

Chapter 7 – Birds in Flight

I saw Peters last night,” Robert’s father said at breakfast. “The Germans are abolishing student deferments. He said they’re afraid of the Americans, and now they’re fighting the Russians for their lives.”

“Can he help me get any other kind of deferment?”

“He said there’s nothing he can do. He doesn’t have any influence over the military, just the *Arbeitsdienst*.”

“Maybe I can get across on the coal barge,” Robert said.

“He doesn’t think you should cross the border yet. He says it’s still going to be a long time until Hitler is defeated. If you go too soon, we will all be deported. He said we should try to get you a health deferment.”

“But I’m in pretty good shape,” Robert said. “The only thing that isn’t very good is my eyesight.”

“We might be able to get you some thicker glasses. I’ll talk to Welters this morning.”

Welters had a medical supplies outlet near the hat shop. He had supplied Robert’s glasses for years. He told Robert’s father that he still had blank prescription forms signed by an ophthalmologist who hadn’t come back after the evacuation. He would see what he could do.

Robert felt dizzy when he reported for his medical review at the Kommandantur three weeks later. His new glasses were

so thick, he felt like he was swimming under water when he tried to walk.

“Take off your glasses and read the letters on the wall,” a German sergeant ordered.

“I can’t read anything,” Robert said.

The sergeant marked a piece of paper and said, “Now put on your glasses.”

Robert stared at the chart with his glasses on, walked a few steps forward and squinted as he read the biggest letter.

“Good,” the sergeant said. Robert handed him the new prescription. “Ah, I see what the trouble is. Your glasses are not strong enough.” He concentrated hard on some mental calculations and added a few numbers to his report. “How can you possibly study with such bad eyes?”

“It is hard, Sir, but I try.”

“I’m sorry, lad, but I can’t pronounce you fit for active service. You would probably shoot your buddies instead of the enemy. The best service I can render the German army is to send you back to the university.”

Robert went straight to the hat shop, where his parents were working.

“How did it go?” his father asked.

“He gave me a deferment. He said my glasses are not thick enough.”

Robert’s father put on the thick glasses and squinted. “So this is how the world looks when you’re a *Bosche!*”

“Peters must be behind this,” Robert’s mother said. “There’s no other explanation.”

“No, he told me he couldn’t do a thing...but I’ll ask him.”

Robert stopped in the park on the way home. He sat on a bench to relax and let his imagination wander. He thought of a remark by Émile Coué: “When you make conscious autosuggestions, do it naturally, simply, with conviction, and above all *without any effort.*” Robert allowed himself to imagine what life would be like after the war. He pictured men in different uniforms laying down their guns and shaking hands. He saw mountains in the distance, and then he heard a child squeal and a woman’s laughter.

Robert opened his eyes. The young German woman who lived across the street was tickling her little boy as they

wrestled on a blanket on the grass. It was the first time he had seen her smile. The woman stopped playing with the boy and looked up at the sky. When she picked him up and he became quiet, Robert heard a low rumble in the distance. It couldn't be British bombers, he thought. They flew at night. The sirens started wailing. The woman grabbed her blanket and hurried up the path carrying her child.

Robert started up the path behind her, watching the sky for planes. The rumble grew louder and his stomach started vibrating. He stopped in a clearing and scanned the blue sky until he saw the slow motion of white streaks, four fine, white threads spreading out into one wide stripe behind the silver specks. He picked out perhaps a dozen planes in a diamond formation, and then he saw other diamonds formations, seven in all, inching across the sky.

Flying Fortresses! Robert had heard the Americans were building B-17 "Flying Fortresses," but he never thought he would see them in daylight. A squadron of Messerschmitts shot up in the air and buzzed around the American bombers like angry bees as they flew out of sight to the east.

When Robert's father came home from the tavern, they talked about the Americans. They seemed larger than life flying those huge planes across France in broad daylight. The "Flying Fortress" looked like a giant porcupine, Robert said, thinking a "Flying Fortress" was the formation, rather than the individual plane. Everyone had gone outside to watch the American bombers, ignoring the sirens.

