burton.”

I never say Sir to Burton, although he outranks me. I still call Turnell Sir. After the Anglo-American forces reached Africa, we had to respect the English ranks. But Burton’s just Burton to me. And Burton’s the most military of all of us. He’s the only one who puts his trousers under the mattress to get a crease, for instance. Burton’s a man of times. Just seeing him out here, I know it’s 0800. Time for his tea and his first cigarette and then another wash. The Germans respect this punctuality, a punctuality that’s survived over two his years in the camps. That’s amusing, considering Burton’s fanatical hatred of the Germans, a hatred that survived even their care of him in Oslo. Burton was picked out of the water with a broken arm and the German sailors on the flack ship set it for him and didn’t question him until he was on shore. When I first met Burton, the day I came up here in the truck with Arkady, I had the distinct sense that he enjoyed hating the Italians and the Germans simultaneously.

They should have put Burton in infantry, or in armor. Up there in a plane he’d be like a loose cannon. Turnell, on the other hand, was born to fly above other people. Burton is strictly a hand to hand type of man.

But he’s waiting to hear what I have to say, waiting for my little sales pitch. I indicate toward his room, toward the neatly made bed. “It will take a minute.”

“What will?”

“What I have to say.”

“Private Fine, it is entirely possible that I don’t have a minute.”

But we both know that he has a thousand minutes to spare. I wait patiently on the stairs before him, blocking his way to his morning tea and cigarette, and he finally shrugs and lets me into his room. We close the door behind us.

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Burton reacts to my plan by asking me if I won't be so kind as to fetch him a cigarette from downstairs, but I have anticipated this request and pull a cigarette and match from my tunic. He lights it in a precise gesture and stands by the window enshrouded in a white haze. I've asked him to come with me, to break out of the fortress as soon as he thinks is prudent.

But right now he's looking down at the man on the moat as if he'd like to bomb him out of existence, as if he'd like to sweep out of the castle and crush the offending, frozen German.

"Fine, what you're talking about is a matter of planning, not bravery. The bravado of youth."

"I know."

Burton sits on the bed, his back straight, his hands idle on his thin knees. The uniform is now a shade too big for him and it is hollow and soft at the shoulders when he sits.

"When were you thinking of leaving?"

"As soon as we can, I guess."

"There are a few things we have to discuss."

I wait for it. He stands, shrugs his shoulders in thought, jams his hands in his pockets. "First, you should know that I can get us out of this place. Out to the moat, safely. It's not difficult."

Burton holds the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger and he examines it minutely before inhaling its wisdom. "The problems begin when we get past the moat."

I remind him of the train into Zurich. He waves the cigarette at me dismissively. "Not the train, although that's not going to be very jolly. No. The woods. Getting through the woods. Into Aosta."

"It will be dark, and I wouldn't think..."

"They have infantry platoons dug in the woods, Fine. Fine, imagine you're a Jerry. You have these mountains and the woods between you and the Italians. Perhaps by now, as you say, Monty's fighting his way up the Italian Peninsula." I'm irritated for a moment that he doesn't mention the Americans helping Monty out. "You have to take precautions. And one thing's ruddy sure: the Jerries don't trust the Italians. So these woods are the problem."

I watch him turning the problem over in his mind and I'm reminded of my father in the workshop, stripping down and rebuilding a canoe, sighting the gunwales and the bang-boards, measuring the ribs. In the art of canoe building, he used to tell me, there are two kinds of problems you must be aware of. The first type of problem has to do with the things that will happen, things you are sure of. The second has to do with those accidents that could happen. Double ribbing a sixteen foot canoe for people who want to shoot rapids -- that's a precaution you take because it's logical. But the expansion of the bang-plate, or supporting the bow deck, or bottle pegging the carrying thwart, these are problems you take into mind when you consider who is buying the canoe, who is using it. An old man who will be paddling on the lake doesn't need an extra wide carrying thwart. A seventeen year old taking off for a week with his buddies needs everything. The thwart supported, the bow deck pounded in and covered, the canvas double patched. You build the canoe starting with the person who uses it.

Burton here is working with problems that might happen. He's making solutions starting with himself and his doubts. The Germans might have platoons out there, sure, platoons of men freezing in the Italian woods. It's possible. But what I

want is advice about the things that will definitely happen, I want him to see the problem for what it is. I ask “What if I said we have to escape, have to take our chances now? That the Germans won’t keep us here if we move too far up the peninsula, they’ll move us back to a Stalag?”

See? I’m talking about the things I’m pretty sure will happen. I saw us on Sicily, I watched the defeat of the 15th Panzer division, I was there when we had North Africa and began the push into Italy. I just can’t see them putting up much of a fight in Italy.

And it doesn’t matter. I can tell that Burton doesn’t like the idea of a Stalag any more than I do. He’s figuring now. I interrupt his thoughts. “Burton, I’m afraid to go to Germany.” Now at least I’ve said it. I haven’t said I’m afraid of the Germans, soldiers like Hansch, because I’m not. That’s the truth. But I’m afraid of going to the country that produced Rommel and the SS and the prisoners we captured at Benghazi. And most of all their tanks and weapons.

That leads me to something else, too, something I can’t articulate because it’s the kind of problem that begins with me and not the escape. Something I think about at night, when I think about my capture. Now it’s enough to say simply that I’m afraid to go to Germany, to the Stalags across the border. He’ll agree with that, if only because he knows what Turnell went through. If I tell him the stuff about Benghazi he’ll say I’m mad and he won’t come.

Burton stands in front of me, his back to the wall. He clasps his hands behind his back like a teacher. The eternal problem of youth is that everybody thinks they have something to teach you. Confusing what they call experience with wisdom. Burton’s getting ready to put his objections in the form of a lesson. I figure the lesson will end when the cigarette dies in his hand and he remembers that he hasn’t had his tea yet.

“We’d have to get through the moat and the woods, into Aosta as quickly as possible. We won’t be able to bring much with us. You know that. That’s a day and a half of constant movement on foot. We won’t have any weapons. But we will have surprise on our side, won’t we?” He turns that over in his mind.

"I don't want to surprise anybody I want to get out of here. I think that we were a kind of mistake, a numbers mistake."

"A mistake?" He's frowning now, angry that I interrupted his lesson.

"Yes. The Germans thought there would be more of us, that they'd have the use of Italy longer. Now they realize they won't, and sooner or later they'll move us. Maybe they'll billet troops in here."

Burton nods, attempting to brush away the implications behind being moved. "We have the additional problem of the train."

"What?"

"Boarding it, for example."

