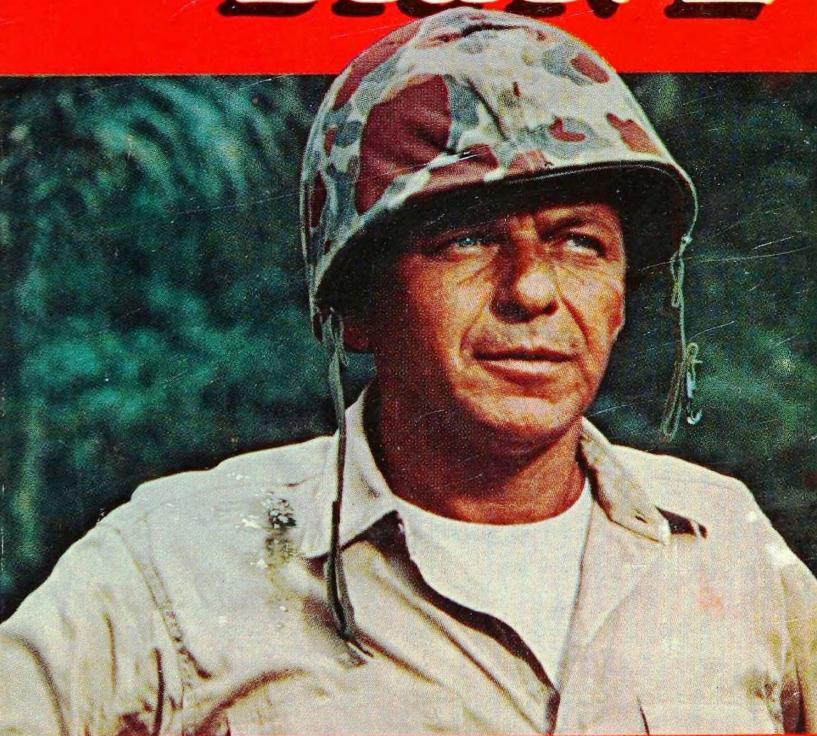




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NONE BUT THE BRAVE



A HANDFUL OF GIs CRASH-LAND
ON AN ENEMY-HELD ISLAND—LAUNCHING THE
STRANGEST BATTLE OF WORLD WAR II

A Novel by LOU CAMERON

Now the brilliant motion picture starring FRANK SINATRA

Huddled in the stinking undergrowth with Corporal Craddock, Captain Bourke decided maybe he had been wrong after all. Maybe there was no enemy on this island.

Ahead, on the hilltop, a lantern glowed dully in the wrecked plane. If anything would lure a patrol, the light would. But instead, silence, emptiness, nothing.

Suddenly, without even a whisper of noise, a Japanese soldier leaped into the clearing, threw a grenade into the plane, and leaped back to cover.

Three minutes after the explosion, a patrol of five Japanese crept toward the plane. Bourke tapped Craddock's shoulder in silent signal and Craddock's rifle-fire shattered the night. One man fell. The others scattered into the shadows.

Bourke now knew the worst. They were not alone on the island. The Japs would be certain to know every inch of terrain and they had lost only one man in learning what they wanted to know about the Americans.

From now on, the Japs would have the upper hand. . . .

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Screenplay by John Twist and Katsuya Susaki

Story by Kikumaru Okuda

none but the brave

by lou cameron

An Original Gold Medal Book

GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

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none but the brave

ON a large-scale map of the Solomons, the island appeared as a small black dot with a notation to the effect that it was uninhabited and surrounded by uncharted reefs. It had no name, no history, no importance. The battle line had moved on up The Slot the year before. Washington, and Tokyo, had forgotten any plans anyone may have ever had for the little patch of sun-baked coral. If the island hadn't been a reference point on his flight plan, Dennis Bourke never would have known of the place.

From the air, the island appeared a trifle larger than it did on the chart, but not a hell of a lot. Bourke was alone in the pilot's compartment at the time he first sighted it on the horizon, but he didn't need the flight plan clipped near the co-pilot's seat. He knew he was on course. There wasn't another speck of land for a hundred miles in any direction. The flight plan ordered a twelve-degree turn over the island for the last leg of their run into Bougainville. A routine sweep of the instrument panel told him there was plenty of fuel left, both engines were running cool, and the vertical trim tab had taken care of that starboard yaw they'd taken off with.

Bourke yawned. Another day, another dollar.

The co-pilot came forward from the passenger compartment and took his place in the right-hand seat. He had a Thermos bottle and a couple of tin mess cups. Bourke noticed he didn't fasten his seat belt when he sat down.

"Coffee, Captain?" the co-pilot asked, waving the Thermos.

"Not right now, thanks," Bourke grunted. He knew how it would sound if he mentioned the seat belt. Instead, he said, "Everything okay back there?"

"One of those gyrene replacements thinks he's airsick," the younger man shrugged. "The Chief gave him some Dramamine and had him lie down with a parachute under his little head. Personally, I think it's all in his think tank. This kite's flying like it's on railroad tracks."

"The air's smooth this time of the year," Bourke observed.

"Funny how the best flying weather in the South Pacific is always just before the typhoon season."

"So they say. Hey, you don't expect anything like *that*, do you? I was wondering why they gave us a fighter escort on this milk run."

Bourke chuckled wryly. "Those two peashooters wouldn't be much help in a *typhoon*," he said. "One of our subs reported what might have been a Jap carrier in the area a few nights back."

He caught the nervous look in the younger man's eyes and smiled. "Relax," Bourke said, "they've *been* spotting that same mysterious carrier once a week since Pearl Harbor. I think it's a sister ship to the Flying Dutchman. Now, if you want to know the *real* scuttlebutt, the navy just hates to admit their peashooter pilots don't know enough navigation to find Bougainville without following a marine transport."

Both men laughed and then the co-pilot suddenly said, "There's that island up ahead, Captain. The one where we turn north."

Bourke started to say he'd spotted it minutes ago, but contented himself with a nod. The guy was pretty sloppy. Forgot routine things like fastening his seat belt and watching for navigational check-points. Bourke wondered if they'd washed him out of fighter school. He looked young enough to be a peashooter.

"Twenty-six," Bourke thought bitterly. "You have to be under twenty-six to qualify for fighter training. They say a guy in his early thirties is too *old*! That was a hot one. You spend damned near fifteen years in the corps, and then, the first time a real war comes along, you're too old to fight in it, so they put you to work flying an airborne ferry boat!"

"You think anybody lives on it?" the co-pilot said.

"What?"

"The island, Captain. I was wondering if there could be any people on it. Natives, maybe, or hula dancers."

"Wrong part of the Pacific for hula dancers," Bourke shrugged. "Any natives you'll find in the Solomons are liable to be a bit darker, and a lot more cannibalistic. I don't imagine *anybody* lives on that island. The Melanesians stick pretty much to the high islands to the north. The living's too rugged on a *makatai* like this one."

