1943

They carried what they could carry. Most men carried two pairs of socks in their helmets, K-rations in their pockets, their letters and cigarettes in their vests. That queer little private, Stanley Polensky, also carried a book, and it was not the Bible.

“Polensky, throw that thing away.” With the nose of his carbine, Calvin Johnson, also a private, poked him in the small of his back, where a children’s book, *Tom Swift and His Planet Stone*, was tucked in his pants, under his shirt. “No wonder you can’t get any.”

“At least I can read.” Polensky flipped him the bird over his shoulder. They were in a line, two men across, stretching for miles from Cerami on their way to Troina. Stanley Polensky was a boy who, back in Ohio, Johnson would have given the full order to. He would have nailed him with a football where he sat in the bleachers, reading a book. He would have spitballed him from the back of class or given him a wedgie in the locker room after track. Polensky had cried in his bunk at night for their first week at Fort Benning, wrote long letters to his mother the way others wrote to their girls.

Now, Johnson stared at his slight, curved back all day, the sun hotter than fire. On narrow trails in the hills, they pulled themselves up with ropes and cleats through passes that only they and their mules—the dumbest, smelliest articles of military equipment ever used to transport supplies—could navigate, driving back enemy strongholds at Niscemi, Ponte Olivo Airport, Mazzarino, Barrafranca, Villarosa, Enna, Alimena, Bompietro, Petralia, Gangi, Sperlinga, Nicosia, Mistretta, Cerami, and Gagliano. It would seem so easy if not so many men died, if Johnson was not walking on an ankle he’d jammed on a hill that had swollen to the size of a softball. And yet their toughest fighting was still to come, at Troina, with Germans shooting at them from the mountains in every direction.

But not today. Today there was sky and food and the Germans to the east of them.

“You want these?” Polensky tossed the hard candies from his K rations over to Johnson. Every day, they had scrambled eggs and ham, biscuits, coffee, and four cigarettes for breakfast; cheese, biscuits, hard candy, and cigarettes for lunch; and a ham and veal loaf, biscuits, hard candies, and cigarettes for dinner.

“I thought a nancy boy like you liked a little candy now and then.” Johnson stuffed them in his mouth, pushing them into his cheeks like a squirrel.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth in months.” Stanley shook his head. “I’m afraid I’m going to lose them all.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what.” Johnson lit his cigarette. “If I come across a toothbrush in my travels, I’ll save it for you.”

“I think you’ll have better luck finding a Spanish galleon.” Stanley lit his own cigarette.

“What do you know about Spanish galleons?”

“What do you want to know?”

“I don’t know.” Johnson closed his eyes. He had not done well in school. When he did not get a football scholarship to Ohio State, he thought he’d become a police officer, like his father. Knowing the war would help his chances, he’d enlisted the first opportunity he got. “What is it, like money or something?”

“No.” Stanley drawled, smiling. “It’s a ship.”

“Warship?”

“And commerce, too. They sailed mostly in the 16th to 18th centuries.”

“Is that what you learned in that Tom Swift book?” Johnson opened his eyes, studied Stanley lying on his back, knees swinging open and closed, smoke pluming upward between them.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Stanley stared at the sky. His eyes broke up smiling when he looked at you, happy or sad. They squished a little, the outsides wrinkling, along with his forehead, his cheeks dimpling. Polensky was the youngest of six. Johnson had always wanted siblings. His mother had him. Another had died in the womb.

He imagined Stanley as a little brother and grimaced. But you took what you got, not what you wanted.

\*\*\*

They set the pup tent over an abandoned trench that they could roll into if any funny business found its way to the camp. They laid boot to head. Stanley was a kicker. It was easier if Johnson fell asleep first.

“Read me something from your book.” Johnson laid his arms across his stomach. When they’d first started the whole bloody business, in Africa, he’d seen a soldier trying to hold in his intestines after getting shot, a slippery pink worm pulsing out between his fingers.

“Read it yourself.”

“I’m tired. What’s it about?”

“Well, every book Tom invents something new. So this time, it’s the metalanthium lamp.”

“Metalanthium lamp? What the hell is that?”

“It’s a device that emits these rays that can heal the sick and bring people back from the dead.”

“Sounds interesting. How does it work?”