I've been jumping trains since I was twelve. Back home, if you want to go to Northern Canada, you hop a lumber train to get up into the Park where your canoe is tarped and stowed. I've jumped on more trains than I've paid for. I've sat for whole days on stacks of newly cut pine trees bleeding sticky sap on my legs and boots. Cut wood and diesel smoke are two smells that have lingered from Niccalsetti, smells I can summon up in a moment. My parents have never had to loan me the car for my trips up north -- they couldn't, anyway. I have always counted on bicycles and trains and borrowed rides as long as I can remember. And I've crossed the Canadian border a hundred times without even thinking about it.

I tell Burton that we'll hop the train, that I know how, and he just looks at me. He was thinking up ways to avoid the guards at the Aosta platform.

He carefully pinches the end of the cigarette and manages to burn himself before it goes out. He shakes out the burned finger with a wince. Then he slips the cigarette in his right breast pocket. "Right Fine, come with me."

I follow him down the stairs and he ducks his head to avoid the gray wooden beams sagging over the landing. We surprise Turnell in the library, Turnell sitting in a quiet reverie, the fire already burning down and he hasn't made a move to stoke it. Burton practically ignores him, walks right to the shelves and starts pulling down books, stacking them in piles. Tiny flecks of old dust rise above him and spin in the weak white light pouring in through the window.

“Fine’s talked to you, Captain?”

“Yes.”

Burton grunts as he pulls another four books from the shelf. “He’ll need help. Need things.”

Turnell steeples his fingers as Burton finishes with the books. Burton places his hands on his hips and breathes deeply, blinking twice. The wedges of his shoulders crease the back of his uniform for a moment as he catches his breath. Then he looks over the shelf and awkwardly pulls out a board that has frayed at both ends. He reaches deep into the hole and finds a gray canvas bag, a ration bag. It’s folded over something square and heavy and he throws the bag on the table in front of Turnell and then sits in the chair beside him, already fumbling for his breast pocket and the cigarette inside.

Turnell lifts his eyebrows. “Are we meant to leave those books out?”

“To hell with the books. Fine can put them back. Fine, light this fag for me, there’s a good chap.”

I take the half smoked cigarette from his fingers and hold it to a stray ember from the fire until it begins to smoke, then hand it back to Burton, who puffs it to life. Burton waves a hand over the gray sack like a conjurer. “Open it, then, Fine.”

Inside I find a map. Underneath the direction compass it reads United States Army, Topographical Corps. It’s a contour map. Underneath that are Burton’s RAF charts. I open the map and try to find Aosta in all the weirdly shaped rings and circles. Burton snorts. “I’ll show you where we are, ass. This is what I want to give you.” He reaches into the bag and out comes a knife. Holding it by the top of the blade he passes it to me, grip first. It has a even inch blade and a cracked wooden handle. There are cruel looking teeth running up the other side of the blade.

“It’s a German knife, but I suppose it will do.”

It’s beyond astounding. Burton watches my face as he taps an ash from his cigarette to the floor, then says to Turnell, “I’ve been waiting months to see the boy’s face when I show him that lot.”

Turnell smiles, but it’s a weary smile. Burton turns his attention back to me.

“Right. Now how do you think I got that beauty?”

“Smuggled it with your personal effects.”

“Rubbish. If the Jerries found that on me I’d be shot or beaten. And back when they plucked me out of the water I was half dead. Would have given them anything they asked for, but they didn’t have permission to interrogate me on the ship and anyway only one officer spoke English and he spoke it badly. They took the bloody knife that I had when they picked me up, I’ve never seen it since. Try again.”

“You bribed somebody.”

“With what?”

“Doesn’t the survival pack come with money?”

“If it did wouldn’t we have spent it in the pub three nights before the run? What would I offer the guards anyway, English Sterling? And what guard in his right mind would sell a prisoner a knife? Even a Jerry. Especially a Jerry.”

I run my finger over the blade. A small splotch of rust has formed just over the guard. I rub it away from a basic training injunction to make double sure one’s knife is kept clean at all times. I’m still trying to imagine how Burton smuggled this down here.

“Give up?”

Burton is smiling broadly, enjoying the game. Turnell clears his throat. “Fine, Burton stole it from the Germans.”

Burton says, “I could have scrounged more, if I wanted. The only thing I really wanted was food and they don’t have any. Not in the rooms I checked, at any rate.”

“Where?”

“Where do you think?”

“The guard’s house?”

“They have all kinds of interesting things in there.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask me why. I was as surprised as you are. I just snatched it up and came back here.”

I look at Turnell. “Were you with him, sir?”

“He didn’t tell me he left the building until he came back.”

Burton shakes his head emphatically. “Of course not. He would have forbidden me to go. The senior officer is not to let prisoners needlessly risk their lives. Regulations, you know.”

I turn to Burton. “How?”

“How what?”

“How did you get out?”

“Through the chapel, of course.”

“The doorway is...”

“Blocked. With rubble. Well, I know. Crawl over the rubble and you get to the interior. Not much left, I’m afraid. You go out through there, through the sacristan door, or what remains of it. Leads right to the moat. Mother of a job negotiating all that clutter, let me assure you.”

“When did you go?”

“Before you came. Weeks before.” He waves that line of thought away, returns me to the guardhouse. “I just lifted the knife, you know. We already had the charts.”

Turnell inclines his head. “I did.”

“Indeed. Bloody good charts, too.”

I set the knife on the table between them. Burton stands, turns his back on us. “Turn to the second chart, the brown one. Northern Italy. The Americans have fitted out their charts in miles. Fair enough.”

I open the map. It is heavily creased, and as the paper spreads I fear that it will stick and split. But I’m lucky, it settles over the table in safety. Turnell locates his round wire spectacles next to him and slips them over the end of his nose. He leans forward, his hands dangling between his knees like a wily tenth round boxer. Aosta is a round bulls eye five inches from the top of the chart and the border with it’s thousand rings illustrating the mountains between Italy and Austria. A thin pencilled line shoots into the green and brown contours, a line that ends with a tentative looking dot.

“The dot represents us, Fine.” Turnell looks solemnly at the map.

“Fifteen miles from us to the town,” Burton adds from memory. “Right through the forest. Downhill.” Burton breathes smoke against the window. “Fine says he knows how to hop aboard moving trains. I don’t necessarily believe him, Captain, but I do admire the boy’s spirit.”

Turnell looks up at me quickly, as if he could judge at a glance whether or not I’ll find my way to the train. He lifts his chin slightly as he regards me.

“I think Fine had better be able to hop aboard a moving train and get inside and avoid the guards at the Swiss border.”

“I don’t need to get inside.”

Turnell looks up again. “Of course you do. You’ll freeze outside, on top of a train. And the train goes under secured bridges and a sentry walkway before it stops for the border.”

“But that last part doesn’t matter to Fine.” Burton says it without any irony. He’s watching the guard out there stamp his feet in the cold, Burton’s face strange and waxen by the window.

“No?” Turnell looks at him.