"A maka-what?"

"Makatai. That's what they call an island like that. A poor little bastard halfway between a high island like Tahiti and a flat coral atoll like Wake or Midway. You see, it's rugged but

too low-lying to have much soil or drinking water, and it hasn't the fishing grounds you find in most atolls. Natives wouldn't bother trying to scratch out a living on *that* little scab of coral."

"I'll take your word for it!" the co-pilot laughed. "You say no hula dancers, there's no hula dancers. What's the difference, anyway? We'll probably never see the stinking place again!"

IT was hot. The noonday sun stared down from the dead center of a copper bowl of sky to bounce blinding white light off every grain of coral sand. Things seemed bleached out in the incandescent glare, like flowers pressed too long between the dry pages of a forgotten book. The lush fronds of the palms along the shore seemed made of pale green straw. From time to time, a fitful breeze stirred the Imperial Japanese flag over the clearing, but its proud blood-red emblem was faded, in the glare, to a dull rose. As if the solar disc in the copper sky would tolerate no competition from its man-made rival.

In his improvised hut of palm fronds and pandanus leaves, Lieutenant Kuroki was trying his best to keep his Military Journal up to date. It wasn't easy. His fingers were slippery with sweat as he grasped the brush, while the heat seemed to dry the ink cake as fast as he could wet it. A hungry green flying thing bit him on the forearm and made its escape as Kuroki swore softly and swatted at it. He wiped a hand across his face in a futile attempt to remove some of the dampness, and closed his eyes for a moment against the glare before going back to his calligraphy. The classic *Kanji* pictographs swam in his heat-blurred vision and the thought crossed his mind that he'd have been better off keeping the damned journal in the newer phonetic *Katanka* script, or even the European *Kokutei Romazi* they'd started using on the newspaper he'd worked for before the war.

Kuroki pursed his lips firmly as he dismissed the thought. He'd started to keep his records in the script of his samurai ancestors and this was no time to start looking for short cuts. He was the only officer left in command of the ragtag band of forgotten castaways left here in the wake of the war. He knew, better than any of the other sixteen Japanese on the island, how easy it would be to let down. He alone knew how hopeless their situation really was. How tempting it

would be to give in to the dark despair they'd forced to the backs of their minds.

What was he trying to prove? He and his men had been left behind in the retreat to Bougainville. Left to guard an outpost neither God nor the Americans seemed to want. Their radio was out of commission and the few supplies he still had to ration were laughable. He'd assigned work details, more to keep the men busy than in any real hope of ever seeing Japan again. Discipline had to be maintained; maintained as long as possible, at any rate. Things were bad enough, as they waited, half-starved, for a relief ship that Kuroki knew in his heart would never come. At least they still had hope. At least they were still pulling together instead of fighting like animals for the few scraps of food this miserable little island offered.

An angry bull-like bellow from outside intruded on the Lieutenant's thoughts as he raised unseeing eyes from the page of his notebook.

"Hai! Get to work! Get back to work, you lazy scum!"

It was Sergeant Tamura. It was always Sergeant Tamura. There wasn't a man within a hundred miles with a parade ground voice like that.

"Unwashed, useless bastards!" the Sergeant roared, "I'll chew your lazy behinds off!"

Kuroki sighed, carefully placed the brush on the table by the ink cake, and stepped out into the furnace glare. The burly noncom was doing his damndest, considering the heat, to make life even more miserable for Privates Arikawa and Tokumaru.

Arikawa, a slender teen-ager who'd worked briefly as a bookkeeper on Hokkaido before the war, was one of the Sergeant's favorite victims and he knew it. Arikawa stood at attention in abject misery while the burly Okinawan peasant lashed him with unimaginative but brutal sarcasm. At his side stood the easy-going Private Tokumaru in as relaxed a position as you could get away with in the Japanese army while a superior talked to you, without catching a healthy slap in the face. Tokumaru had been a Zen Buddhist priest before being drafted into the official Shinto forces of His Imperial Majesty, and nothing the Sergeant could say to him could get under his philosophical skin. Tamura knew it, and, with the hunting instinct of a bully, concentrated on the utterly unhappy youth from Hokkaido as he rasped, "You think you're too good to work with the rest of us, Arikawa-san? I've watched you with your mincing northern walk and superior

smile." He glared at the other private as if to enlist him in support as he added, "You can always tell these ever-so-educated northern Salve Sellers by the way they go about talking through their teeth like a Yashiwara girl." His voice raised as close to a falsetto as he could manage as he mockingly sneered, "Zu-zu, Arikawa-san. Are you sure you told the truth on your enlistment papers? Are you sure you came from Hokkaido, my little zu-zu-san? You look to me like a Seikenji boy! Is that what you really did before they drafted you, zu-zu-san? Sell salve to old men on the Tokaido Road?"

"That will be quite *enough*, Sergeant!" Lieutenant Kuroki snapped as he approached the trio in the middle of the clearing.

"Lieutenant-san!" the Sergeant sputtered, turning and snapping to attention with a brisk salute. "I did not see you approaching!"

"I dare say," Kuroki muttered dryly. "You know how I feel about those methods in my command."

"Sir, I was only trying to remind them they are still Japanese soldiers. I was only trying to lecture them on their duties."

"With that remark about Seikenji Salve Sellers and their boys, Sergeant? I was not aware that sodomy was included in the duties of a Japanese soldier. Hereafter, I don't want to hear any more such accusations unless you can back them up, understand?"

Sergeant Tamura's face was vivid crimson as he managed to choke out a grudgingly correct, "Yes, Lieutenant-san."

Then, catching a look of relieved amusement where it had no right to be, the young officer suddenly snapped, "And you two, why are you shirking while your comrades work? No; I don't want any excuses! There aren't any excuses on this island. Not if any of you ever hope to see home again. Back to the beach and tell Corporal Fujimoto I said you were to work on the deck planking where he can keep an eye on you!"

As the two abashed privates made tracks for the beach, the young officer turned to the older noncom and said, "I didn't wish to cause you loss of face like that, Tamura-san, but I've warned you too many times in private about the way you've been driving the men."

"My methods may seem harsh to you, Lieutenant-san," the older man grumbled, not looking his commander in the eye, "but these left-over dregs they've sent out to fight for the Emperor in the past two years. . . . Gah! There were *men* in our army when it marched into Nanking in '37!"

(Yes, the Lieutenant thought, and many of them never marched *back* from Nanking, or Bataan, or Guadalcanal. Lots of men would never march again, anywhere.)

"I don't wish to discuss the matter further, Sergeant," Kuroki said aloud. "You have your ideas and I have mine. Perhaps you are right, or perhaps my gentler methods are the ones to use. Since I need hardly remind an old soldier like yourself which one of us is in *command* here, I feel the discussion is academic. Do we understand one another, Tamura-san?"

