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"Black Card"

by Thompson Girl

"Where's Saunders?" Hanley asked.

"He dropped back with Cajé and Kirby. Wanted to make sure that German patrol didn't pick up our trail," Littlejohn answered. "Looks like the Krauts want their major back something fierce."

Hanley looked at their two prisoners. The car accident had left the German major with only a bloody scrape across left forehead and cheek, a torn uniform, and his bright blond hair mussed and caught with bits of gravel. The same could not be said for the major's driver. The feldwebel moaned from the stretcher they had rigged for him, and Doc knelt beside him, checking his bandages and looking grim.

The major drew himself up under Hanley's scrutiny. "I am Major Franz Meinhardt," he said, his English heavily accented, but understandable.

"Lieutenant Hanley," Hanley said, saluting.

The major returned the formality and asked, "How far are we from your lines? My man, he is hurt badly."

Hanley asked, "Doc?"

"He needs a hospital, Lieutenant," Doc said. "I can't do anything more for him out here."

Hanley faced Meinhardt again. "We'll do our best to see he gets help."

"Thank you," the major said. "I will help carry his stretcher, if you will let me." It surprised Hanley, the sincerity in the German's voice. It must have shown, because Meinhardt added softly, "He is a good man."

Hanley acquiesced and gestured to the rest of the squad. "All right, let's go. The sooner we get moving, the sooner we can get him to a doctor."

He stepped aside. Doc and Meinhardt lifted the stretcher and set out immediately, Littlejohn disappeared into the woods ahead, and Hanley took up the rear position. He hesitated, his gaze roaming through the sunlit field they'd regrouped in, wondering how Saunders, Kirby, and Cajé fared. There'd been no sound of gunfire recently, and he hoped that was a good sign.

He hadn't told the major, of course, but they were still dangerously far behind German lines. It had started out as a simple enough mission to take out a bunker. But intelligence had drastically underestimated the German forces in residence, and the American attack had been repulsed. They had lost five men, and Saunders had been winged. The survivors had withdrawn in two separate groups to evade being overrun by superior numbers. It had been pure luck that Saunders and the men who'd retreated with him had managed to ambush the staff car and capture

Major Meinhardt, who'd been on his way to the bunker. It was small consolation for the otherwise disastrous mission.

And they still had to reach American lines safely, or even that would be for nothing. He pushed his worries away. The three men would catch up when they could.

One moment, they were walking through the woods, the next a dozen Frenchmen sprang out from behind the trees on either side, rifles pointed directly at the Americans. Hanley spun, but they were surrounded. "Hold your fire!" he barked at Littlejohn. "They're French."

Littlejohn tightened his grip on his rifle and eyed the French uneasily. Hanley didn't blame him. They were a rough-looking group, with no hint of welcome for the Americans, but none of the usual partisan cunning and reserve either. These men stood severe and unsmiling, their own stolen rifles – Hanley spotted American, German, and British weapons in their hands – unwaveringly aimed at them. Hanley wondered if they were criminals.

A thin, clean-shaven man, with eyes as icy as any he'd seen, stepped forward. "Your guns," he said. "Drop them."

"We're Americans," Hanley said, making no move to obey. "On our way back to American lines with two prisoners."

The Frenchman was unfazed. "You are trespassers. Who you are does not matter."

"I said we're Amer–"

The Frenchman snapped a couple of commands, and several men stepped forward to forcibly disarm the two Americans. They manhandled the stretcher and wounded man away from Doc and the German major, who were shoved to join Hanley and Littlejohn. When the major objected and pushed away one of the French, he was backhanded for it. The French searched their clothes, claimed their bayonets, extra ammo, and Hanley's .45, but when they didn't take anything that wasn't a weapon, Hanley had to rethink his first image of them as criminals.

"What's going on?" Doc whispered. "What was that about trespassing?"

Hanley shook his head. "Maybe they just want our weapons."

"*Taisez-vous!*" the Frenchman said. He gestured to the major. "Come with us."