“No. Fine will jump off the bloody thing before the border, won’t he? Of course he will. He’ll cross the border on foot. Walk his way into Switzerland.”

“If he’s not crippled getting off the train,” Turnell counters. I’m not in the room any more. Turnell has turned his attention to Burton. Turnell’s hands hang off the ends of the armrests as he watches Burton finish his cigarette and presses it into the stone wall beside the window. Burton unwraps the tiny dark butt in the palm of his hand and as he searches for the last shreds of tobacco he says, softly, so as not to disturb the crumbs of ash and leaf, “I’ll show him the way out.”

“When?”

Now Burton lifts his head and looks at me, bringing me back into the room. “This afternoon. We’ll need a bit of light.” Then his eyes drop mournfully to his palm as he makes a fist and empties whatever is left of the cigarette into his pocket.

There’s a silence in the room as Turnell focuses his attention on the map again. Something else they want to say to me. But Burton has made the moment difficult for

him by bringing me down here and literally throwing open the subject. Turnell looks at me and gives me an innocent face before taking his seat. Now I have two instructors. A schoolboy brought before the deans.

Turnell suddenly looks at Burton. "It's cold in here, isn't it?" It is. I can feel the cold descending on us from the windows. The fire has died down to almost nothing. I crouch down and cross two thin logs over the new pile of ashes and the ashes glow and smoke. A spark spirals up into the darkness of the chimney, then another. I stay there by the heat and now Burton has to twist in his seat to see me. "Right. We have a weapon. We have a proper set of maps and proper traveling clothes. There's one thing you need."

"A compass." Turnell's irritated now, taking control of things. He crosses his legs. "A compass would do to even your chances. For a start."

Burton nods. "That might be in there."

"Did you look?", I ask.

Burton raises his eyes to heaven. He places his hands squarely on his pale blue knees and sticks out his chin. "I rather thought the knife was a rather decent start, Fine. And if I pilfered all their muck, then somebody might take note that things are amiss, wouldn't they? And I always knew that when the escape had to be made, Jerry was taking care of our belongings in the storage house, I know where they are. I kept the knife because one's meant to be prepared for the worst, for any eventuality and all that, and I didn't believe the Germans were aware that it was in there. Everything had just been sort of thrown into the room slipshod. It's actually a mess in there. We might have the only slovenly Jerries in the entire German Army looking after us."

"You took the knife because you are impulsive, Burton." Turnell adds, still silent and immovable in the depths of his chair.

"Yes. Quite. I suppose so." But Burton fetches him a dark look anyway. He shrugs in his uniform, then sits forward the way Turnell had been sitting. His forehead has turned pink in his excitement. "What we have to do, Fine, is get back into the guardhouse and get you the proper things. A proper coat, for instance..."

"And a compass," Turnell interjects.

Burton nods. "Indeed. A compass. They might even have field glasses in there."

"Boots, too." Turnell's heavy eyes are resting on my feet now.

My black GI combat boots are now faded into gray at the toes. I'm not even sure if the winter issue boot is much different. But these have traveled all the way through North Africa and through part of Sicily. If nothing else, they are supremely comfortable, the leather now finally supple around my toes. But Turnell is right: the boots have begun to come apart. Cracks and fissures run the length of the sole. The leather around my ankle and shin has collapsed into a crumple of wrinkled creases.

The first lesson they teach you in the infantry is to take care of your feet. It's a lesson I already know, coming from a town by a lake where every winter a member of the high school class gets drunk and freezes to death walking home. Cold feet means a cold body, period. I've grown up wearing layers of wool socks, dreading water in winter.

When the army issued the boots to me I wondered how anyone could imagine that these ugly monstrosities which we had to keep polished and upright at all times could possibly be used for hiking and marching, much less running. I even put in a request to my drill sergeant, back when I was green and stupid, if I couldn't supply my own boots, thinking to have my mother send down my hunting boots to Basic Training at Fort Henry in Ohio. My drill sergeant made me clean the latrine in my GI boots, made me sleep in them, checked my boots first during morning, afternoon and evening inspection. His nickname for me was Boots. Boots Fine. Or Fine Boots. And the boots are indeed comfortable and serviceable, despite their looks.

I think about the mountains outside and the snow in the trees and my toes ball into fists, huddling together for warmth at the thought of the cold. The trip out means twenty, thirty hours of exposure, including the cross country travel. I have taken care of my feet and of my socks. Take care of your feet and they'll take care of you, the US Army's motto. They haul out the same motto for their harangues about the stomach.

But without a compass, I'm dead. Especially when I drop off the train. It's that simple. Burton is standing now, his eyes on his own watch. "We can go to the storage room soon, Fine. Not now, but soon."

"Wouldn't it be better to go at night?"

Turnell coughs. "No. You have to have a little light to get out of the forest. With any luck, you'll have ten, twelve hours of travel before you're missed."

"So you had better start sorting out your plans," adds Burton.

I think of my room, of the things I must take. For a moment I wish I had a canteen. In cold weather, one tends to exhale more water than usual.

I suddenly remember Arkady's bedpan. I stand and nod at Turnell. "I have to take care of the Russian, sir," and I'm out of the room before Burton has a chance to throw me his irritated glare.

I jump from stair to stair to Burton's room and find the pan where I left it. I snatch it from the stair, cold and heavy, and make my way down past the kitchen where I empty the pan in the small latrine. I draw water into it from the ancient iron pump, forcing the long pump handle up and down, praying that the pipes have not frozen. The water burps into the pan and I swirl it around, dump it down the latrine. I shake out the pan and make my way back up to Arkady.

He's lying still and silent as a medieval carving, his hands piously crossed over his breast, his eyes closed to heaven. In the pale light from the window his face appears to be etched in chalk. I kneel by his bedside and tell him I'm here, I apologize for forgetting the pan. He opens his eyes to the light. I push up his blankets and know I'm too late, he's wet himself, has lain in it for an hour. The smell is sweet and warm.

"I'm sorry Arkady. I have to clean this up. It's going to hurt."

He nods, begins to smile again. I cross the room to a cold wooden pail half full of water and the gray cloth floating inside. I had this up here to bathe his face and arms. I haul over the pail and kneel, preparing myself to act the part of torturer.

We have no sheets to change. Mercifully, his blankets are not soiled and I carefully fold them at his feet. I wash down the sides of the mattress, then tell him to get ready. He interlaces his fingers on his chest and I push him on his side to get at the

wetness below him. He manages to bite his lip for the first three or four seconds of it but finally cries out in pain as I finish up and lower him to his back. His eyes are bright and glistening. He closes them to say, "I am sorry."