“I’m not telling you anymore. You want to find out, you have to read it yourself.”

“I don’t have time to read.” Johnson rolled over, away from Stanley’s feet. “In case you didn’t notice, there’s a war on. Why are you carrying a children’s book, anyway?”

“My mother bought it for me when I was a boy.”

“Couldn’t you have brought something more useful?”

But Stanley had fallen asleep, his snoring choked with hot, dusty mountain air. The sound reminded Johnson of the clogged carburetor on a motorcycle he’d fixed up one summer in Ohio. At night, his own mind churned. The war had been hard to swallow. He did not know what he had expected, but he had not expected this. The exhaustion. The hollow fear⎯fear so intense it burned a hole through you and left you hollow. The walking. They walked along ridges and through valleys for miles and miles, up and up on roads that lead to little towns full of rock and cement houses in which lived Italians with gaunt, piercing eyes who begged for candy or sugar and cigarettes and mostly had nothing because the Germans had taken everything.

The Italian women were attractive. Sometimes he would look at them as they took his chocolate rations, their long olive necks the soft fruits of their lips, and he wanted to lay with one on the ground. Not anything sexual, although he always thought of that. He wanted to lay on the ground with one to feel her heart through her chest with his fingers, the pulse of a vein on her neck, the soft skin on the underside of her arm, to remember what it felt like, the warmth of living skin, the soft quiet of humanity in measured breaths. The skin on the dead looked like rubber, and he did not understand the difference, the living, the dead. So many had died, men in little piles, only boys, really, their limbs thrown about like tire irons, hoses, their mouths open where something had taken flight. If they could all only go on living, with quiet pulses in their necks, wrists, little bird chirps. If no one had to die, except the very old.

Sometimes it got so bad, the need to touch, he wanted to hold Stanley. He thought of waking him up and asking for the book, to take his mind off things. But he was too tired to even open his mouth. He thought of Spanish galleons instead. For some reason he imagined that they were gold like coins and flew across the ocean. But for one to take you home, you would have to die.

Johnson guessed that was fair.

\*\*\*

They spent the summer moving inland toward Germany. *The war will be over soon,* Stanley wrote his mother. His twentieth letter. *The Germans are running like cowards*. He played poker with Johnson and Ennis, throwing pennies and cigarettes and girlie pictures into a German helmet they used as a pot. *I hope you are well and do not worry about me*. He spent one week at Netley Hospital for his leg wound. *Nothing much has happened to us in Europe, except we are getting fatter*. He lost twenty pounds since leaving the States. *Hopefully by the time you get this, I will be on the train home*. In September, they entered the Hürtgen forest.

“I would die for a ham,” Johnson let his cigarette dangle as he settled in the brush. It was a game they played sometimes, what they would die for, since they might die for much less.

“I would die for a turkey sandwich,” Stanley answered. Spruce and balsam trees cloaked their eyes, yielding little forest beyond a few feet. The tree limbs, low, grabbed, and the men walked with a semi-permanent stoop.

“I would die for a woman’s hips. I would put myself between them and sleep like the dead.” Johnson grinned, his teeth white against the green cave. Water dripped constantly. The men could never find the source of it. Sometimes it confused Stanley, and when he slept for brief periods and woke, he thought he was at his parent’s house, down the hall from the leaky faucet.

“Stay here.” Johnson’s arm would grab for Stanley’s ankle as Stanley began to push forward through the brush.

“The sink is fucking leaking,” Stanley waved him off, before Johnson yanked and Stanley fell down into the bed of pine needles that covered the forest floor.

“I would die to get out of this forest,” Stanley said as they ate the last of their bread and coffee. The supply lines inland were farther away, their rations fewer.

“I would die for dry socks.” The mud and fog lay on them like a film. In the dark undergrowth, the men rubbed against the trees and each other like ingredients in a stew. Where were the Germans? Surely not as stupid as the Americans, Stanley thought, burrowing through the forest, their tanks and artillery and Air Force stalled by the dense formations of trees and rough terrain. The Allies were all alone.