They're stealing our prisoner, Hanley thought, but then the man's waving hand extended to all of them, Americans and Germans alike. Two of the French lifted the feldwebel's stretcher and started off.

"*Vite!*" came the angry command when the Americans didn't obey immediately. They were too outnumbered to offer more than a token argument, but that didn't stop Hanley from protesting again, "Hey! Now, wait a minute!" His words fell on deaf ears. The muzzle of a rifle prodded his side, urging him after the others, and Hanley had no choice but to turn and start walking.

But just before he did, motion caught his eye, and he saw someone slide out of sight behind a tree, forty feet back. And he would have sworn the dark, bearded face he'd seen beneath the helmet was Caje's. He hid the urge to smile and followed after Doc.

From a distance, burnished by the afternoon sun, the château looked untouched by the war, something stately and elegant left over from the Eighteenth Century. Hanley could easily imagine the evening air ringing with the laughter and music of a gay party. But as they approached, Hanley saw the rubble where a carriage house might have once stood. Broken windows on the second story cast jagged reflections of the sky, and dirt and dead leaf piles

littered the front steps and drive. Up close, the château and grounds carried a forsaken air, and the weeds and vines strangled the flower beds and untrimmed lawn.

The Frenchmen herded everyone through a neglected rose garden to a side door. The hallway echoed as they were hurried inside. The corridor opened into a large foyer with a curving, open stairway that led upstairs. Hanley followed the squad beneath the stairway's arch into what must have once been a grand ballroom. The polished wood floor stretched to the back of the château, where glass doors opened onto a balustraded veranda. A breeze whispered through white tattered curtains.

The large ballroom stood empty except for a wall-mounted display of swords and armor and one man, his back to them, watching out over the veranda with a saber in his hand. He spun at their noisy entrance, swished his sword through the air, and strode to meet them.

The man reminded Hanley of the château. From a distance, he seemed handsome, in fancy clothes, with aristocratic bearing. But up close, like his home, his days of true finery seemed long past. His tanned face had not seen a razor that morning, and his moustache needed trimming. Dark circles underscored brown eyes, and his thick, curling hair needed a wash and cut. The white silk shirt had not seen an iron or a washtub in so long that it was doubtful the sweat stains would ever come out. The black trousers had a ripped seam down one leg. His black boots, however, were polished and buffed, the leather unmarred by even a single scuff. Hanley stared at them a moment, fascinated by the odd discrepancy.

The man's gaze swept over the prisoners and settled on the injured feldwebel. He snapped his fingers and pointed at him. Three of his men hurried forward, shoving aside Doc and Littlejohn to reach the German's stretcher. They carried the wounded man back out the way they'd entered. It took a moment for what was happening to sink in, then both Doc and Major Meinhardt were objecting loudly in English and German. Armed Frenchmen blocked them, forcing them back into the center of the room. The single gunshot came less than a minute later, and Doc and Meinhardt both fell silent mid-sentence.

For a moment, uneasy stillness oppressed everything. The French, stolen firearms raised, poised for another outburst as Doc and Meinhardt fought back the need to act on their outrage. But when Doc opened his mouth, Meinhardt touched his arm and shook his head. Doc's shoulders slumped a little, but his fists were still clenched.

Hanley felt outside it, watching the tableau. He realized he wasn't the only one observing the reactions without reacting himself. The sword man's expression was cold, the lips beneath the moustache almost sneering. Weakness, Hanley thought. He saw only weakness in their caring for the doomed driver.

The man glanced toward him, and Hanley met the appraising stare evenly. The man flashed him a white-toothed grin. "I am Philippe Carton. And you," he said, "are trespassers on my land."

Hanley'd had enough. "We're Americans," he said roughly. "And *you're* preventing us from returning to our lines with this prisoner."

Carton laughed, but there was no warmth in it. "You are *all* prisoners, and you are going nowhere." His English was very good, just a trace of an accent.