For a moment, their eyes locked in a steady unwinking stare. Then there was a slight movement deep in the non-com's eyes, like the flicker of motion you might glimpse of a shark turning in three fathoms, before Tamura bowed curtly and answered, "Yes, Lieutenant-san, we understand one another . . . perfectly."

"Good," Kuroki smiled in an attempt at heartiness. "How is our nautical project coming along? Does it look like Leading Private Ando might finally put together a boat that will float, after all?"

"The boat's nearly finished," the Sergeant shrugged. "As finished as we can manage with rocks for hammers and wooden pegs in place of nails. Ando has them caulking her seams with coconut fiber right now, but we'll be lucky if she holds together between here and Bougainville, even if he can launch her before the first typhoons arrive."

To himself, Kuroki thought, "We'll be lucky if our own forces still *hold* Bougainville or any part of it by the time we get there."

Aloud, he managed a jovial optimistic cliché and allowed the somewhat chastened Sergeant Tamura a graceful exit.

He knew the hard-boiled Okinawan would be turning the air blue with curses as soon as he was out of earshot, but he had to sit on his noncom once in a while, if only to keep him from enforcing a casual order by slamming a rifle butt against the nearest enlisted skull.

"Damn, it's hot today!" he swore softly to himself as he crunched across the smouldering coral toward the shade of his hut. His ears were starting to ring from the effort of standing erect in all this heat. Maybe it would be a good idea to dismiss the men for the rest of the afternoon. It was too hot under this murderous sun to walk a straight line, let alone work with hammer and saw. The buzzing was growing louder in his ears and Kuroki had a moment of panic as he thought

how it would look if he were to suddenly black out at *this* stage of the game!

"I don't care what that damned Tamura thinks about reserve officers coddling the troops!" he mumbled, turning back the way he'd come. "If *my* ears are ringing just from the effort of writing my report, think how worn out those poor half-starved men on the beach must be! No lousy boat is worth losing a man to sunstroke!"

The buzzing was louder now, and taking on a deeper throb. Kuroki stopped dead in his tracks and squinted up into the glaring sky. He wasn't hearing an imaginary ringing in his ears. He was hearing *planes!*

There were planes coming up the beach from the south, two or more, by the sound of it. There were no longer any Japanese positions southwest of this forgotten island, he knew, and those engines had a deeper tone than the sawmill rasp Kuroki would have recognized if the oncoming planes had been powered by standard Japanese Homare HA-415.

"Take cover!" he shouted, suddenly snapping out of the heat-induced stupor and racing toward the others down by the shore. "Get some camouflage over that boat and keep your heads down. Those are planes I hear! *American* planes!"

THE Japanese Zero at Angels Twenty was outnumbered two to one, but he had a few things going for him, just the same. Neither of the peashooter pilots escorting Bourke's transport spotted him as he came down on them out of the sun. So the first warning the Americans had was when a burst of 20mm cannon shells tore hell out of one of the fighters, and the man inside.

After that, the odds against the Zero weren't quite as high. The remaining American fighter pilot barely had time to digest the fact that his buddy was going down in flames before he found himself looking down the barrels of the Zero's wing cannon as the Japanese plane flashed around for a head-on attack.

The kid in the American plane was green, but he remembered one thing they'd pounded into him at flight school. "If you ever find yourself in a head-on collision course with an enemy plane," the instructor had said, "for God's sake, don't be the first one to turn aside! No matter how hairy it looks, you've got to pull the other guy's bluff. As long as your nose is pointed right at him, you're protected by your engine and

your guns are aimed his way. The minute you pull aside, he'll stitch holes all over that beautiful target you just made of yourself!"

Gritting his teeth and pressing down on the trigger button, the American made up his mind that if anybody lost his nerve, it wouldn't be *him*!

Unfortunately, the Japanese pilot had been told the same thing by *his* instructor.

Guns chattering, the two fighters roared in on each other as Bourke stood the transport on one wing and searched the sky wildly for any company the crazy bastard in that Zeke might have brought along. Pulling out of the evasive side slip, Bourke saw the two fighters meet in a brilliant orange ball of flame.

The American died instantly, his brains spattered by hot steel as his engine came back through flaming gas to sit in his lap. By some fluke, the pilot of the frailer-built Zero remained alive, and vaguely aware of what was going on, as his nearly demolished plane wrote a line of flame across the sky. His clothes were on fire from the waist down, but a merciful 50 caliber slug lodged in his spine had left both legs without feeling. A six-foot length of aluminum tubing from the American's framework had knifed through his instrument panel and pinned him upright in his seat like an untidily mounted butterfly. A short-circuited green light winked on and off brightly, and he wondered, dimly, why the hell his landing gear was cranking down at a time like this!

The sky outside the smoke-filled cockpit was turning a lovely shade of ruby red as the blood drained from his brain. There was a large dark blur slightly to one side and, in a moment of lucidity, the dying man realized it must be the American transport. His scorched feet were dead on the rudder controls but his numb left hand still gripped the joy stick with enough strength to bank his plane with her one remaining aileron. The response was sluggish and he realized he wasn't going to be able to ram the transport as a mushy tremor warned him of an impending stall.

The guns! He still had the guns, didn't he? He wasn't too sure at the moment as his fuddled brain groped for the location of his cannon toggle. A split-second before his life ended in a final blackout, he was able to fire his 20mm cannon.

The aim was off, and the Japanese guns spit an erratic trail of disaster in a wild arc with a dead man's hand on the trigger. But, in a moment of completely lousy luck, Bourke

flew through the cone of fire from the yawing Zero as he took what *would* have been a neat evasive side slip if only the Zero had been going the way he'd *thought* it was!

The world dissolved in a chaos of flame and ear-splitting sound around Bourke, and for what seemed a hell of a long time, he thought he was dead. The sound faded to a sustained musical rush of air, like the sighing of a monstrous organ in a void.

There'd been an organ the last time he and Lorie had been to church in Manila, but it hadn't been a very big one. The church had been cool and dark and filled with the smell of that sandalwood incense the Filipinos burned. Lorie had liked that little church. They'd had some half-formed plans about that church, and the little old Spanish priest had looked like he was going to cry the day Bourke had taken the time to tell him why he would never perform a certain ceremony, after all.

"Hey, Lorie," Bourke muttered, as nineteen American lives plummeted earthward at two hundred miles an hour, "how the hell did *you* get here, kitten? They don't allow women out here on the line. . . ."

"You're not at Bataan anymore, darling," she answered. Funny how misty Lorie looked in this purple light. "That was a long time ago, remember? Wake up, Dennis! You'll all die if you don't wake up!"

Dennis Bourke thought about that. He thought about it for a million years while the cold slipstream lashed his face through the holes in his riddled windshield. Lorie's lovely face had faded almost completely now. Only her voice remained, telling him the others were depending on him. Who in the hell were the others? Oh yeah, he had a load of marine replacements he was taking some place, and Chief Maloney had thumbed a ride on this flight, he remembered. Good old Maloney, the crazy drunken bastard! He didn't want the *Chief* to die, did he?