"Those Americans are not afraid of Hitler," Robert's father said. "They'll blow up every factory in Germany."

"What about the Haffner factory?" Robert's mother said.

"I don't think they would bomb anything here," his father said, "but it's a good thing you're going back to school."

"Did you talk to Peters today?" Léonie asked.

"Sure, I bought him a beer. He said Hitler was going to lose for sure, but it will still take quite awhile, even with the Americans. Things are going badly for Hitler in Russia."

"Did he say anything about my physical?" Robert asked.

"He swears he had nothing to do with it. He said that it was pure Nazi stupidity, that they are so blinded by their

feelings of superiority that they can’t see straight. Their arrogance is clouding their judgment.”

On his return trip to the university, Robert’s train slowed to a crawl in Saarbrücken. The tracks were uneven and the train creaked as it crawled past collapsed buildings. People went about their business, while others picked through the ruins and cleared rubble in the streets. There were gaping holes and fallen buildings in almost every block. The train station was shut down, so passengers switched trains in the yard. The next train started east into Germany late at night, but it stopped halfway to Heidelberg on the outskirts of Ludwigshafen, an industrial city across the Rhine from Mannheim.

“You have to walk from here,” the conductor said.

The train tracks in front of the locomotive were twisted like pretzels in the moonlight. A path had been cleared on one side of the track, where passengers filed past each other in the darkness walking in opposite directions. Robert started down the cinder trail and tried to walk quickly past the collapsed buildings on both sides of the tracks, but he soon slowed to the weary pace of the others. People walking towards him were covered with gray soot. Ahead, he noticed several columns of white smoke. The number of collapsed structures increased as he walked, until finally he passed the final shell of a building and saw that almost nothing was left standing ahead. There were only fragments of walls and chimneys jutting out of flat waves of unrecognizable debris. Smoke was rising from pyres of burning bodies.

As dawn approached, he saw groups of people crying in the ruins. Heading into the glare of the sunrise, Robert walked for miles through flattened blocks, square upon square of smoking dust where houses had been pulverized. Unimaginable fires had left no trace of tens of thousands of people. Ludwigshafen was reduced a powdery tomb.

“How did this happen!” he asked a man passing the other way when they both stopped to rest. The man’s gray face was sagging with grief.

“The firestorm—you ask how did this happen? First they

covered the city with incendiary bombs, spreading fire all over the city, and the British kept coming in waves and dropping the phosphor bombs, the ones that burn your eyes and nose until you can't breathe, and they explode if you spray water on them. Some of them were time bombs and they'd go off while people were trying to put out the fires. After a few hours, the whole city was on fire. It burned all day until it turned into one huge flame, and you could feel the wind, like a hurricane, pulling air into the fire, and people were getting sucked into the fire, pulled right off their feet. If you were down in the shelters it didn't matter. Either you couldn't breathe because the air was gone or you burned to death. What's the difference?"

"That's what they call a firestorm," Robert said.

"No, that was just to get it hot. Then they came back the next night and dropped explosives down the center of the furnace. When those bombs went off, everything turned to dust. You couldn't stop it."

The man's eyes seemed to be pleading with Robert.

"Is there really a God in heaven?" Robert said.

The man shook his head and walked away.

Slavko tried to cheer Robert up with his latest theory—how the Serbs won the war.

"First of all, the war's not over," Robert interrupted.

"No, of course not, but we both know Hitler can't win," Slavko said.

"All right, I'll go along with that." Robert was in no mood for Slavko's humor, but he didn't want to be alone.

"And what's beating him—Russia," Slavko explained, like a patient teacher. "Almost every German soldier and tank and plane is now in Russia, which means Hitler doesn't have enough men to stop England and the United States."

"So you're saying the stubborn Russians are winning the war, not the troublesome Serbs," Robert said.