"My headquarters is expecting—"

Carton waved a hand dismissively. "I said you are going nowhere."

"When we don't show up—"

"Soldiers die all the time. That's their fate, no?"

"In war, perhaps. Not murdered by their allies."

Carton's smile faded, and he stepped toward Hanley, his saber angled threateningly. Hanley hadn't paid attention to the weapon before, assuming it was some sort of aristocratic affectation. With it pointing at his face, he could see all too clearly that it was a real saber, its single-edged blade glinting and very finely honed.

"We are not allies," Carton said. "The *Boche*, the bloody Englishmen, you apple pie Americans... you are all invaders. No different, one from the other. This is not your land. It is not your country."

"It's a little late for—"

"These lands have belonged to my family far longer than your United States has even existed. Don't talk to me about Allies. Don't talk to me about war. It does not exist here. This is my home."

Hanley was losing patience. "Now, you just listen a moment. The war—"

"Silence," Carton interrupted, "or I will have Antoine take you outside to join the German."

Hanley ignored the command, ignored the thin subordinate Frenchman who'd captured them in the woods. Maybe Carton needed a dose of reality. "And when the German patrol following us catches up to you here?" He figured he was probably only slightly exaggerating. If it wasn't the patrol trailing them now, it'd be another one. Sooner or later.

Carton shrugged, almost cheerfully. "Then we will have more prisoners."

Hanley tried one more time. "We're here to help you beat the Germans."

"You are not here to help me. My weak countrymen, perhaps, but not me. I need no man's help." Carton's gaze fell squarely on Doc. "And I have to wonder just how much help you are, giving such compassionate care to your enemy."

Hanley shook his head at Doc, warning him to keep silent. Doc pursed his lips and subsided.

Carton smiled at Doc, then glanced at Hanley. "You say we are allies, Lieutenant? *Eh bien*, good. Then you will have no objection to me eliminating our common enemy." He leveled his saber at Meinhardt.

The German raised his hands and took an instinctive step backwards.

"The major is my prisoner," Hanley said quickly. "And I would object. He has valuable information we need."

"I see," Carton said. "Too bad. You will have to watch me kill him anyway. And I already told you, you are *all* my prisoners. Antoine!" he called and issued orders in rapid French.

Three of Carton's men shoved Hanley, Littlejohn, and Doc against one wall and kept them under close guard, while the rest isolated the German in the center of the room. They spread out, forming a broad ring around him, rifles at the ready should the major try to run.

Carton re-entered the circle carrying a second saber in addition to his own. He tossed it hilt first to Meinhardt, who caught it awkwardly.

"What do you want from me?" Meinhardt demanded. "I have no skill with this."

Carton shrugged. "Neither have I. But it does not matter. You will defend yourself, or I will cut you down where you stand. *En garde*."

"Lieutenant!" Meinhardt called urgently, searching around him for any way out.

The man at Hanley's side jammed his rifle muzzle hard into Hanley's stomach, and Hanley gasped and doubled over, gritting his teeth, his protest lost in pain.

Amused, Carton said, "The German looks to you for help. Such enemies you are, eh?" He turned and swung his saber at the major. The major jerked his own weapon up and forcefully

knocked the blade away, the metal ringing loudly in the quiet ballroom. Carton pursued almost lazily, aiming swings at Meinhardt: left, right, left, right. Meinhardt backed up with each blow, but he managed to block each stroke easily, if awkwardly.

"Bon," Carton said lightly. "*Ce n'est pas difficile, est-il?*"

The German glared at him. "I cannot fight you like this. You want a duel? Bring out some pistols, and I'll give you a duel."

"Pistols? Where's the sport in that? Come now. I give you my word. If you best me with your saber, I'll let you go. I'm an honorable man." Carton lunged, a graceful, fluid move that put him inside Meinhardt's guard before the German could react. His blade sliced along the major's side, and the German let out a yell. Carton attacked again immediately. No clumsy play-like swings this time. His movements were precise, controlled, and he drew blood on both of Meinhardt's arms and once across his cheek while the German could only flail his sword in belated reaction. He never once parried the Frenchman's strikes.