And then, quite suddenly, he woke up. Bourke shook his head and looked around. The guy in the co-pilot's seat was a bloody mess. No use asking him how he felt about all those holes in his hide. Nobody had ever looked as dead as *that* poor slob!

One engine was dead and the other was on fire and racing wildly. Bourke cut the switch and feathered the prop, which left him without power in the middle of the South Pacific, and headed for the deck with the glide angle of a brick.

Bourke pulled back on the control yoke and felt himself

pressed down against his seat pack as the transport pulled out of its dive. A row of palms lay stretched along the shore line dead ahead. Damn, he was low! Not more than fifty feet above the water as he dead-sticked toward the only land he remembered around here. Bourke raised her nose as high as he dared to give himself time to pick a place to put her down. The plane gained a few feet of altitude on her remaining speed. Then Bourke felt the stall just before it happened and brought her nose down for what had to be the one and only landing approach.

The water was shallow just offshore, and the book said a water landing was safest if you had to bring her in dead on her belly. On the other hand, there might be wounded men aft, and there was enough blood in the damned cockpit alone to draw every shark within a mile.

"It'll have to be the beach," he thought, shaking his head free of lingering cobwebs. He wasn't sure the narrow strip of hard-packed sand was going to be wide enough as he came down, fighting to hold her in the air. Okay, one wing could hang out over the water a little, the palm trunks could have the other. He was coming in too fast! No time to see if he still had any flap control left. Working the rudder pedals to fish-tail her from side to side, Bourke was still trying to bring her down to landing speed when the first palm trunk caught a wing tip. The plane slewed around, smashing her belly against the coral, and bounced into the trees. Both wings were left behind as the transport tore her way through the jungle growth, shedding pieces on the way. But her tanks held. She didn't catch fire, and Bourke was still alive when she finally settled in a cloud of coral dust and falling leaves.

He wondered if anyone else aboard was.

HE got all three of the bastards!" Sergeant Tamura was shouting, "It cost our boy his life, but he took three enemy planes with him."

Abruptly, he stiffened to attention and faced out to sea where three plumes of greasy smoke rose above the water. "Attention, all of you!" Tamura shouted. "A proper salute for a fallen Japanese warrior!"

Lieutenant Kuroki's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as the men lined up to pay their last respects to their unknown comrade. He was used to his noncom's officious way of giving orders without waiting for so much as a nod from his commander.

But Tamura's order was a proper one and that wasn't what bothered the Lieutenant at the moment. What *did* worry him was the glib assurance that all three American planes had crashed.

True, the big twin-engined transport had been diving at a steep angle, trailing smoke, at the time Kuroki watched it vanish from sight behind the tree tops to the east. But he hadn't actually seen it crash, and there was no tell-tale pillar of smoke above the jungle to reassure him.

Of course, it might have gone down in the sea on the other side of the island, but Kuroki wanted to be sure. He wanted to be *damned* sure. A plane that size could carry thirty fully equipped soldiers. And he commanded sixteen!

Turning toward a figure on the hill behind him, Kuroki shouted, "Private Goro! Did you get a look at where that last American plane came down?"

Goro, the lookout, waved his binoculars and came part way down the hill as he shouted back, "I didn't see them hit, Lieutenant-san. One engine was smoking pretty bad, but it looked to me like they might have pulled out of that dive in time to land."

"So? Where, do you think? The shallows to the northeast?"

"More like the east beach, Lieutenant-san," Goro answered, coming nearer. Kuroki motioned him back to his lookout and turned to the others.

"Sergeant," he said, in sudden decisiveness, "I want every man to arm himself at once. Have someone run over to the garden plot and warn Corporal Hirano. Our agricultural experiment can wait, for now." He thought for a moment as his eyes swept over his suddenly alert men. Then he snapped, "Where's Private Okuda? I sent him out this afternoon to see if he could catch any fish! Which way did he go?"

There was a moment of confusion and then the Sergeant shouted, "He's all right, Lieutenant-san. I remember he said something about trying his luck this time on the west beach. You there; Tokumaru; get your carbine at the hut and pick up Okuda's, while you're at it. Then run over to the west beach and get Okuda back here on the double. And I mean *run*, you lazy bastard! Let's not be stopping along the way to burn any offerings to Buddha!"

The Zen priest bowed slightly with a mocking smile and turned to dog-trot toward the thatched huts clustered under the faded Imperial flag. Sergeant Tamura nodded his satisfaction and turned briskly to the young officer.

"With your permission, Lieutenant-san, I will march the

men back to camp and muster arms. We will fall on those American dogs like tigers within the hour!"

"That's not quite the way we're going to do it, Sergeant," Kuroki said quietly. "I want the men fully armed at all times until further notice, but nobody's going any place until I have a better idea of what we're up against. I want you to take Tokumaru with you and scout to the northeast, Sergeant. I'll send Corporal Hirano with Okuda due east. Corporal Fujimoto will check the southeast point, just to be safe. You'd better rendezvous at the spring in the jungle before reporting back."

"Lieutenant-san!" the Sergeant cut in, "time is against us! If that transport landed safely, it will have radioed its base for help!"

"Yes," Kuroki answered softly. "There will probably be an American rescue force coming our way."

"Then we should attack the ones on our island *now*, before they have us hopelessly outnumbered . . ."

"And walk right into an ambush while we flounder around in the jungle like a flock of Baka-no recruits? We don't know *anything* about our enemy, Sergeant. We don't know how many men he has, or even where they landed! If the enemy commander has the brains of a gnat, he's setting up a defense perimeter this very minute. Yes, and probably sending out patrols to find out what *he* is up against!"

"But, Lieutenant-san . . ."

"We have no time for discussion, Sergeant!" Kuroki snapped. "You have your orders. Get moving! While you scout the jungle, I'll have the others dig in."

For a long moment, the burly noncom didn't answer. This was the second time in a day the Lieutenant had ranked him in front of others, and his jaw muscles twitched as he fought to keep the rage and embarrassment from showing on his face.

"The little snot-nosed brat!" he thought. "I could chop the life out of him with one blow to that skinny neck! Just one blow! And here I stand like a woman while he chews me out like it was my first day in the army!"

"Did you hear me, Sergeant?" the officer seemed to be saying from somewhere far away.

"I heard you, you dreamy-eyed little schoolboy! Hai, I heard you! You think you're an officer giving orders, eh? You think a muti like you is fit to hold a towel for a man like Lieutenant Nakamura, while he lays his girl? By God, I'd like to see you in *Nakamura's* outfit when we took

Nanking! No farting around in those days! It was butt stock and bayonet every step of the way! We kept going and we kept killing and the hell with what the damned Chinese thought! We didn't give them *time* to think!"