"You don't see my point. If the Serbs hadn't defied Hitler, which made him so crazy he went after Yugoslavia and Greece, he would have attacked Russia at least a month sooner and he would have won! He went for the cape

instead of the matador.”

“So what’s your point—the Serbs drove Hitler crazy and changed the course of World War II?”

“Exactly!”

“What about the Croats and the Slovaks?”

“They’re mad at us too! We’re very good at getting people riled up. So what is that you’re reading?”

Robert showed Slavko his philosophy book. “I saw some bad things on the way here, and then I read this passage by Immanuel Kant: *It will be proved, I know not when or where, that the human soul stands, even in this life, in indissoluble connection with all immaterial natures in the spirit world, that it reciprocally acts upon these and receives impressions and help from them.*”

“Consider this remark by Thomas Carlyle,” Slavko said. *Everywhere the human soul stands between a hemisphere of light and another of darkness; on the confines of the two everlasting empires, necessity and free will.*”

“Slavko, do you think there are spirits in the universe who can visit us and they might help us to end to the war?”

“We will win because Hitler will make mistakes,” Slavko said. “Is that because Hitler can’t listen to Kant’s invisible spirits, or because he has fallen into a hemisphere of darkness? Maybe they are the same thing. I believe that Kant inspired Émile Coué. Kant’s Copernican Revolution brought forward the idea that the human mind is the originator of experience, rather than a passive recipient of perception.”

“But even if the mind can generate perceptions, does this have anything to do with the real world?” Robert said. “I don’t feel that I have any power to change the reality of a city that was reduced to ashes in a few hours.”

Slavko saw the sorrow in Robert’s eyes. “Robert, your train passes through Mannheim, doesn’t it?”

“And also Ludwigshafen—the residential area was gone!”

“Ludwigshafen has the largest chemical manufacturing center in the world. It’s three miles long, right across the river from Mannheim. They have refineries there and they make rubber. How can they stop Hitler if they don’t stop his trucks and his planes?”

“If we have to fight, how do we make the world any

better?”

“You can’t change it with will power, but maybe if you let your imagination wander, it will show you a better way.”

Fifty-four thousand American and 23,000 British troops landed between Morocco and Algiers on November 8, 1942. Marshal Pétain stayed his course, appeasing Hitler by ordering his commanders in Africa to resist the Allied “aggression.” On the other hand, he hinted to his officers in North Africa that he was acting against his wishes and was sympathetic to the Allies. This only added to the confusion.

French admirals and generals in Africa argued with each other for three days over the legality of joining the Allies. The French commanders took turns locking each other up, switching internal allegiances, and issuing and rescinding orders so many times that General Mark Clark, Deputy Commander-in-Chief for Operation Torch, started pounding tables with his fists and slamming doors.

After three days of sporadic fighting between French and American troops, Hitler lost patience with Pétain, who vacillated every time the Germans offered him military support. German armored convoys and planes swooped into southern France on November 11, 1942—Armistice Day. The German invasion sent shock waves through French commanders in Africa. General Clark threatened to arrest the French leaders and lock them up on a ship. They came to their senses and joined the Allies on November 13, bringing France back into the war.¹⁰³

After Hitler invaded Vichy France, thousands of French men fled into the hills to join the *Maquis*, the guerilla units of the French Resistance. Pétain’s government retaliated by organizing its own militia, the *Milice*, to function as an auxiliary of the German Army. The *Milice* recruited 25,000 Vichy Frenchmen and trained them to infiltrate *Maquis* units. The *Maquis* and the *Milice* started waging a civil war in Southern France with such fury that even the Gestapo was impressed by their brutality.

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In March 1943, legal blindness no longer qualified as an excuse to avoid serving in the German army. Hitler needed every man he could get.

Peters warned that Robert would be called up with the next group of draftees. "Do not do anything foolish," he told Robert's father. "Buy time. Do anything you can to survive this insane war. Can you trust your family doctor?"