Carton pulled back while Meinhardt sobbed in pain and tried to retreat. Two of Carton's ring of men closed ranks to shove the German back into the arena. He stumbled and fell, the saber dropping from his grasp.

"And you claim you're an honorable man?" Hanley said accusingly. "You lied to him."

Carton glanced mildly at him. "Yes. But I told you who I was. Is it my fault you don't recognize my name? I was on the French Olympic team in 1936 in saber, but there was..." he waved his hand around as if searching for the right word, "...an incident with a team member, and I was wrongly disqualified one week before we left for Berlin. The Hungarians took the gold. Those bastards always win at saber." Carton grinned at Hanley. "I would have proven otherwise."

He turned back toward the major, this time dropping into a picture-perfect relaxed *en garde* position. He advanced on the fallen Meinhardt, and Hanley felt ill, realizing he was witnessing a strange kind of murder happening right before his eyes. "Stop!" he called. "You don't want to fight the German."

Carton flashed him a smile. "I don't?"

"No. There's no challenge. Oh, you can toy with him all you want, you can play cat to his mouse, but in the end, it's just butcher's work."

The smile faded, and Hanley knew he'd gotten through. "Careful, Lieutenant," Carton said.

Hanley smiled as broadly and with as much patented fakeness as the Frenchman had. "You want a challenge? I'll give you one." He began stripping off his jacket. It wouldn't stop the sharp edge of Carton's saber, and it would only hamper his own movements.

"What are you doing?" Doc muttered to him.

"I took a fencing class in college."

"Are you kiddin' me, Lieutenant? That's like saying you went a round at the local gym once before you go in the ring against Joe Louis. Didn't you hear him? He would have gone to the Olympics. He'll take you apart like he's doing to the major."

"We'll see about that."

"Lieutenant..."

"Doc!" Hanley cut him off. "I can't let him murder the German. Not like this."

"But you can let him murder you?"

Hanley said nothing. Doc was right, of course. He didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell against Carton. Oh, he remembered some terminology: parry, riposte, balestra, disengage... He

recalled a few basic positions. Not that they'd help him now. Those memories were no more useful to him than having read about them in a book. Fencing required a quick eye and quicker reactions, and those things came with practice. Carton had that in spades. He didn't.

But he had one thing Carton didn't. Unpredictability. Carton had had rules drilled into his head for years, and Hanley clearly remembered that the target zone in saber was waist up. And so far, Carton had played by those rules with the major. Hanley was not bound by the same training. But then again, he knew that any out of bounds attempt also dropped his own defense and left him vulnerable to Carton's blade. It would also only work once, and then the element of surprise would be lost. And if he broke the rules, he knew Carton would have no compunction about following suit.

But fighting Carton himself was still the only chance they had. That *was* Cajé he'd seen out in the woods. He was sure of it. And if Cajé had been there, Kirby and Saunders couldn't have been far behind. He had to stall, buy them time.

His determined expression clearly dismayed Doc, who still seemed to be waiting for him to change his mind.

"Help the major," Hanley said brusquely.

Under the watchful eye of Carton's men, Littlejohn and Doc both moved out onto the floor, caught the wounded German under the arms, and dragged him off to the side. Carton paced a few steps, swished his saber through the air, never taking his eyes off his new opponent. Hanley could almost feel the man's excitement. He took his time walking out, surreptitiously looking around again. Carton's men still ringed the floor, still carried their stolen rifles. Stall, he thought again, and keep on stalling.

"If I win," he said, "we go free."

Carton laughed.

"Including the major," Hanley added. He bent and picked up Meinhardt's saber, hefting the unfamiliar weight in his hand. The grip was wire-wrapped, almost sharp against his palm and fingers, and the sword heavier than any practice weapon he'd used in college.

"No," Carton said.