A dangerous look was starting to smoulder in the young officer's eyes by the time Tamura managed a grudging bow of assent. The Lieutenant's face was cold as his Sergeant turned away to assign the three patrols. He knew Tamura was a soldier, but he didn't like the older man's wild-eyed approach to war. All that sword-slashing stuff might have been fine back in the days of the Forty-Seven Ronin, but, as Kuroki remembered the story, all forty-seven of them had wound up very, *very* dead. If Japan was ever to win this nearly hopeless war, her soldiers would have to match the western cunning of the enemy.

Kuroki had read the translations of treacherous pink-skinned bastards like Napoleon Bonaparte-san and the cold-blooded Prussian, Bismarck-san. Although he took much of the War Ministry's propaganda with a grain of salt, Kuroki knew what lengths the Americans were liable to go to.

Honor meant little to a Caucasian soldier, as long as he *won*. They'd retreat like women from a strong position, if retreating meant a chance to better their over-all strategy. No Banzai charges for *those* round-eyed killers! All through this war, they'd played each hand like an unprincipled money-lender. He knew he was faced with an enemy who would snap up any chance Kuroki and his desperate little band gave him as quickly as a cat snaps up an unwary mouse.

If he could help it, Lieutenant Kuroki had no intention of offering that chance.

"Butt stock and bayonet . . ." Sergeant Tamura was muttering to himself as he strutted across the clearing. "Fire from the hip and move in with butt stock and bayonet!"

THE men in the American transport had been lucky. Bourke's co-pilot and navigator had been killed, but everyone else had gotten off with assorted cuts and bruises.

Dennis Bourke and Chief Pharmacist's Mate James Maloney sat side by side on a fallen palm log, watching Second Lieutenant Donald Blair flap his arms as he tried to give fifteen marine infantrymen the impression that he knew what the hell he was doing. Blair, fresh out of OCS himself, had

been put in command of the passengers on Bourke's flight mainly because he was an officer and they weren't.

The men were a mixed lot from the replacement depot back on Guadal. They ranged in ability and experience from Corporal Ruffino, a scar-faced regular who'd landed with the 1st Battalion back in the days when Guadal didn't have replacement depots and USO shows twice a month, to Private Dexter, six weeks out of boot camp. The passenger list even included a Negro artilleryman for the colored 155 outfit attached to the 3rd.

"All right, you men," Blair was shouting, "I want you to line up here in a column of twos. All but the wounded. Wounded men are excused from duty until we have a chance to examine them."

"That's big of him," Maloney snorted, loud enough for his voice to carry.

The Chief was in his mid-forties, with the build of a slightly oversized jockey and the face of a man who'd seen a little too much of life to take it seriously. At the moment, he was working his way down a bottle of reasonably good bourbon originally intended for an Officers' Club on Bougainville.

Young Lieutenant Blair waited until seven men had lined up in front of him before he gave any indication of having heard Maloney's sarcastic remark. Then he said, "At ease, men," and slowly turned around.

"Here we go again," sighed the raffish navy medic.

"You, there!" Blair snapped, bearing down on them with a parade ground step despite the tangled forest litter. "What do you mean by sitting there while wounded men lay untended? Is that a *bottle* I see in your hand? By God, I'll have your stripes for this, sailor!"

"Not until you join the navy, you won't, gyrene," snorted the Chief, taking another healthy belt at the bottle. "Besides, I already looked your poor wounded veterans over. Couple of concussions and a dislocated shoulder, which I already set. So, why don't you sit down and have a drink with ol' Dennis and me?"

Blair blinked rapidly like a man having a bad dream and wondering why he didn't wake up. He searched Bourke's face for some sign of support from a brother officer, but the Captain seemed completely indifferent to the Chief's insubordination as he stared morosely at the wrecked plane across the clearing from them.

"Captain Bourke," Blair said, a trifle desperately. "I'm

trying to bring some sort of order out of this balled-up mess we're in. We're down on a deserted island and nobody seems to be making the slightest effort to do anything helpful!"

"If you want to be helpful," the Chief sneered, "you'd put some of your gyrenes to work bringing the supplies out of that gas-soaked wreck before it goes up in smoke." He held the bottle out to Bourke and added, "Come on, Denny, help me finish this friggen bottle so I can open another one."

Bourke looked blankly at the bottle the Chief held out. Then he shrugged and took it from Maloney with a crooked smile. He helped himself to a swig as Blair, in a sudden attempt to regain control of the situation, turned to shout, "Sergeant Bleeker! Take a squad into the wreckage and salvage as much of her cargo and our equipment as you can."

Bleeker, a heavy-set muscular animal who'd made his stripes on the regimental boxing team, blinked a couple of times at Blair as he digested that. Never too bright to begin with, Bleeker hadn't the slightest idea how you form a ten-man squad out of seven or eight able-bodied men, but the corps had never called on Bleeker for any thinking, and he didn't propose to start now.

"Yes sir," Bleeker said, throwing the Lieutenant a salute. Then, turning back to the others, Bleeker bellowed, "Corporal Ruffino! Form a squad and put them to work salvaging the gear!"

"I'd better get over there and do some salvaging of my own," Maloney said, getting to his feet, "before them sea-going bellhops get into those other cases of booze!" He winked at Blair and added, "While you're at it, sonny, you better see about setting up some kind of camp while there's still daylight."

"Damn it!" snapped the Lieutenant, "I was about to order that, but I don't take any orders from *you!*"

"So, stand at attention all night," laughed Maloney, turning away. "I'm gonna see about making myself at home until the navy comes looking for us."

Blair watched the wiry medic's retreating back in a mixture of confusion and rage until Bourke chuckled wryly and softly said, "Slip you a little friendly advice, Lieutenant? Never pull rank on a navy chief. It's a complete waste of time."

"I go by the book, sir," Blair said stiffly. "He's an enlisted rating. I'm commissioned."

Bourke shrugged and took another sip from the bottle as Blair studied him in confused embarrassment. The Captain

was a big man. Not just tall, but big, as if he'd been designed to a larger scale than other men. From a distance, his well-proportioned body gave no particular impression of size, but at close range, Blair was uncomfortably aware of the fact that Bourke stood head and shoulders above him.

And yet, there was a hint of . . . weakness? No.

Bourke had brought them safely down as only a quick-thinking pro who knew his job could have. Blair had seen the christ-awful mess those Jap shells had made of that cockpit while they'd been pulling the bodies out. A weak man would have panicked, he was sure. And yet, the Captain seemed so . . . uncaring? Maybe that was it. Maybe he just didn't *give* a damn.

"Those bars are kind of new, aren't they?" Bourke was asking, not unkindly.

Blair flushed slightly as he grinned and asked, "How long does the shine usually take to wear off?"

"Not very long out here, kid. Not very goddam long."

"I guess you think I've been acting pretty green, but . . ."