\*\*\*

Stanley peed in the snow. The cold air crept into his open pants and ran down his legs. Before he could even finish the German shelling of the tree canopy began again, and Stanley crouched and hugged the spruce in front of him without even pulling up his zipper. Around him, splinters from the trees rained down like daggers, along with hot metal. Ennis had looked like a wooden porcupine when they pulled him back behind their lines a few days before. The shrapnel in Ennis’ chest had been bad, and he and Johnson, trapped in front of a patch of machine guns, pressed themselves to the snow and needles and mud for hours, Ennis between them, moaning for his mother.

Three days earlier, the First Division had discovered the Germans, hidden and waiting for the Allies to amble past the river, when their eyes were tired of the undulation of snow and trees, when their bodies were cold because, in anticipation of quick victory, the Allied brass had not thought to ship winter clothes to the front. For weeks, as the Northern chill swept in, Stanley and Johnson and the others had measured their boots against dead men’s, their inseams, their chest sizes, looking to replace their wet, worn clothes with ones slightly drier, slightly cleaner. Stanley wore two shirts other than his own, each caked and itchy with medals of blood.

Stanley crawled on his hands in the red and brown snow back to the slit trench he had dug with Johnson earlier that afternoon. They had covered the opening with tree limbs and hoped it would protect them from the shrapnel and wood. Inside, they were asshole buddies, sitting back to back, or asshole to asshole, chest high in the hole, branches and snow over them as they watched for movement beyond their line.

“You all right?” Johnson asked as Stanley shivered against him. After nightfall, it became frost. The dead men stuck to the earth.

“I think I’m going to have the runs something awful.”

“Well, go have them the hell out there.”

“You just want me shot at.”

“Just go behind that tree over there. I’ll cover you.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m *joking*. Just be quiet.” Johnson’s hands felt frozen to his carbine. He would give his left hand, purple and granite under his glove, for a cigarette. He felt the pressure of Polenksy’s back leave his, a creeping cold between his soldier blades, as Polensky turned around in the trench and squatted, helmet under his ass.

“You know, we should have a code word, a personal one, in case one of us leaves the hole.” Johnson tried to talk over Stanley’s sounds. A cigarette would go a long way to blunt the smell. But smoke could be seen at night. Rot, shit, and death smelled day and night, as assessable as air.

“What’s wrong with the company’s password?”

“Nothing. I just thought it would be good if we had our own. So I always know it’s a kraut in the burned-out house I’m about to fire into and not you.”

“Jesus Lord Christ,” Stanley grunted from his side of the trench.

That’s not a good one, Polensky. Too many guys already know it.”

“Screw you. Christ…I ain’t going to wear this again, that’s for sure.”

“Just clean it out with some snow. You don’t need to protect that empty head of yours, but where are you going to store your socks and corsage?”

“Up your ass.”

“Well, I know for sure that hasn’t seen any action.” Johnson aimed his rifle toward a flutter by the trees on his right. Geese? Squirrels? “How about metalanthium lamp?”

“That’s your word?”

“Pretty good, huh?”

Suddenly, movement rocketed upward from the same trees. Mine? Mortar? Geese, definitely geese. The feathers and pulp floated to earth, shot by two others in the company. In response, the kraut line lit up like flashbulbs. Polensky fell into position next to Johnson, his helmet, an overturned latrine, unstrapped on his chin. Around them, the snow spit bullets, feathers from feather pillows. For a second, Johnson closed his eyes, thought he would let himself get hit. To feel the cool, light fabric of a pillow, a flat one, a hard one, a moldy one, it didn’t matter. His head whipped to the right, and he thought he’d gotten his wish. But it was only Stanley, punching him with an open palm.

“Wake up, dummy,” he shouted at him above the soft explosions. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Johnson grunted, but he realized he was smiling. He liked this Stanley. He fired off a round. “Shithead.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Stanley answered, firing off his own. Johnson could see he was smiling, too.

\*\*\*

The brass said the Hürtgen Forest was 50 square miles. It seemed to stretch to 100, then 200, then 300, as late October became early November and late November became early December. Stanley did not understand how they could not see the Germans and yet the Germans could see them.

“They know these forests. They’re stuffed in bunkers while we walk right by them,” Johnson said, coughing. Johnson had developed a cough-snore-shiver in his sleep. Perhaps Stanley could boil the herb for tea, soothe Johnson’s deathly rattle. *I still have the root*, Stanley wrote to his mother. *Although I suspect I will have no reason to use it. You never even told me how. Should I put it under my lip, in a wound, perhaps?* His right foot smelled. There was no time to unlace the boot and find out whether his toes had rotted. *We are warm and fat and happy. Save me some Chinina*.