"Dr. Frederich is a very good friend," Robert's father said. "Our families came from the same town."

"Maybe he can perform an operation, but it has to look real. I can find out the date when the next draft notices will be issued. If your son is in the hospital when the order arrives in the mail, that may save him for another month or two."

Dr. Frederich scheduled several appointments for Robert. He showed Robert the exact location of his appendix and told him to press hard on that spot every day. He arranged for X-rays to be taken by a friend who was a radiologist, who then certified that there was a strong suspicion of an infected appendix.

Robert returned to the university. Dr. Coué had taught his patients how to cure illnesses. Robert went to the library and looked through notes of Coué's sessions that had been transcribed by one of his disciples. Robert wanted to learn how to get sick.

Every one of our thoughts, good or bad, becomes concrete, materializes, and becomes a reality...Man is what he thinks. The fear of failure is almost certain to cause failure, in the same way as the idea of success brings success.¹⁰⁴

It didn't matter what the thought was. Autosuggestion worked either way, for good or for bad. Robert guided his imagination to think that his appendix was infected. He pictured it getting more swollen and inflamed each day. He pressed on it for hours while he practiced autosuggestion, persuading himself that he had severe appendicitis. The spot became so sensitive it was almost too painful to touch.

Slavko dropped into Robert's room. "I've been reading some Goethe, and it started me thinking about some of the

choices I've made. Tell me what you think about this:

Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness.

Concerning all acts of initiative and creation, there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans:

That the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred.

A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no one could have dreamt would come his way.

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.

"This is a good time to be bold," Robert said. "Audacity is the first step in any worthwhile adventure."

"I'm going home, Robert. There is a war to be won, and I don't think lawyers are going to win it."

"There will be plenty of time for lawyers. We will need a whole new system when the fighting is over."

When Robert got up the next morning, a copy of Émile Coué's little book was resting against his door. He wondered if he would ever see his friend Slavko again.

A telegram arrived from Robert's father a few days later asking him to come home. He took the next train. The following morning, Dr. Frederich checked him into the hospital across the street from Robert's home in Sarreguemines. A draft notice was delivered to Robert's home the next day.

Nazi nurses in brown uniforms had replaced all the Catholic nuns at the hospital, and the *braune Schwester* assigned to Robert was as beautiful as she was suspicious.

Schwester Erika would have been quite a lovable woman, Robert decided, if she were not trying so hard to be strong, heartless and efficient. She was contorting herself to be a

good German soldier, loyal to her Reich. It was her duty to expose Robert Muller as a fake. Her Führer needed soldiers, all the soldiers he could get.

It was Robert’s first operation. Brown Nurse Erika didn’t stop asking questions as she shaved Robert’s belly. “Where does it hurt? What kind of pain is it? How long has it been hurting? Does it hurt here...here...here...here?”

Robert jumped and screamed every time she pressed the precise spot.

She was a good looking, strong, healthy German girl who, under different circumstances—but the questions kept coming as she wheeled him into the operating room. She placed a mask over his nose and mouth. The ether started dripping.

“Does it hurt here—start counting from one to a hundred—here...here?”

A faucet near the bed was dripping, and as Robert watched her beautiful, grinning face, the drops got louder—*keep counting*—and louder. He closed his eyes and saw beautiful colorful circles expanding into ever-wider circles—the drips now echoed like a gigantic gong hit by slaves—colossal circles, colors, and sounds reverberating in the universe, infinite, eternal color, a stunning world he had never imagined.

“How about here?” she cooed, and the lights went out.

Nurse Erika was holding Robert’s hand when he awoke the next day. She was asking him about his studies, about his politics. How about Dr. Frederich—was he Robert’s regular doctor? How long had Robert known him? Did he ever talk about the war or mention the Germans or say anything about the draft?

Robert had expected this interrogation and had prepared himself. His self-imposed brainwashing was paying off.

Dr. Frederich entered the room with a big grin. “I have seldom seen such an enormous, diseased appendix, and it was about to rupture. You would have been in great danger if it had not been removed.”