"You've done your job, so far," Bourke cut in. "You've got your casualties patched up and in the shade. The others have been put to work. Maybe we ought to see about a burial detail for my co-pilot and navigator, but it can wait until you unload the cargo and settle things down. So, why don't you take it easy and have a drink?"

The Lieutenant hesitated a moment. Then he grinned boyishly and accepted the bottle.

"He'll do," Bourke thought. "A little too eager, but he means well."

"Captain," Blair was saying, "I've been wanting to tell you . . . what a hell of a fine job I think that landing was. I mean, I really thought we were goners. You must have been flying for some time!"

"Since they had two wings," Bourke shrugged. "Joined the corps back in '30. The stock market crashed the year I graduated from Cal Tech and I figured it was better to be a marine on twenty-one dollars a month than an engineer on nothing. Got kind of tired of all that walking, though, so I transferred to the flying cadets after a hitch in the Infantry. That was back when we were flying the old open-cockpit O2Us and wearing white silk scarves and square-rimmed goggles, like the illustrations in *War Birds*."

His somber eyes gazed thoughtfully at the wreckage across the way and added, softly, "Tempus fugits, boy. Tempus sure as hell fugits!"

"Captain," Blair interrupted him abruptly, "between the two of us, how do our chances look?"

"Not so good."

"The navy knows our flight plan. Surely, they'll come looking for us when we don't show up on Bougainville."

"In peacetime, maybe," Bourke shrugged. "Even now, if they knew our exact position. But we could be down anywhere within a couple of hundred square miles, and they haven't got the planes and ships to spare for a search like that."

"Wasn't there time to radio our position?"

"Would have been if they hadn't shot up our radio. I've got Keller, my radioman, over there now, trying to salvage the set from the plane. But it's just to keep the kid busy, Lieutenant. I saw what a mess they made of it."

"Well," Blair said cheerfully, "we'll just have to survive on our supplies until . . ." He stopped as he caught the wry look on the older man's face and asked, "What's wrong? There must be a ton of supplies in the wreck."

"Yeah," Bourke answered bitterly. "A consignment for the Officers' Club and Enlisted Canteen at that new airstrip. Bourbon and cigarettes. Period."

Blair stared at him for a long moment as that sank in. Then he said, "You mean, there's nothing to eat?"

"Nothing but the K rations they gave you to eat on the trip," Bourke said. "Of course, we won't have to give up smoking or drinking. We've enough booze and tobacco to last us until we starve to death."

Blair looked wildly around. "This is a tropical island!" he gasped. "There ought to be plenty to eat around here. How about coconuts?"

"That's another thing we've got to worry about," Bourke added. "Most of these palms are the wrong kind, but that's a coconut tree over there, right above those two guys stacking cases. Notice anything about it?"

Blair stared for a moment and then he muttered, "There don't seem to be any coconuts *on* it."

"No, and none on any of the other five or six I can see from here."

"You mean, somebody . . . picked them?"

"Crabs, maybe. These big crabs come out of the sea at night and climb right up the trunk to get at the nuts. The natives kill them off on inhabited islands, but the ugly bastards keep the palms stripped pretty bare on deserted low islands."

"Then, that means this island must be completely deserted?"

"Not necessarily," Bourke shrugged. "Natives might strip the trees that bare if their taro crops or the fishing has been bad. On the other hand, the Japs held these islands a few months ago. Might not be a bad idea to set up a defense perimeter."

"Japs on *this* island?" Blair gasped, leaping to his feet. He put a hand a trifle dramatically on his gun butt and said, "We'll sure as hell *find out* in a hurry! If any stinking Japs are holed up on this island, my men and I will find them!"

"Relax!" Bourke sighed. "If there's an enemy garrison on this rock, they must have seen us come down. I kind of think that if there *are* any Japs around here, we won't *have* to go looking for them. They'll come looking for *us*!"

LEADING Private Ando looked up as the shadow of Lieutenant Kuroki fell across the rudder he was working on. The carpenter dropped the improvised rasp of dried shark skin and started to get to his feet.

"As you were, soldier," Kuroki smiled, "I just wanted to see how our boat was coming along. Go ahead with your work."

Ando smiled nervously and made a slight bow before sinking back to his knees in the sand and picking up the rasp to continue. For a time, nothing was said as the young officer watched his carpenter shape the oddly grained palm wood. Each man was wrapped in his own thoughts. Ando's mind concentrated on the difficulties posed by the unfamiliar wood and his crude tool. Kuroki was not really thinking about the work at all, but grateful for any distraction as he waited for word from the three patrols he'd sent out.

Ando's hand suddenly slipped and he swore softly, sucking a bleeding knuckle with his lips.

"Hurt yourself?" the Lieutenant asked.

"It's this damned wood, Lieutenant-san," Ando answered. "It has no regular grain, like the clear pine we have at home. Unless one is very careful, you pick up splinters."

"You've done a very good job, Private Ando," Kuroki smiled. "We couldn't have thought to try and build this boat without an experienced carpenter like yourself to show the others the way."

Pleased and flattered at his officer's attention, Ando grinned

from ear to ear. "I'm making this rudder in the Chinese fashion, Lieutenant-san," he said, pointing to the holes he'd bored near the top of the long squared-off rudder. "I'm mounting it like the rudder of a fishing junk, with a pivot hinge and a replaceable wooden retaining pin. That way, if we drag it over a reef, the pin will give way and the rudder will tilt up like an outboard motor instead of breaking."

"Very ingenious," Kuroki smiled. "How much further do you have to go with the caulking, Ando-san?"

"We were almost finished when you ordered the men to stop the hammering, sir. She's sound and shipshape below the waterline already."

"You mean she's ready to launch?"

"Well, she'll float, Lieutenant-san. But we still have a couple of days' work before she's ready for a sea voyage."

Kuroki looked thoughtfully at the makeshift hulk on the water's edge. Thrown together with unseasoned wood and the most primitive makeshift tools, the boat didn't look too prepossessing. But, if only Ando *could* finish it before the typhoon season began, so many of their problems would be solved. Not only would they be able to join their army once more, but they'd escape the showdown Kuroki knew was coming, sooner or later, even if there weren't any Americans on the island right this minute. Even if the patrols came back with the news he hoped for; even if it should turn out the transport had crashed in the sea across the island, it was only a question of time before Americans did land here. They'd been lucky, so far, but Kuroki knew it couldn't last.

He glanced nervously at his watch. Too early, yet, to start worrying, he told himself.

Meanwhile, it was cooler down by the water, and there was nothing to be gained by nervously moving around the camp. He'd had his men arm themselves and set up a perimeter guard. The patrols were out, and he had to remain calm. His men were nervous and tense enough, without having their officer running around the camp like a chicken with its head cut off.

"Watch Ando," he told himself. "You might learn something."