I can't bear to look at him as I pull the coarse blankets to his chin and his hands begin to move upward to the edges of the blanket. He's shivering. I look around desperately for a means of warming him, finally pull off my sweater and gently press it against his shoulders. His eyes open again when he's finally stopped shivering, as if he has warmed himself through an act of will. He looks up at me. I wish that I could at least let him sit up, but his pain would be unthinkable. But Arkady, in his still way, is jubilant. "The light is strong now, Fine. And I think I can smell these trees you speak of. These many millions."

The air seeping under the deep-set window is cold on the thin back of my green T-shirt. I stand by his bed and look up, out the window. "The snow has stopped," I say. And it has. The forest is hushed. Stern shadowy crowds of thin trees dissolve into other trees falling away from the castle, dusted a somber white, waiting for me.

He says, confidently, almost sternly, "This snow will come once more."

"Are you warm now?"

"Yes, yes. Please take back your sweater, Fine. I am warm now. I am sorry to have put you to these indignities."

"My fault."

His eyes close for a moment, as if he's listening for something, some comforting word from his past. Then he says, "I now have dreams of winters. Lying here in this bed, I think my dreams have more colors. These dreams are more real to me than before."

"You're lucky." I have ceased to dream in the castle, my own sleep is now a long darkness.

Arkady gazes up to the rafters. "When I was young I do not remember dreaming of winters. Or of trees. I think now I like it to be winter better than any other time. Is the most philosophical season, winter. But maybe now I believe I am

wrong. The time before winter, when the leaves fall and the ground is just beginning to be hard, this is a time for me, too.”

“Autumn.”

“Yes. Autumn. The time for leaves to fall away in the forest, and we see things as they are.” He grins. “These are the thoughts of an old man like my father. But these dreams I cannot stop. I do not wish for them to stop.”

He closes his eyes now, as if a dream has softly tapped him on the shoulder and beckoned him away. I stand looking down at him before Burton clears his throat at the door, wrapped in his leather bomber’s jacket, his hands deep in his pockets.

“We might be able to make a run for the storage house now, old boy. Change of plans.”

\* \* \* \*

Burton looks strained, his face seems tight now, and I follow him wordlessly down the stairs from Arkady to the floor we share. I have a tiny, forgotten closet of a room off the landing and I duck inside to find my sweater and my coat. I’m going outside now.

Burton waits, fidgeting, while I dress. He says, softly, “I want us to go now because I just saw the jeep leave. I think it was one of the guards and the Commandant. In my considered opinion, the less of these blighters that are about, the better for us.”

The tips of my fingers are shaking as I button my tunic to the top. Burton watches me impassively as I try to find the lump in his coat where the knife is, try to imagine him knifing a guard. I wonder if Burton knows how to handle a knife, knows enough to hold the handle like a ladle, the thumb resting just above the base of the

blade, attacking his opponent as if merely offering him the naked edge, knees bent, head up, short, slashing movements up and across. I consider carrying the knife for him and then wonder if I can trust myself, if I could rip open Hansch in his cold greatcoat. I'm going outside.

I follow Burton down the stairs to the chapel, to the rubble. Burton's eyes narrow as he inspects the space between the entrance and the heap of stones and masonry, the heap of ruined stone that blocks our way, leaving only perhaps two feet of crawl space at best, crawl space that leads upward, to confined horrors that block our way to freedom. The bricks are mashed to tiny fragments and as Burton sets a tentative boot into the heap.

He wordlessly scrabbles to the top of the rubble and I follow, the stone cold and biting my hands as I find my footholds, my knees tender to the grate of the rubble. The chunks of ancient brick are rough beneath my hands and knees and I hold my breath and duck my head when I get to the black space just beneath the chapel arch. When I breathe again a dampness released by the smashed walls sticks to my lungs. I smell something slick and stubborn growing in here: the odor of a tomb. In the new, close dark I follow the sound of Burton's grunts, wriggling along now on my stomach and the cold of the sharp stones beneath me works into my gut. Once I reach forward and touch the underside of Burton's boot, my palm layered with dust, my eyes blinking for light. We keep crawling upward in the dark and I sense more heavy stones above the back of my head. Cold protrusions maddeningly flick my hair as I worm along. A smooth pebble drops down the back of my neck and I try for a howl as it slips like a skeleton's icy finger down my spine, but my chest is heavy with my body and I only manage a quick curse. I'm heartened by my whispered "shit."

Where are we? I can't tell, except that we are on top of destruction heaped upon destruction, rubble upon rubble, ruin upon ruin. We're crawling up over the bones of the chapel, that's sure, perhaps the wreck of a bell tower as well, slowly working our way upward through the dark. It seems as if we crawl along forever, rooting in the stones like animals, and the width of the tunnel, if that's what it is, gets smaller and smaller. As I follow him through a series of turns, I try to imagine Burton

making this journey alone, the ferret in him driving him forward through the heavy dark, Burton thinking he'll crawl until there is nowhere left to go. Only Burton would go to such lengths: I know that I would never do this for the first time alone, would never pluck up the courage.

Burton stops short and I crash into his heels.

"Fine?"

"Yes, I'm here," I say stupidly. Our voices are flat in the heavy dark. I pull back a couple of inches, my scalp burning where I ran into his boots. I can hear him breathing hard. I yearn to bend my legs, to stand and stretch my back.

He says, "We're almost there, I should think. I'm bloody knackered. You're all right, then?"

"I'm OK."

"Give us a moment." He shifts his legs somewhere ahead of me, still breathing hard. "It's good and dark, isn't it? Bashed up my hands pretty well, feeling the way. I have to light some matches for this last bit, find our bearings. So be careful, won't you, because I'll be stopping the show now and then."

"I hear you."

He pauses a moment more in the dark, then rustles about, before he pauses again. "Christ, I can't reach the box. Hang on, no, here we are."

I hear him strike a match and a dim light flickers against the wreckage beside me. We're crawling under a wooden ceiling, in a kind of depression, rubble spreading out to either side of us. This must be what it's like to be laid to rest in a catacomb, I think, and then push the image away. The sulfur of the match scratches at the top of my throat just as the flame goes out. Burton grunts and lights another match, then mutters almost to himself, "That's it. Right. Almost there."

He lets the match dance for a moment in silence and then the darkness falls around us once more. He crawls forward again, then pauses. The space has opened up: I can reach beside me, flap my arms. Burton considers the way in the dark, then veers off to the right, stops, lights a match, then moves forward. We're going down now, sharply, and after a minute I have to hold myself back from falling into him.

Pulsing blood rushes to my head, to my nose, and my palms tear from the effort of keeping away from Burton. He pauses one last time and I run into his feet again, I just can't help it.

"I told you to watch yourself."

I apologize and I know he hears the annoyance in my voice. He strikes the last match, breathing stiffly. We crawl a few more feet and he tells me to stop, stay where I am. It is cooler now. He flounders about in the rocks and I feel him moving away from me, into the dark.