Robert’s family and friends visited him during a cheerful

week of recovery. The *braune Schwester* came by several times a day, and stayed to discuss philosophy, literature, and politics. He had passed the interrogation with flying colors, and now she wanted to talk about more important things. After experiencing the anesthesia, Robert was eager to talk.

“Where does life end and death begin?” he asked her. “Which little drop of ether makes all the difference between life and death, or is there is no discontinuity between life and death and matter is simply changing?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, “but many people have told me about reactions like yours to the anesthesia.”

“The religions have all their Gods,” Robert said, “but we are all part of the universe. All these Gods tell us that there is a reality that goes beyond our life on this Earth.”

“What I *feel* is bigger than what I can see or touch,” she said. Erika let him see her softer side when she talked about deeper subjects. She never mentioned, though, that a Gestapo officer had stood at Dr. Frederich’s side during the operation to be certain the appendicitis was real.

A group of teenage girls brought books and flowers to Robert—he was one of the only boys their age in town, so they stayed as long as they could. Finally the nurse became furious and told them that visiting hours were over.

“You have a good mind, Robert,” she exploded. “You must not waste time on those silly geese. Your ambition will take you far beyond this little town.”

Erika visited Robert more frequently as the week passed, and stayed long into the evenings after she was off duty. He wrote:

I began to like her very much. Behind her stern appearance and military gait, there was a marvelous intelligence and a warm woman, beating with all the loving impulses of life. The military, the toughness had been added only superficially by education. No regime can really change the fundamental nature, warmth and uniqueness of a human being.¹⁰⁵

Robert brought Erika a bouquet of flowers a few days after he was released, and she invited him up to her room

in the hospital for dinner. They talked late into the night about what held the world together, and when it was time for him to leave, they looked into each other’s eyes for a long time without saying a word, but the whole time their eyes were talking. They knew they lived in different worlds.

Robert and Louis, a student from Metz, were the only ones left in Slavko’s gang. Seppel’s tavern continued to be their meeting place, but most of the seats were empty. Students who still attended the University of Heidelberg at the end of the spring semester in 1943 were an odd assortment that could not be trusted. Conversations about the war were evasive, and any emotion other than grim determination caused alarm and aroused suspicion.

“My mother used to smuggle schnapps across the border into Belgium in my baby bottle,” Robert said to Louis.

“My father used to say that he had two suitcases,” Louis said, “one for business and the other for pleasure, and the one for pleasure had a false bottom.”

It had started out as a tentative conversation, a possible door opener that either of them could end by changing the subject. They had seen each other at Seppel’s with Slavko and the others for over a year, but Robert still didn’t know Louis’s first name. He always went by the family name, Louis, which Robert guessed was a prosperous Metz family. But the name Louis was so common he would almost be untraceable.

Everyone in Germany was up to something, but *you have to trust someone*, and the conversation seemed to be going in the right direction.

“Smuggling is a way of life on the border,” Robert said.

“Border people don’t do it for profit,” Louis added. “It’s just a way of testing the system and defying the borders.”

“My mother went to Paris and brought back a whole shipment of French berets after the armistice,” Robert said.

“No kidding. I wouldn’t mind going there myself,” Louis said. “I hear the girls in Paris are terrific.”

“The women around here are too serious,” Robert agreed.

“They have forgotten how to have a good time, Robert.

“Wouldn’t it be fun to hear a woman laughing?”

“The only way we can get there is in our dreams.”

“Who knows, we might be able to find a way,” Louis said. The door was open.

“How do you know that we can trust this man?” Robert’s father asked. Robert had finally told him that he had been meeting with Louis throughout the summer.

“I just feel I can trust him,” Robert said.

“All right, so what do you know about him. His name is Louis, right? What’s his last name?”

“That is his last name.”

“Okay, then what’s his first name?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, and you’re putting your life in this man’s hands? Help me out,” he said to Léonie.