“Duck blood soup,” Johnson laughed later, when Stanley described Christmas dinner at home. “You eat everything, don’t you, Pole? Makes me want to come to your house to dinner after the war.”

“Right now, I would eat anything,” Stanley shivered. He shivered when he was awake and he shivered when he was dreaming. His breath was staccatoed with shivers. He shivered when he peed and he shivered when he shat and he shivered when he shivered. Stanley would eat his shivers, if he could, but they would probably give him diarrhea, he thought, like everything else.

\*\*\*

They walked in a diamond formation: Stanley walked in the back, Johnson in the front, one man, red-haired, was to their left, another, blond-haired, to their right. Stanley didn’t know their names. It seemed a waste to learn them. Wood and shrapnel fell from the sky, mixed with snow, hitting the ground in hisses. The trees burned standing still. Stanley listened to the fire eating the wood, the snap of twigs and branches as they broke free of the parent trunks and fell down to the forest. Smoke poured from the nooks and crannies of the burning bark, and men were forced to crawl. On the ground, the red-haired man, in front, would tap the top of his helmet and point in the direction of movement, and they all would crouch and fill that direction with fire, grenades. But then the blond man on the right threw a grenade that hit a tree and bounced back toward them, and they dove leftward and rolled down a small hill.

“I would die for a stick of gum.” Johnson entangled himself from Stanley. The smoke cleared, briefly, and the hard marble of sun blinked through the treetops.

“This might be your lucky day.” Stanley nodded. Before them, a formation of rock appeared in the trees with a low opening, two by eight feet. A bunker. The red-haired man stood off to the side of it. He tossed in a grenade as they turned, covered their ears. Then they waited for the smoke to clear before joining him at the hole.

Stanley was the shortest, so he got on his knees and crawled in. He imagined a speckling of dead pale boys, boys with smooth faces and darting eyes, but it was empty with black. He tapped the inner mouth of the cave to make sure it was still secure. Then he pointed his thumb up, and the others joined him.

“Now this is living,” red hair said in the darkness. He lit a cigarette and stretched. “We stay here until the war ends, okay?”

“At least for a nap,” Stanley agreed, pulling his blanket out of his backpack. “We’ll take turns on watch.”

They slept on ground that wasn’t wet and in corners that weren’t windy. They slept with their helmets off, their boots unlaced, oblivious to the shelling outside. When they woke, their stomachs were relaxed, growling. They wondered how to get back behind the line for rations, wondered where they were.

“I say we stay in the hole,” the red-haired man said.

“Yeah, and when one of our own boys throws another grenade in here, then what?” the blond said, tightening his laces. They were broken and did not go all the way up the boot.

“That’s why we take turns on watch.” The red-haired man shook his head.

“And when our whole company leaves us behind?” Johnson loaded his rifle. “We’ll starve to death in the woods.”

“Moving thirty feet a day?” red-haired man sneered. “Not fucking likely we get left behind.”

“My orders were to take the forest,” Johnson craned his head out of the hole. “I don’t know about yours.”

Their mood was sour. They decided to follow the ravine that led from the bunker.

“All aboard the Kraut trail,” Johnson laughed. “Think they’ll shell us here?”

“I say we’re mighty close to something.” Stanley lit a cigarette. “Think we’re near the West Wall?”

“By God, we should be so lucky,” the blond man said. “Then we can shoot the hell out of them and go home.”

Stanley could not picture home. His mother’s face appeared vaguely, the smell of her, the sound of her. The hardware store where he worked on Eastern Avenue. His school, Baltimore Polytechnic. He could not be sure whether any of those things had happened or whether they were a dream. Whether he had always been at war and would always be. They walked along the ravine for hours. Sometimes they would come across a body of a German, always picked clean. One body was missing its fillings, the mouth open and exposing bloody stumps of gumline.

“We need to find some Krauts so we can take their braut,” the blond man said.

“I’d even eat the fucking Krauts,” the red-haired man said. “Maybe we should go back and find our men.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Stanley said. “Even if we find the Germans, they’ll probably outnumber us.”