"Then we don't fight." Hanley dropped the saber to his side.

"You will not win."

"Then you have nothing to lose by agreeing, do you?"

They stared at each other, until, with a hint of irritation in his voice, Carton said, "Okay, as you Americans like to say. *If* you win. If you lose, the major is mine and your lives are forfeit."

"Agreed," Hanley said and, as Carton raised his sword, he asked, "What constitutes a win?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm your ally, even if you don't want to think so," Hanley said. "Fighting me to the death is pointless."

"On the contrary. It will give me great pleasure to kill a lover of the *Boche*."

Hanley refused to rise to the bait, waiting patiently.

"Very well," Carton said in annoyance. "We fight until one or the other can fight no longer."

That would work, Hanley thought. He could see the surprise on Carton's face when he agreed to the terms and echoed, "Until one of us can't fight any more."

"Lieutenant," Doc tried to say.

"Silence!" Carton whirled on him. "You have no say here. Tend your beloved major."

The Frenchman's temper was on a hair string. Hanley wondered how he could use that to his advantage. He glanced out at the veranda, looking for movement, but if anyone was out there, he couldn't spot them.

Carton began to prepare himself one more time, and Hanley said, "Care to make a wager on the outcome?"

"What?" The irritation in Carton's voice was loud and clear.

"A wager. A bet." At least Hanley had the other men's attention. They understood enough English to be intrigued, and all seemed keen to win a bit of something on the side.

"Ridiculous," Carton said. "What is there to bet on?"

"The outcome, of course." He gestured toward where Doc and Littlejohn sat beside the injured major. "In my jacket I've got money and four packs of cigarettes, some rations."

"When you are dead, it will belong to me anyways."

"That's not very sportsmanlike," Hanley taunted. "Besides, my wager isn't with you. It's with your men. After all, if I win, you won't be around to pay up." That almost had Carton sputtering in indignation, but he recovered his poise. Keep delaying him, Hanley thought.

Antoine stepped forward. "I accept that wager, Lieutenant."

"Good," Hanley said, but Carton stalked around the circle glaring at each of his men in turn. "No wagers! When I win, whatever he has is yours." They backed down without protest under his harshness, and he faced Hanley again. "Now. Enough of this waste of time. We fight." Carton saluted him with a flourish of his sword and sank neatly into *en garde* position.

Bits of his instructor's lectures came back to Hanley. Big men have longer reaches... but they also make bigger targets.

Carton waited, a slight smile on his lips.

Hanley raised his saber before his face, then swept it down in a simple salute. He turned sideways, trying to minimize the target area he presented Carton. The man advanced lightly on his feet, stabbing for Hanley's right shoulder. Hanley swung right to block the attack – and Carton's blade was no longer there. It dipped, lightning quick, beneath his attempted block and drew a neat slash across his stomach. Hanley gasped and slashed back, but Carton had already straightened from his lunge, and Hanley's blade cut only air. The cut was shallow but hurt like hell, and Hanley retreated several steps, pressing the heel of his left hand against the wound. Carton made no move to follow him. He didn't have to. Hanley'd gotten the message loud and clear and painfully: Carton could have killed him on that very first strike. He hadn't even been able to anticipate or parry the Frenchman's simple disengage.

Doc was right, Hanley thought. Carton could fence blindfolded and Hanley'd still lose. Angrily, he said, "So this is what you do? Hide in your big house and play lunatic games with anyone who crosses onto your land?"

"It passes the time, Lieutenant."

"You're crazy! I've probably seen more of your country than you have. I've certainly met more of your people. And they're out fighting the Germans, not us."

"I tried to fight the German." Carton smirked and gestured toward Meinhardt. "You wouldn't let me."

Hanley grimaced in disgust. "You joke. You joke while your fellow citizens are out there dying?" Hanley flung his saber at Carton, but the Frenchman batted it out of the air with his own blade. One of his men picked it up.

"Give it back to him," Carton said coldly.