Suddenly a crease of pale light falls over the rocks beside me. Burton's found the opening. I suck in the bracing new air in great gulps. Burton is squatting by what looks like half a door below me, a dwarf's portal, now opened an inch. When my eyes adjust I realize he's found a normal door, the entrance half filled with debris. Burton is a gray, hunched shadow by the white line of light. I'm trembling with the urge to rush down to the air, but I hold back and brace myself against our newly conquered mound of wreckage with the raw heels of my palms. I'm almost willing to be shot for the relief of being able to stand.

He says, "I think we're all right for now. You can come down here. It's time for the difficult bit."

\* \* \* \*

I practically fall right on top of him in my efforts to get down to the door. I look at my watch and am amazed to find that we've taken only fifteen minutes to get here.

I peer out through the crack and see that Arkady was right, it is snowing again. Thick snowflakes are flying in the breeze, making a downy fur above the snow that has already fallen and compacted. Burton shifts below me, and then whispers, "Now

the guard can only see this door when he's about one o'clock from where we are, understand? Between one and twelve o'clock, he's visible, and so are we. Then we have a minute to get out of here and down the path to the main building."

He quickly turns and grabs my arm. "You're shaking like a leaf, Fine. What's wrong? Don't tell me you're not up to this, not now."

"I'm not shivering." I pull my arm away. "I'm tired, is all." I'm short of breath, too. Our life in the castle is too sedentary for awkward, claustrophobic climbs. I feel a deep burning in my arms and back, the complaints of little used muscles. Burton keeps his eyes on my face. "You're sure now?"

"Yes. I'm sure. "

"Because if that bloke down there notices you, it's all up for us, you see? He'll shoot you dead as sure as you're sitting here. You understand that aspect of things, don't you?"

"Yes, I do." I want to get this testing over with.

"I want you to follow me and don't take a fright or do anything stupid. Don't bloody trip. Stay near me. I don't need your life on my conscience, Fine."

"I will."

"This is the only hard part, Fine, then we're in." Burton turns, puts his eye to the line of light. After a few seconds I see the guard walking along, gray and erect. He passes by the door from one to twelve o'clock. Then Burton hisses out a "now" and pushes the door open wide enough so we can both slip out and sprint across the frozen path to the towering black corner of the main building. It's perhaps only thirty feet away but it seems like a mile. I keep thinking I hear the crack of the sentry's rifle, that our boots are making a pounding racket that will wake the eons of dead buried below the castle and alert the Germans above. In the three or four seconds that we are exposed, I believe that the two of us sound like an army on the move. I run with my eyes wide, waiting for the bullet to come whistling over the moat that will leave me a steaming corpse on the frozen ground. But the bullet doesn't come and after what seems an agonizingly long time we are safe behind the main building, flattened against the wall, safely out of view from the moat.

Burton's face is even more pale than usual now. His breath condenses before his face in time with his gasps. He leans close to my ear and whispers, "Let's not look so smug, Fine. We still have to get ourselves back, don't we?"

My nose starts to run in the fresh air. I look up into the flat, restless clouds and wish that we could remain exactly where we are just one moment more to savor this freedom, temporarily invisible to the guard without and the guards within. But Burton is already trotting along the wall. He is all utility, while I figure I should take my liberty as I get it. This is the first sight of the sky that I have had in almost a year that is not sanctioned by the German Army. My private sky.

But I follow Burton after a half moment and we come to a single door. He stops, draws the knife from his jacket, then looks again at the door.

"It's open. Bloody, bloody hell."

"What's wrong?"

"If it's open, perhaps there's somebody in there, wouldn't that be a wee bit logical, Fine?" He's venomously sarcastic now, speaking through his teeth.

The door's not flush with the frame. It hasn't a knob, but a long, black handle, nothing to turn, no key hole even. I place both my hands on the handle and flex my knees. Burton puts his back to the door, the knife pointed down, and I give the door a good shove, wondering what I'm supposed to do if there's a guard in there. The door opens with a scrape and a sigh into a silent gloom. I crouch down and Burton takes two steps into the room, turns from side to side, the knife held before him as he crosses the room. The only light in the room comes from a cross shaped window high on the wall. Burton tries the inside door and mercifully it's locked. I gently pull my door to and my eyes adjust to the room.

The window high up is meant for archers to shoot from. I don't know how I know this. It's a window meant for efficient killing, a window that has only inadvertent religious overtones. Below the window is chaos. It looks as if the room has been ransacked. Piles of coats loom in one end of the room. Broken crates have been pushed by the outside door. Boxes litter the floor, their contents spilling out. More coats. Tunics. Leather straps. There are even two saddles on the wall. Stacks

of empty oil cans. Square green cans for gasoline. A tire for a jeep. It is the squalor of the guards.

Burton is already rummaging through the scattered hoard and he stops to rest his eyes on me. "Well, get on with it, Fine. We might find a rifle in this lot, for all I know. Look around for gloves, boots, a decent bloody coat. Most of all, food. Anything. Cans. Cheese. Biscuits."

I plunge my hands into a promising pile, but find only rags hardened into strange, twisted shapes by a long-dried polish. I find a leather hat, then a box of stiff papers. I rattle the sheets and a fine haze of dust floats upward to my nose and eyes. I cough into my arms, push aside the box, rummage some more, crouched over the mess, my knees bent, my legs spread wide.

I push aside two spindly, broken backed chairs. Then I find a stack of boards rotting, stained. I stack these beside the dry rags and then I locate a metal bucket, its bottom rusted away. I find a torn sweater, a stain down the front, and slip it on over my own, the dust from that sinking into my pores. I have started sweating, but am now at least efficiently wading through the junk.

"I found a canteen, Fine. Bit knocked about, but not all bad. Want it?"

"You take it."

"Right."

I yank the top off a crate full of heavy jeep parts. I turn over a rusted hub of a wheel and the ripe smell of old oil wafts into the room. I find what must be a jack that is clumsy and heavy in the dim light. I pass the rest of the spare parts over and lift up a greatcoat, wondering if I should take it. I rifle through the pockets like a thief. There are two green woolen gloves stuffed into one of the pockets. I shove the gloves in my own pockets and keep searching for more useful things. Burton sneezes, then whispers, "We're not going to find a compass in this mess, Fine. That I can assure you."

It's only when I kick through another pile of boxes that I find the boots. I almost pass them over. They are wrapped in a long dark cloth, a drape perhaps, or a forgotten tapestry. Stiff riding boots, boots from another age, fashioned for a long

dead nobleman to fight a settled war. The leather is rubbed a delicate shade of brown. I take one up in my hands and turn it in silence for a moment, holding it to the ray of light from the window as if it were a bottle of delicate wine.

“What have you found?”

Burton pads toward me in the gloom, straining to see, a newly discovered metal bar in his left hand. He takes one of the boots from the floor. “Too small for me. Might fit you, though. Wonder why some Jerry hasn’t taken these for himself. Come, put them on, we have to get out of here soon.”