“Our men are probably ahead of us,” Johnson said, his head nodding forward. “That’s why we’re seeing so many dead. I told you we got left behind.”

“Not likely,” the red-haired man said. “I’m going back. The whole month, I ain’t seen nobody get ahead of me. If there’s somebody ahead of us, it’s a different division. Which I’m more than happy for. Let them take some shots.”

**“**I’m with him.” The blond turned in the slit trench.

“Come on, safety in numbers.” Red gripped his rifle. “Let’s go back.”

“What say you?” Johnson looked at Stanley. Johnson was the leader, but Stanley wanted to find their squadron, food.

“Let’s go back.” Stanley didn’t look at Johnson.

“The Pole has decided,” Johnson said, spitting in the trench, kicking at the snow-dirt with his shoe. “Let’s go.”

\*\*\*

They turned around and followed the slit trench back to the bunker. Then they climbed up the slope they had fallen down earlier.

“Let’s sweep out and move forward,” Stanley said. Stanley moved in front, Johnson in the back. The shelling shook and shredded the tree canopy above them, branches falling like swooping vultures, pelting their shoulders and arms, leaving welts. The raining wood and shells filled the air with the sound of sanding metal, and Stanley could not hear anyone, only see their jaws moving, their eyes flicking back and forth as they scanned the area for mines, for Germans, for secure ground in front of them. Stanley wished they had stayed in the bunker. He glimpsed a man running through the trees, white and red cross armband. A medic*.* They knew how to get back to the line. All they needed to do was follow him. Stanley motioned to the men and ran toward the figure.

He had not gotten far when the ground swelled behind him like a wave, sweeping him off his feet. A shell. His body hit the dirt at angles—elbow, knees, ankles—before rolling. When he stopped, he felt for his legs, moved them, and stood up, crouched over.

“Johnson?” he called back. The area from where he had been thrown was peppered with wood and metal. Blackened bark. Gray and red snow. Johnson’s helmet.

He followed the trail to Johnson, what was left of him. Blood spread from the left side of Johnson’s groin, his left leg scattered around him, bone broken and carved like scrimshaw and strewn with strips of muscle and skin. Johnson shivered, coughed, and looked lazily up at Stanley, drunk with shock. Stanley called for the medic. The blond man staggered up and then off, shouting for help. Stanley tore a strip of cloth from Johnson’s backpack and made a tourniquet. Johnson’s big long face caved in from his cheeks to his chin. His eyes fluttered.

“Johnson.” Stanley shook him. But Johnson was going. Stanley took off his helmet and scooped the herb out of the lining. He opened Johnson’s mouth and pushed it in.

But Johnson didn’t chew. Stanley opened Johnson’s mouth and pulled a third of it between Johnson’s gums and teeth. He picked off another piece and put in the red, beating hole that was once Johnson’s hip, leg. Then he moved Johnson’s jaw with his own hands, pushing Johnson’s tongue aside, grinding the herb with Johnson’s teeth. Johnson’s mouth was dry as cotton, and the herb coated the soft pink insides. Stanley stuck his finger in Johnson’s mouth and pushed the flakes, the unchewed pieces, into Johnson’s throat. Johnson gagged, sitting up and coughing, hands at his neck. The green-brown flakes flew out, covering Stanley’s face and shirt. Stanley wrapped his arms under Johnson’s chest and jerked upward. Stanley jerked and Johnson coughed and the herb chunk flew into the snow.

“Medic.” The man dropped his kit beside Stanley. Stanley moved back and caught sight of the spat-out herb. It glowed in the detritus, unearthly. Stanley’s heart jumped. He reached for the glowing orange saxifrage. The medic turned, shook his head, frowned.

Johnson was dead. The medic tagged him, took one of his dog tags, and scrambled back in the forest. It seemed wrong to leave Johnson like this, any of them like this. Maybe Stanley wouldn’t fight anymore, stay here with Johnson, work the herb into his wounds, down his throat. He could stick his knife into Johnson’s chest and massage it into his heart.

The trees shook around him. Men shouted in the distance, the trill of bullets, explosions. Small fires baked in pockets of black trees. When another shell landed to the left of Stanley, he could feel the warmth of it on his leg. He did what he later imagined any other person would do. He ran.