“You’ve always said we can’t do it alone,” she said to her husband. “Are you sure the barge is no longer an option?”

“The barge is gone, the owner is gone, and his brother Guehl the baker is gone. God help us!”

“What about Peters?”

“He can’t help us. He said if you can walk, the army will take you, and the notices will be coming out any day. I’m surprised they haven’t drafted *me* yet.”

“Louis said it’s a pretty normal thing now,” Robert said.

“There are quite a few *passeurs* taking people across the border, and his father knows where to find one in Metz.”

“After the draft notice comes, we’re sunk. You must get out now,” Robert’s father said. “That’s the only thing that matters. If you stay here, you’re finished.”

“Now remember, Louis and I are only going to Paris for a week, that’s all you know. We’ll have round trip tickets from the nearest town across the border to Paris, and we have both registered for the fall semester.”

“You should carry the school papers with you,” Léonie said. “And you’ll need a receipt from your landlady for October.”

“It’s all here,” Robert said.

“What about the bank?” she asked. “A student wouldn’t

leave money in the bank if he was about to escape.”

“That’s why I left enough money in there, and I have my bank book with me. We thought about it carefully.”

“I don’t like it,” Robert’s father said.

“It sounds like it will work,” Léonie said.

“It makes me nervous,” he muttered. “But you can probably stay with my cousin Marcel above the bakery.”

“Crossing the border shouldn’t be a big problem,” Robert said, “but when the draft notices come out, you’ll need to tell them a story.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Robert’s father said.

“We’re not taking any chances. Louis and I are going to Vienna for a mountain climbing expedition in the Austrian Alps. We’ll send you letters from Vienna before we return to Metz. When the draft notice comes, tell the Germans we disappeared in the mountains and you think we must have been killed.”

“So if you get away, you went to Austria,” Léonie said, “and if you’re caught, you were on your way to Paris for a week.”

Robert and Louis couldn’t sleep on the crowded train. They arrived in Vienna at dawn. After a bowl of goulash, they found a hotel room and slept for a few hours, then wrote letters to their parents. In the first letter they described their search for mountain climbing equipment, and said they would be leaving for the Alps in a few days. They deposited those letters in a mailbox. The second letters were entrusted to a French maid at the hotel. They were to be mailed a few days later.

Louis’s father met them at the Metz station. “I have bad news, boys. The *passeur* was arrested.”

“Do you know anybody else?” Louis asked.

“I haven’t found anyone yet, but I’ll keep looking. You can stay at the house, if you like, Robert.”

“We can’t do that, Mr. Louis. We’re supposed to be in Austria. We can hide at my uncle Marcel’s bakery at 82 Rue des Allemands for a few days. If you find anyone, let him know the arrangements.”

While they hid in a room above the bakery, Robert and Louis went over their alibi. Ten days later, Robert's uncle found a *porteur* named Bernard from Montigny-les-Metz. Half the money had to be paid in advance to his intermediary, a girl named Yvonne. The rest would be due after the crossing.

Robert's mother came to Metz to wish him off.

"You shouldn't have come," he said.

"I wouldn't miss this for anything," she said. Léonie stuffed a big chunk of smoked ham and fresh underwear into his small suitcase.

Robert and Louis left Metz for St. Privat, a village to the north, where Yvonne met them at the station with two other people, a woman and wiry man about Robert's age. They became acquainted at a restaurant while waiting for the *porteur*. Robert and Louis joked about the French girls they would meet in Paris, while the man smoked cigarettes and the women made polite conversation about the problems with rationing. Bernard arrived late in the evening, a nervous, redheaded squirrel of a man. Leaving Yvonne behind, they walked to the woods, where three others were waiting—an adult couple and a weary young man.

They walked for hours through the trees along an old railroad track. The ties were too close together for one normal step and a little too far apart to skip every other one. The man who smoked in the restaurant had trouble keeping up with the group. The other man walked with a limp. They finally left the track and followed a path towards a field, pausing when a German patrol passed behind them. Robert offered to carry the suitcase of the smoker who kept falling behind, since his own bag was not heavy.