I sit on the floor, amidst the rags and yank off my GI boots. I stretch my damp socks over my toes, straighten them, then pull on one new boot, arch my foot, the strange leather creeping up my shin. I pull on the other, rise and stamp each one twice, as if for luck. The boots slip over my feet smooth as velvet slippers: the craftsman who molded them selected only the most supple calfskin to grace my feet. My broken GI boots, with their wilted laces and cracked innards, seem like poor, crude kin to these, their magnificent noble cousins. I stand tall in these boots, the heels click smartly against the stone floor as I rock back and forth.

Burton says, “Bring them along. Leave the old ones here, I suppose. Wouldn’t think anyone would notice.” He places his hands on his hips. “There’s not much else, I’m afraid.”

“I found some gloves.”

“Not really worth risking your neck for, I guess. Not having a compass will be a serious matter, Fine.” He’s thinking to himself now, thinking out loud. He turns the bar over in his hands and looks back up at me. “I rather think I’ll bring this along. If anybody wants to stop me I can give him a good clout. And I think we’ll use it to get you through the kitchen...”

Burton freezes. I tense, listen. Burton, without moving his head to look at me, slowly, softly says, “There’s somebody outside the door behind you. I need to know if you closed it.”

“Yes.” I’m sure I did. I throw my whole mind into the effort of listening, hear only the blood ebb and flow in my neck and scalp and my own heart pumping. I hear

Burton's deliberate, fragile breaths, as if he's scenting the air. And then, when I stop breathing all together, I hear the footstep outside the door, the crunch in the snow. There's the sound of somebody pushing the door behind me, and Burton slips by me, fumbling in his jacket for the knife. I follow him to the door, still holding my breath, flatten myself against the wall opposite Burton, who has drawn the knife and holds it in front of his body like a charm. I can hear gloves scrabbling against the door now, hard, brutal pushes. "Bist du da drinnen?", then "Warum ist diese tur zugeschlossen?"

Burton is breathing quickly now and the guard outside, more curious and bored than concerned, gives the door a kick. Burton waves the knife once, his left hand a fist. He doesn't look at me. The guard outside pushes the door again. "Mach die tur auf!" The guard coughs heavily.

Burton begins to shake. I see the end of the knife tremble. Burton's jaws are clenched, his eyes direct, but his fear is between us, something real. His fear grants him a sudden, frantic resolve and he waves the knife like a wand before the door, as if hoping to make death disappear. I take a step close to him, brace myself. My shoulder touches him, and still he doesn't look my way.

Thomas knocks on the door, three sharp taps with his bare knuckles. The blade in Burton's hand quivers as he suddenly shifts his position, takes the knife up like an ice pick, raises it almost to his ear. I gently but firmly put my hand on his other arm, the arm close to me and whisper his name, but still he doesn't look at me, merely licks his lips, waiting for the guard. My right hand moves up his arm to his shoulder, then across his back towards the knife and in a quick, easy motion I close my fingers over his. Burton licks his lips once more, glances at me, then at the door. I lower his hand, step in front of him and only then does he look me in the eyes, just as he lets go of the knife, lets it drop into my palm. I turn it around, crouch, slip my thumb up the handle. I face the door and can now plainly hear Burton breathing. I close my hand around the latch. If the sentry tries to force the door I'll jerk it open, take him down while he's off balance.

The sentry doesn't touch the door, but he's there. I wonder if some instinct has warned him about me, for he stands there doing nothing, just a silent, invisible menace. He shuffles his feet, takes a step from the door. Then he crunches away, leaving the two of us. We haven't much time.

Burton speaks almost immediately after I straighten. "I would have gone for him, Fine." He's not accusing me of anything. He's putting forward his best defense. And he's right. He would have stood there, the knife cocked by his ear, and met whatever came through that door. No question about it.

I point the tip of the knife downward as Burton turns his eyes to the door. "You seem like you can use that thing, Fine. Good show. Might have spoken up sooner." He's groping for his clipped tone.

"I should have. You're right."

It feels strange to be agreeing with Burton, to need to support him. And when I assure him he's right he smiles sadly, shakes his head and says, "No. I think that you should know something. If you hadn't taken that knife from me and he had blown in here, the bugger would have killed me. He would have killed me straight out. Then he would have killed you." Burton looks down at the knife in my hand. "You keep that damned thing. We might need it." He buttons his coat and shakes out his shoulders. "Come on, then, let's go before he comes round the other way to see why the door was locked."

But all that greets us beyond the door is the black, looming prison building and the wind's languid swirls of new snow. When I reach the edge of the wall and cautiously look around the corner, I discover that no sentry has replaced Thomas yet. We sprint for the chapel door anyway, scurrying along the base of the castle desperate for the safety of the passage, rats fleeing a deluge.

\* \* \* \*

Turnell greets us with surprise when he hears us return through the remains of the chapel. He stands by the entrance to the library, his glasses on, his face drawn and tight. As I poke my head under the arch, he says, flatly, "I thought you two were dead."

Burton slips on the rubble on his way down to Turnell. Turnell's hands are clasped in front of him, and he greets our survival with perplexed surprise rather than exaltation. Burton catches his breath and says, "Why would you think a thing like that, Captain?"

Turnell looks us over -- ensuring we are not ghosts -- and asks us to follow him into the library. He's pushed his chair aside so he can stand at the window, gestures to it. "Look for yourselves."

Burton and I huddle against the bottom of the window. The jeep is back on the other side, and behind it is a black, bulldog shaped Schwimmwagen. Two of our guards lean against the hood of the jeep, but the driver of the black Schwimmwagen sits alone in his little, vicious-looking SS vehicle. The driver is dressed in black, his hair a clump of white burrs clinging to his scalp. He sits with his hands gripping the steering wheel, thin, white faced, his gaunt, blue-veined neck poking stiffly out of the heavy black uniform. He can't be over the age of eighteen, perhaps half the age of either Hansch and Thomas, but our guards avoid him nonetheless, pretend not to notice his glare. The driver is wearing a stiff, straight black collar that would make him look oddly clerical if it weren't for the silver lightening badges under his chin. Thomas and Hans are smoking, idling away, while this child of the SS sits doing nothing, his eyes dark and mistrustful even from here. It is this imperious eighteen year old face that strikes fear into me. A flimsy canvas top is stretched over the Schwimmwagen and the wind rustles it as the driver sits there making no effort to warm himself. His hands will freeze to that wheel before he makes a concession to the cold, I think.