It was funny how the boat had grown without his consciously being aware of any of the technical details. Ando had suggested it a few weeks before, he remembered, and he'd given permission in a disinterested way, not because he thought the men could actually build a seaworthy vessel, but to keep them busy.

There was so little to *do* on this damned island where nothing ever seemed to happen. He'd lost track of how long it had been since the last supply boat had put in at the ramshackle wharf down the beach. Was it three months, or six? He probably had the date somewhere in his journal, but he wasn't sure he really wanted to know. Time stood still here, where one day was just the same as the next. With no radio, or newspapers, the war seemed far off and a little hard to believe. The men had been listless, and a little on the verge of giving in to apathy when Ando had started the boat.

And now, wonder of wonders, the damned thing was almost finished! It was a little difficult to accept. Kuroki had never made any really serious plans to reach Bougainville by sea. But the dream was rapidly becoming reality. The men had ransacked the island for the green coconuts they'd need on the voyage for drinking purposes. Private Okuda, an experienced fisherman, had dried a good supply of the catch he brought in each day, and the garden that Lance Corporal Hirano had laboriously improvised by practically hand-making fertile loam from night soil, seaweed and coral sand was promising a bumper crop of taro and sweet potatoes to take along. The whole crazy project was beginning to look like it might work!

"I wonder if our army still holds Bougainville," Kuroki thought to himself as he watched the brown hands of Private Ando working the splintery wood. "What if we were to go to all this trouble only to sail into an American trap?"

He forced the thought into the back of his mind with a grimace of distaste. If a man thought of everything that could go wrong in a war, he'd never do anything. Besides, he *knew* what would happen if they stayed *here*. Bougainville at least offered them a chance.

"A chance," he mused, "but a chance for what? To fight once again for the Empire? To lead these poor trusting boys into another battle against overwhelming odds?"

He was suddenly aware that Ando had stopped work and was looking up at him with a worried expression. Good God, was his confusion starting to show on his face? Aloud he said, "I was just thinking, Ando-san, that it might be a good idea to launch the boat tonight, while it's cool. We could tie it up at the dock and work on it there, eh?"

"The men will enjoy seeing her afloat, Lieutenant-san," Ando replied. "Sergeant Tamura has been betting she will sink the moment she hits the water!"

Tamura *would* say something like that, Kuroki thought. He knew what a waste of time the burly Sergeant thought the

boat had been. If Tamura had had his way, the endless days on the island would have been spent in double drill and bayonet practice.

War created such strange values, Kuroki thought. In anything resembling a sane universe, a thug like Tamura would be doing time in Sugamo Prison, while society honored Ando as a skilled craftsman. But war's honors were reserved for the man whose hands were quick to destroy. Ando's creative hands were awkward with a bayonet, and so he would spend the war a private, if he lived that long.

"I will see about launching her after the patrols return," the Lieutenant said, turning away. To himself he added, "If they return."

It was getting late. Tamura and the others should have come back by now, if they hadn't found anything.

"A couple of days," Kuroki swore. "Why couldn't we have had just a couple of days? The damned Americans could have had the whole lousy rock to themselves if they'd waited a couple of days!"

PELICAN X Nine Eight calling Octopus . . . Pelican X Nine Eight calling Octopus . . . Come in, Octopus, goddammit to hell!"

Aircrewman Keller had been working on the transmitter salvaged from the wreck all afternoon, but he was the only man on the island who thought there was any life in the battered mess of junk he'd completely rewired. Oblivious to the war, or the men around him, the young radioman kept tinkering with the set and sending out his forlorn call signals as Sergeant Bleeker glowered down at him.

"You really think you're gonna do any good with that thing, Sparks?" he muttered, "'cause I got a detail for you if you ain't."

"Octopus, do you read me?" Keller shouted into the mike, turning a knob a fraction of an inch. "Come in, Octopus. Over."

"Lissen, punk, when I'm talking to you, I expect you to lissen!"

Lieutenant Blair, attracted by the Sergeant's angry tone, paused as he was going past on another errand and asked what the trouble was.

"This punk's goofing off, sir," Bleeker answered. "I tried to put him on that burial detail and he says he only takes orders from his goddam Captain."

"I'm trying to contact base, sir," Keller muttered, looking up from the set.

Blair looked undecided for a moment and then he said, "Let him see what he can do, Sergeant. Have you seen Captain Bourke?"

"Him and that swabby medic wandered into the jungle over on the other side of the clearing, sir," Bleeker snorted in disgust. "You know what one of the guys was telling me? That Captain Bourke's a psycho, that's what. Landed on his head once too often in a crash and that's why they got him flying transports. They say he was the biggest drunk in the corps back in Manila. Drunk and psycho. Him and that goddam swabby he pals around with!"

"Really? Well, let's just see about that burial detail for now, Sergeant. We've got to get those bodies in the ground before this heat gets to working on them. I'll join you in a moment."

As Bleeker went back to supervise the grave digging operation on the far side of the clearing, Blair crouched beside Keller and asked, "Are you sure you know what you're doing, Keller? I don't hear so much as a hum from that set."

"Neither do I, sir," Keller shrugged, "but I'm doing the best I can. Maybe if I just keep fiddling around and trying, I'll hit the right combination."

"You mean, you're not sure what you're doing? Aren't you a qualified radio technician?"

"Not exactly, sir. You see, they was kind of shorthanded and I'd played around with a ham set in civilian life, so..."

"Jesus H. Christ!" muttered Blair, getting back to his feet. "I've seen some sloppy ways to run a railroad, but the goddam air transport command takes the cake."

"Yessir," Keller answered. "Pelican X Nine Eight calling Octopus. Come in, Octopus. Over."

Blair shook his head in disgust and started over toward the burial detail. Halfway there, he became aware of a commotion centered around Corporal Craddock and the tall figure of Dennis Bourke. The men had stopped digging and were concentrating on something the Captain held in his hands.

"Jap bayonet," Bourke explained as the young officer joined the group by the open grave. "Craddock, here, found it while they were digging. From the way it's attached to this shaft, I'd say somebody was using it for a fishing spear."

Blair took the thing Bourke held out to him and studied it

with a frown. It looked like the Krag bayonets they'd had in the ROTC when he was still in high school and Blair almost asked how the Captain knew it was Japanese before he spotted the tiny chrysanthemum between the words "Dai Nippon" on the broken blade. The handle had been lashed with raffia or some other crude fiber to a three-foot length of wood, making it into a crude spear or harpoon.

"Funny place for a fishing spear," Blair frowned.

"The Chief and I found a path over here that leads to a cove along the shore," Bourke said. "Some rocks overhang the water and it looks like a pretty good spot to spear fish. Whoever used that might have busted the blade and thrown it away on the way home."

"Well, so what? We know the Japs were in this area awhile back. The blade's rusty. No telling how long it's been lying here."

Bourke shook his head. "Look at that shaft and the binding, Lieutenant. In this tropical dampness, they'd be rotten if they'd been lying there more than a couple of weeks."