The guard slid it along the floor to bump hilt-first against Hanley's boot.

"No," Hanley said.

"Pick it up, or I will guarantee you never pick up anything again. Or do you think I am still joking?"

With a curse, Hanley snatched up the sword again as Carton advanced on him. He backed away, trying to keep out of the Frenchman's reach. The ring of men forced him to circle, and, when he glanced over his shoulder to avoid bumping into them, Carton closed the distance and lunged again. Hanley parried that blow, and Carton let him. Too hard, he was swinging too hard. Small movements, Hanley cautioned himself, recalling that it actually took very little motion to deflect a blade so it swept past you instead of into you. The smaller the movement the better, because then your saber remained centered, ready to react to a disengage or riposte. But remembering the lesson and putting it into action....

Carton lunged again, swiftly and smoothly. Hanley jumped backwards and managed to block it, but Carton riposted immediately and Hanley failed to stop the return. This time, when the sharp metal opened his left forearm, he cried out in pain.

"Lesson one," Carton said. "Keep your non-sword arm out of the—"

Hanley drove his sword at the man's stomach in the middle of his sentence, dropping his aim in the last instant toward the man's thigh, trying not to telegraph the motion too much. He knew Carton would try to block it, so he jerked his blade up slightly and back down in an attempt to try his own awkward disengage. It almost worked, but Carton physically sidestepped at the last minute, and Hanley's saber slid harmlessly past him.

Hanley recovered and retreated again. Blood ran in warm rivulets down his left forearm.

The cheerful hunter's look had vanished from Carton's face, replaced by something dark and dangerous. "So, you think to win by cheating?" he asked softly. "Typical American. Though I cannot say I blame you under the circumstances. You know you only had one chance at that, *n'est pas?* I would have let you live if you had played by the rules. Now...." He left the threat dangling.

"Like you play by the rules?"

"*Excusez-moi?*"

"You said you didn't make the Olympics because you were disqualified. You weren't playing by the rules."

Carton glared. "I said I was *wrongfully* disqualified."

"Uh-uh," Hanley said. "You're lying again. You lied to the major about your abilities, and you're lying to me right now."

"You dare say such a thing—"

"No one who enjoys hurting inexperienced opponents can claim any sense of honor or sportsmanship," Hanley interrupted contemptuously. "You're nothing more than a bully picking on those who can't defend themselves—"

Carton feinted left and slipped in under Hanley's parry again, this time slicing across his right forearm. Hanley gasped and nearly dropped the saber. He quickly grabbed at the hilt with his left hand. Only with both hands together was he able to keep the sword up between him and Carton. Blood made his grip slippery.

"You forget yourself, Lieutenant," Carton snarled. "And insulting me won't gain you anything—" He broke off angrily as a commotion broke out among his men. "*Qu'est-ce qui se passe maintenant?*"

"*Un autre Américain,*" Antoine said, and the circle of men parted as two of Carton's

guard shoved Saunders in before them. His left upper arm was bandaged from the earlier bullet wound, but he looked otherwise unharmed.

"Where did you find him?" Carton demanded.

"Outside," Antoine answered. "I think he came here for help. He was unarmed, and he is wounded."

Hanley started forward, but Carton's blade flicked out and rested against his chest. "You know this sergeant?"

Saunders met Hanley's eyes without reaction.

Hanley took a quick step away from the saber's touch and decided to play dumb, just in case something had gone wrong, and Saunders wasn't here by choice. "He's American, that's all I need to know." He fought the urge to look around. He needed to keep Carton distracted, give Kirby and Cajé time to make their move. He indicated Saunders. "Are you going to shoot him too?" he asked Carton. "That's what you do with wounded men, isn't it?"

Carton favored him with a glare.

"Isn't it?" Hanley challenged.

"What good are wounded men?" Carton said. "They take time and provisions to care for, and for what? For every wounded man, there are a hundred strong ones to take his place."

"In my country, lives don't come so cheap. I don't think they do in France either, just in your own demented little world."