The SS Schwimmwagen itself looks like a dark, poisonous steel toad, its two covered headlights like sleepy, reptilian eyes. We captured one of them in Benghazi,

as well as two beige, desert camouflaged Kubelwagens. We appropriated the Kubelwagens, gave them hasty olive paint jobs and assigned them Army lot numbers from my unit. The Kubelwagens, with their four cylinder, two wheel drive engines at the back of the vehicles and their high wheel base performed better than the jeeps. The SS Schwimmwagen had more power, but there was something sinister about the amphibious little black vehicle that we captured amidst all of the beige and brown flotsam left behind by the Germans. We located our Schwimmwagen beside the main road out of the town, flipped over on its back, a dead black desert beetle, the back of the driver's head sheared off six feet away. Our unit took the Kubelwagens, cleaned out the fifty pounds of sand in each engine box and replaced their drive shafts with parts taken from our own jeeps, but we left the upside down Schwimmwagen behind, telling ourselves that it was damaged beyond repair. But some joker pried off the white SS plates before we departed.

Now the driver out there sits sullenly waiting for his master inside. Turnell must have thought the arrival of the SS had something to do with our expedition. But an escorted SS vehicle is a herald sure as walking crows before a storm. Turnell speaks my thoughts. "I hope the SS is just paying us a social call."

"Or arranging for new prisoners to arrive," Burton grunts.

Turnell shakes his head slowly, slips his glasses from his face, rubs his nose. "They've come to move us. Or to give orders to move us."

Turnell's eyes move back to the window. "If anyone is wanting to leave this place, there's no time like the present."

I sit by the fire, cross the new boots over one another. Turnell looks down at them. Burton watches him examine the long boots. "Fine found himself some Italian footwear."

Turnell reaches into his pocket for a cigarette. "Not Italian, I don't think. The Italians go in for black boots." He sits in his chair and holds out his hands. "Hand one over here, Fine. If you don't mind. Let's see what you've found."

I pull off a boot, feeling as if I should have a valet, and hand it over. Turnell's eyes travel up and down the length of the leather. He inspects the bottom of the heel and laughs. "The writing here is Cyrillic, Fine."

Burton steps over to us. "Cyrillic? You mean our friend Fine here has a pair of Communist boots?"

"Believe so, Fine. I believe so."

Burton takes the boot up suspiciously, licks his fingers and rubs away the dust and grime. "So it is. A Russian boot."

Russian boots. Burton sees my face and says, with perhaps a shade too much callousness, "I shouldn't worry, Fine. If they are Arkady's he won't be needing them any time soon."

Something outside catches Burton's eye, and I see his lips press together into a tight line. "Come see our bloody visitor."

Outside is an SS lieutenant. His coat is thrown over his shoulders and he's laughing with the commandant as they cross the bridge. He wears a flat green tunic and his eyes are hidden by the peaked officer's cap. His driver is already out of the vehicle, standing at attention. I look down at the black belt around the officer's waist, at the triangular sidearm holster under his left elbow. The driver has unchained the barrier in the Schwimmwagen and clicks his heels together as his officer approaches. Thomas and Hans do the same. The Lieutenant ignores them all, stands talking to our commandant, who has brought along, of all things, a swagger stick which he shoves under his arm. The commandant's guards snap to attention twice as he strides by them.

I close my eyes for an instant and open them, look down at the five of them out there on the ancient cobbled road, the SS officer laughing in the snow. His laughter carries up to me, tinny and false. I try to see the death's head symbol on his cap. All their SS officers carry the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross and the golden German Cross as well. Crosses and death's heads, runes. This is an army that relishes the symbol. We once recovered bodies of the Allgemeine SS officers in Benghazi, the political watchdogs of the German Army. I had been tempted to take as a souvenir the

heavy silver belt buckle proclaiming *Meine Ehre heisst Treue*, this noble sentiment lost to me, who had seen the conception of honor these men held. *Meine Ehre heisst Treue*. *Gott mit Uns*. Slogans easily cast in silver and gold to be scavenged by the nimble fingers of Arabian women ransacking dashing blonde corpses.

These uniforms do not mean anything to me. The NCOs uniforms from their armored regiments do: heavy black wrapped tunics with black berets. Gray shirts and black ties. Finding corpses wrapped in this heavy black cloth somehow made the bodies seem foul, as if they were the remnants of a dead hell. And all the dead NCOs were found with their uniforms intact. Dying in black, silver skulls on the throat. An army dressed for death.

Burton is the one who says, "It's all up here." He doesn't move his gaze from the window. "If there's going to be an escape, it has to be now."

"I know."

"I mean today. Right now. There is no tomorrow when you're talking about the SS. Not in this army."

Turnell turns his back to us, kneels down before the books he's carefully stacked back in the shelves. He pulls out five, then six. "It's still light out. When the lieutenant leaves, that's the time to go." He has folded the maps into a large folio. He stands before me. I watch the lieutenant salute our commandant, his arm shooting straight in the air. He cracks the air with a shrill "Heil Hitler." The guards return the salute, as does the commandant. I can feel the cold wind outside now. The snow has begun in earnest.

"I have to get my things upstairs."

Turnell checks his watch. "Go. You don't have much light left today."

I go to the ration bag and find the tobacco I neglected to bring back to Arkady, in black strings at the bottom of the sack. I leave them in the room and find my way up the stairs to Arkady's room. It is freezing up here, but he's there exactly where I left him, his hands flat on the covers. Before I enter, I sit on the last stair and pull off the boots, enter the room barefoot, feel the cold wooden floorboards beneath my feet.

I am carrying the boots underneath my arm. Arkady turns slowly to me, his eyes hazy.  
“Fine.”

“How are you this afternoon?”

“I have slept. I have wondered where you were.”

I crouch down beside him. “I have something to show you.”

“Good.”

“Before we talk, should I light your pipe?”

“Of course. Just as always.”

The homemade pipe is where I left it. I berate myself for not bringing the tobacco sooner. I fill the pipe in silence and he waits with his endless patience. I light the pipe for him, bringing the end to my lips, drawing the acrid smoke into my throat, the clump of tobacco glowing and dying, then glowing again. Thick smoke lazily wafts upward from the pipe in my hands. I am on my haunches now, bowed over the pipe. Only when it has been truly lit, the shell case hot to the touch, do I present Arkady with the pipe, bringing it to his hand, closing his fingers around it. I arrange his pillows so he can look at me and smoke with some semblance of comfort. He touches the end of the pipe to his lips once, without inhaling, his eyes far away from me. After he lowers the pipe, he says, happily. “I thank you Fine.”

“I have found something you may be interested in.” I hold the boots before him, as a supplicant would. “They are Russian boots.”

“Russian boots.” He repeats the sentence with a smile, as if I have somehow been amusing.

“I thought they might look familiar.”

“Ah, yes.” Nothing more. He is now gazing at me again. “I was correct about this snow. It has started again, yes?”

“It has.”

“It will not stop now.”

“I know.”