"We just crossed the border," Bernard said. "Welcome to France. We will wait here until the other patrol goes by up ahead."

As they stood in silence, Robert felt the pulsating, warm fragrant body of the Earth beneath his feet. The full moon cast a luminous shadow in the branches overhead. Robert felt the joy of approaching freedom. It was 15 August 1943.

They walked another hour. Bernard gathered them in a wheat field on the outskirts of a village. "You are safe now. In the morning you can take a train from here into France.

If you want, you can sleep in that barn over there near the farmhouse. The peasants are used to it. I’ll return to Metz now and inform your relatives. Good luck to you.”¹⁰⁶

The couple and the woman went to sleep in the barn. The smoker said he would spend the night at his uncle’s place in a neighboring village. Robert and Louis and the weary young man stacked a few bales of freshly cut wheat together and laid down between them to sleep out of sight in the field.

Robert removed his suit and carefully folded it, then put on extra undershirts and briefs to stay warm.

He slept for about an hour and then awoke to the sound of crickets, more crickets than he had ever heard in his life. He was finally free, lying in an open field with stars overhead and a new life that would begin with the dawn. There were so many crickets chirping, he could hardly believe that he was feeling so much fear. Fear gripped him, a deep terror like he had never felt before, as if demons were being released from beneath the earth. The fear consumed him and crowded out any sense of reason. A cold chill made him shiver and his lungs worked hard because his ribs felt tight, as if a steel cage was squeezing the life out of him. His heart was beating fiercely.

Then a voice called out inside his head. *Run! Get up and run away from here as fast as you can!*

He pictured himself running away, running across the field and into the forest and running until he was far away.

Run the voice commanded. *Don’t think. Run as fast as you can.*

But his body wouldn’t move. It felt tight and cold as he lay there, trembling.

“This is nonsense,” he said. “I’m free. Thank God it’s over and I can finally relax. The Germans will never find us.”

He took a deep breath, and then another, and felt his muscles relax a little. “It’s over,” he whispered. “I’m letting go now. I am in France, I am free...happy to be free...”

Run, the voice said, but it was softer now. *Run away...*

His body was relaxing. His breathing was easier and the steel cage was releasing. The terror was subsiding. His forehead stopped squeezing. The voice had been pleading, but now it was leaving, and the pasture was filled with the

haunting call of an owl and the pounding sensation in his temples subsided.

Robert heard two owls calling back and forth. An ocean of calm engulfed him in a warm feeling of...perfection! It was all unfolding, revealing itself, knowing itself in the shadows, in the starlight, in the shrill song of crickets singing.

The crickets stopped.

Robert lay calmly, breathing slowly in the silence. His chest was rising and falling evenly and he felt peaceful. He had seen a fleeting glimpse of perfection. His mind was calm, quiet, alert.

He heard a light crackling sound, followed by footsteps. A raspy voice shattered the silence.

“Heraus, sie Schweinehunde! Hände hoch! Get up, you pig’s dogs! Hands up!”

Half a dozen men surrounded them, Gestapo wearing dark leather jackets. Two German shepherds lunged at them, yanking against their chains. Robert could barely see the barrels of their guns in the glare of their flashlights. Black boots kicked his companions. They groaned and awkwardly stumbled to their feet.

“Flying away from the army like birds, eh?”

“You have no right to say that,” Robert snapped back.

“We’re on our way to Paris for a vacation, that’s all.”

“Nice story.” The Nazi laughed. “We’ll see.”

He stared at Robert closely, then Louis, then the other man. The Nazi hesitated. The triumph melted from his face.

“I know you,” he said to the weary young man, who pressed his shoulders back and stood at attention. “You failed to return to your regiment after your leave.” He glanced at his men and let out a sigh. “I have the sad honor to inform you that you were awarded the Iron Cross for your courage under fire on the Russian front.”