"Hold it right there," Kirby's voice called out from the back of the ballroom.

Cajé repeated the command in French. Carton and his men turned, then froze as they found themselves facing the B.A.R. and M1 in very steady hands. Cajé had Saunders' Thompson slung over his shoulder. Both Americans moved farther into the room, keeping everyone in their sights. Littlejohn and Doc scrambled to their feet, and Saunders shook free of his guards. "Drop those rifles," Kirby continued. "C'mon, drop 'em!"

As the Frenchmen slowly obeyed, Hanley turned to Carton with a hard smile. "I'm afraid I win."

Carton began an angry tirade in French, but Hanley cut him off. "Your own rules, Carton – we fight until one can fight no longer. You," he said, pointedly, "can't fight any longer."

Carton stared at him in disbelief, then at Saunders, who had come up beside Hanley, the reclaimed Thompson resting across his arm, aimed almost casually at the Frenchman's middle. Carton's expression changed to one of hatred.

Littlejohn and Doc relieved the French of their weapons, and Cajé ordered them to line up against the far wall. They went reluctantly, but they went, leaving Carton alone in the center of the room.

Hanley went on, "My men and I are leaving – with the major. You keep insisting you're an honorable man. You can prove it by keeping your end of our bargain. Let us go peaceably."

"You cheated," Carton spat the words at him. "I owe you nothing."

"We both cheated. I think that makes us even, doesn't it?" Hanley hardened his tone.

"Don't try to stop us, Carton. You'll be dead before you can lift that sword again."

Carton glared at the firearms covering his men, as if they were a personal affront. He turned the glare on Hanley and said, "Get out of my sight. All of you."

"With pleasure," Hanley said and saluted with the sword before tossing the saber to clatter at Carton's feet.

"Some day, Lieutenant, you and I might meet again."

"Don't count on it."

Carton saluted him back, his blade swishing loudly through the air, before he turned his back on the Americans and crossed to his men.

"Let's get out of here," Hanley muttered. Littlejohn and Doc helped the major to his feet, and they retreated out the veranda, covered by Cajé and Kirby.

"Better let Doc take a look at those cuts," Saunders said.

"Not until we're clear of this place," Hanley said. "I don't trust Carton."

They made it safely to the woods and kept going until Cajé and Kirby caught up and reported no one was tailing them. Then Hanley let Doc bandage him. The slice across his stomach didn't bother him half as much as the deeper cuts on both arms. He could no longer make a fist with either hand. Hanley tried to pull his cigarettes out of his pocket, but it hurt too much to grasp the package. "Could you get me a cigarette?" he asked. He glanced up to see Saunders smiling crookedly as he fished his own pack out. Irritated, Hanley said, "What are you smiling at?"

Saunders lit a cigarette and stuck it in Hanley's mouth for him. "You cut a pretty impressive figure holding that sword, Lieutenant."

"You didn't see me trying to use it." Hanley winced as he couldn't help trying to flex his fingers again.

"I did," Kirby said. "I don't think you're supposed to let the other guy cut you to ribbons, but if it's any consolation, you did better than I would've."

Hanley stared at him a moment, eyebrow raised, smoke spiraling up from the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "Thanks, Kirby."

"You're welcome."

Hanley turned to Doc. "How's the major?"

"He's cut up pretty badly too, but he'll be okay."

"You saved my life at the risk of your own," Meinhardt said. "You didn't have to do that. That madman back there may not understand honor, but I do. Thank you."

Hanley nodded, accepting the thanks. He carefully took the cigarette out of his mouth. "I'm sorry about your driver."

Meinhardt looked over his shoulder back the way they had come. "Maybe it's not you and Carton who will cross paths again someday. Maybe it will be me. I think I would like that."

Hanley exchanged a wordless glance with Saunders, then nodded once to the sergeant, who took the cue and said, "Okay, let's saddle up. We've still got a way to go. Cajé, you have the point."

end