Only now does he look at the boots I hold before me. “These are old boots. Dress boots, you see. Much to be prized. Very beautiful.” His eyes travel back to the window. “I will ask you a favor, Robert Fine.”

“What is it?”

“I would like to see this snow.” He clears his throat. “I would like you to make this possible for me.”

“You mean move your bed again?”

“No. I must be able to stand, you see. You can do this for me, please. I ask it of you. Is not so very much to want, I think.”

I place the boots on the floor and speak clearly. “Your legs, Arkady. To stand will be painful.”

“You will help me, Fine.”

“But your wounds are such that any movement will bring you much pain. Very much pain. Terrible.”

His grip tightens on the pipe. “I am in much pain now, my friend, Robert Fine. Very much pain, as you say.” His breath catches in his throat. “So I do not worry anymore about this pain.”

“It may hurt you to be moved.”

He laughs then, not the weak laugh of a sick man, but a booming laugh of pure amusement, an unexpected thunder in the room. “I am already greatly hurt, Fine.” He is smiling broadly, holds his arms upward, his fingers trembling. “You do this for me now, before I become afraid of your pain, yes?”

I move the sheets away, exposing Arkady’s body to the cold. His purple and red legs I ignore. He doesn’t start to shiver until I move behind him, gently push his arms down. I get down on one knee, slip my hands beneath his arms. I lower my head to his. “You are ready?”

“Yes.” He closes his eyes. “Yes.”

His skin is not firm and his breath is sour. I slowly push him forward, lift him. He is light, perhaps only a hundred and fifty pounds, maybe less. I rise to my feet and

heave him from the bed and he shouts in distress as his twisted bare feet touch the floor beside mine. “Do you want me to stop?”, I ask.

He shakes his head, his eyes focused on the light from the window. He tries to move his legs as I wrap my hands around him, feel his narrow bones compress. His flesh sags like an old man’s. His head lolls back into my chest as I awkwardly bring him across the floor, one step, two steps, three, a grisly waltz. His breath is coming in shuddering gasps. As we reach the window he tips his head forward in eagerness.

“I see outside, Fine.”

I take one more step and he tells me to stop. As we stand there in the cold silence his breathing eases. He smiles broadly, radiant in the light. “Is just as you have said, Fine. Trees.”

“And snow.”

“The snow,” he repeats. “Like my home, yes.” He raises an arm and touches the glass of the window with the tips of his fingers. Tears are running down his face to his chin, where they wait and fall. His face glows with them. His breathing becomes easier in my arms and his head falls back under my neck. For a moment I think he has lost consciousness. I speak his name and he answers “Yes. I am still here with you. Do not worry.”

“Are you in pain?”

He shakes his head. “There is no pain now.” But his body betrays him, his tiny reserve of strength seeping away as I hold him. He slowly points to the trees. “You will go out there.”

“Yes. I will go.”

“Robert Fine, you will see these trees again.”

“Yes.”

He laughs again, then clamps his teeth shut to move himself in my arms. “You will wear these new boots you have found.”

“Do you know what I thought, when I saw where they came from?”

“What?”

We are standing in the cold light and though he is breathing well I can still feel his body steadily weakening, his hoarded reserve of strength draining away. I say, "I thought these boots might have been yours."

"Mine? Is this what you think?"

"It is possible, isn't it?"

"I have no more need for boots, Robert Fine."

He is no longer weeping, his eyes are clear. He whispers, "Have you seen such beauty in all your life, Fine?"

"It is beautiful."

He now slumps in my arms. I have to catch him. His eyes are still in the trees. "I must lie down now. I am sorry."

"Have you seen enough?"

"No, never." He shuts his eyes. "But now I think I am very tired, Robert Fine."

I can no longer walk him and so I reach down to sweep him up in my arms. His eyes are still closed, his lips turned down in a frown. It is like holding a very young, sick child. I bring him to the bed and cover him, place his hands over his blanket. His pipe has gone out. He opens his eyes, remembering something. "Let me see you put these boots of yours on."

So I sit and slip them over my feet. He watches me stand and stamp them into place once more. He does not smile. He looks at the boots, then at me. His eyes linger on my face and then he makes his last supreme effort, which is to turn away. "Go, Fine. You must go now." Then he shuts his eyes to me.

\* \* \* \*

I come down the stairs to the library to find Burton and Turnell waiting for me. Burton looks me over first. "You still have the knife, I suppose."

"Yes."

Turnell bends over the map, points to the point marked Aosta and the point, farther away, that is our prison. "You will have to go follow the road to the tracks, stay beside the tracks as long as possible. It would be better to have you cut through the woods to the town, but without a compass, this is impossible."

"I'll be all right."

Burton has lit a cigarette, one of Turnell's. "We'll see you off now. You still have some light. Then you are on your own, Fine. They won't know about your being gone until tomorrow."

"You're not coming." I say it as a statement of fact, something I've known all along.

"No."

"Why?"

Burton sighs. "The train. I'll never be able to do that bit and you can. I have to be able to walk, Fine."

I look at the two of them. "You know that they're going to move you two. This arrangement won't last. They'll come for you, bring you to Germany."

Turnell nods. "We'll just have to wait and see."

Burton speaks up. "And I'd be willing to bet they won't come right away."

"Come with me. Even if you have to walk."

"No, thank you. Not alone. And somebody has to stay here and explain to the guards where you are. To at least see their faces when they realize you've pissed off." Burton's stands, the argument over. "Are you ready, Fine?"

"I am."

"Then let's get on with it."

They lead me to the tunnel, before the wrecked chapel. Turnell holds on to the maps as long as possible, then folds them twice and slips them in my hands like a

father doling out spending money before a voyage. Then he shakes my hand and turns away.

Burton is much more abrupt. “You do have your matches?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t get lost in there. You know the way, just keep veering to your right.”

Then Burton wraps his arms around me, a quick, firm hug before he shakes my hand.

“Good luck to you, then.”

I look at the two of them for a long moment standing shoulder to shoulder in this prison before I make my way up to the arch of the chapel, to the entrance to Burton’s tunnel and the beginning of my escape. Before I disappear I turn and salute them both. Then I’m gone.

\* \* \* \*

I wait at the chapel door for the sentry to pass by. I have a only minute before he comes back, a minute to get below him in the moat, out of his line of vision, then another minute to get out to moat. When I see the sentry pass a second time I make my run over the edge. The side of the moat is as steep as I feared and I almost fall in my haste. I bang into the ice and frozen ground at the bottom clumsily, then cling to the opposite side and begin crawling upward. My moment is over, the sentry must be above me, but I am safe for now. I claw my way up, my boots digging into the earth, my hands already wet through my stolen gloves. The sky is still bright this late in the day for my journey out. I climb hand over hand toward the light, the light that will not hide me, the light that will force me to trust in luck and Providence and speed.

The End