Blair studied the spear while the Captain's words sank in. Then, in grim jubilation, he looked around at the others and said, "Well, they sent us out here to fight the dirty little bastards, didn't they?" Turning to Bleeker, he added, "Have the men get their battle gear on, Sergeant! It looks like we might have found some action, after all!"

There was an eager chorus of agreement as the men, without waiting for further orders, fanned out through the clearing to gather their field packs and rifles. Bourke stood there frowning as the Chief nudged him and muttered, "Like I keep telling you, Dennis, me boy, you're going to have to do something about that eager beaver."

"He's in charge of them," Bourke shrugged.

By now, Blair had turned his back on him and was loudly proclaiming a state of siege to anyone who would listen.

"Dennis," the Chief sighed, "that kid don't know his ass from his elbow. He's gonna get the whole bunch of us killed."

"So, what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Come on, who are we kidding? Just because you don't give a damn anymore..."

"Oh, crap! Are we back on that again?"

"Damned right, we are, Dennis. You think I don't know what's bugging you? You used to be a pretty fair marine before you decided to carry that friggen cross of yours."

"Drop it!" Bourke snarled in sudden anger.

"Now what?" Maloney sneered. "You gonna belt me, big

man? Go ahead, if it'll make you feel any better. But it won't bring her back, Dennis. And it won't stop those kids from getting themselves killed by that jerk Blair."

The Captain glared down at the smaller man for a long moment, and the Chief never knew how close he came at the time to a broken jaw before Bourke suddenly shrugged and turned away. He stood there for a time, watching the marines get ready for war, and then he walked over and tapped Blair on the shoulder.

"Lieutenant," he said, "the way I got it this was a detachment of retreats for Bougainville, right?"

"Certainly, sir, but . . ."

"You say you go by the book, Lieutenant. You got any orders to mop up wayside islands?"

"Orders, Captain? Who needs orders to attack the enemy? By nightfall, there won't be one of the dirty little animals alive on this island!"

From behind Bourke, the Chief observed, "Dirty little animals, Lieutenant? You ever see how many baths a Jap takes every day?"

Blair frowned at the navy man and said, "You keep out of this, Maloney. I don't need any advice from a goddam Jap lover!"

"You can say that again, sir!" laughed Sergeant Bleeker. "I heard about this stewbum back on Guadal! He was in the reserves when the war started, living on the beach out here. They say he didn't join up until after the Nips were pouring down into Bataan 'cause he was shackled up with some Jap broad."

"She was half-Malay, and I was her house guest," Maloney sniffed delicately.

Ignoring the by-play, young Blair shouted, "You men in good condition, Waller, Kolinsky, Horton, Magee, Hoxie, McAdams . . . Get your stuff together and fall in!"

He nodded in approval as the hard-eyed Ruffino drew his combat pack's shoulder straps on with practiced ease and took his place ahead of the others. Young Dexter fell in beside the combat vet and Bourke was reminded of an eager pup as the recruit all but wagged his tail at the thought of action.

Bourke looked over at Maloney and sighed. Then he stepped up beside the Lieutenant and muttered, "Look, we haven't even finished burying our dead yet . . ."

"They'll wait," Blair snapped. His face was flushed and eager, like a kid ready to go out Halloween night for trick or

treat. Only he was asking for bullets instead of the usual goodies.

Bourke shook his head wearily as the men lined up in front of the young officer. "Why me?" he muttered softly. "Why can't they just let me fly my goddam plane and drink my goddam beer?" Then, in a sudden decision, he stepped around in front of Blair and barked, "Attention!" in his best drill field voice.

From habit, the men lined up in the clearing popped to attention, even as their faces showed the surprise they felt at the order coming from Bourke.

The Lieutenant, in sudden fury, whirled on Bourke and snapped, "Are you trying to take over *my* command?"

Before Bourke could answer, Sergeant Bleeker thrust forward and added, "Yeah, what's going on here, Captain? The Lieutenant gives the orders in this outfit!"

"Listen, both of you," Bourke cut in, "I was on Bataan and I want to tell you something about the enemy. Aside from a few fanatics, he's a pretty fair soldier. He's a cool cookie in the jungle, and on this island he's on his own ground. He knows the terrain, and we don't. So we dig in and give him the first move, see? At least, we dig in until we know what the hell we're up against!"

"Are you afraid of a few lousy Japs?" Bleeker sneered.

"You're damned right, I am! First of all, there might be more than a few. There might be a whole goddam regiment of them! So let's all simmer down and play this thing cool." Bourke smiled at Bleeker and added, "They tell me you boxed on the regimental team, Sergeant. You ought to know better than to wade in blind."

"I done all right fighting blind, Captain," Bleeker muttered sullenly. "I hit hard and I stay good and mad until the other sonovabitch goes down, see?"

"And you got to be Champ? Sounds like a good way to wind up punchy."

"Punchy, my ass!" snarled Bleeker. He turned to Blair and said, "You want to know somebody what's punchy, Lieutenant? This flyboy landed on his head once too often and they had him in the hospital for months."

"I wasn't in any hospital for as long as you're liable to spend in the *brig*, Sergeant," Bourke snapped.

"Brig?" Bleeker fumbled, pressing his luck. "What the hell for?"

"Insubordination, for a starter," Bourke said, his voice taking on a steely edge no one had noticed before. "You're

playing a risky game, Sergeant. Gambling that we're stuck here for the duration with no military courts. You figure a big boy like you ought to make out pretty well if we reduce this whole thing to jungle law . . ."

Before the confused Bleeker could come up with a reply, Blair cut in officiously, "You're the one who'll answer to a military court, Captain, if you break the chain of command."

Bourke smiled pityingly down at the Lieutenant and shook his head as he said, "Article Nine, page thirty-three; I quote, 'All military personnel consigned to the care and custody of the commanding officer of any military transport, whether seaborne or *airborne*, shall obey all orders of said commanding officer until arrival at assigned destination.' Unquote. You haven't been reading that book you go by so much, Lieutenant, or you'd know that *I* am in command of you and your men until such time as I deliver the bunch of you on Bougainville!"

Before Blair could reply, Bourke looked past him at the lined-up men and said, "At ease, men."

"There must be something that covers this . . ." Blair tried weakly, "I was on a very important mission."

"Yeah," Bourke nodded, "at first, I thought that Zero that jumped us thought General MacArthur was aboard. Now I realize who he was after. Sergeant Bleeker!"

"Yes . . . sir?"

"We're setting up camp on that high ground over there. You can start by digging a slit trench for a head."

"I'll detail some men, sir."

"You will like hell. I told *you* to dig it, Bleeker!"

For a moment the two of them stood there while Bleeker's eyes narrowed to dangerous slits and his hands doubled up into rock-hard fists.

"Any time you want to gamble, Bleeker," Bourke said in a curiously gentle voice. "Any time you want to go for broke."

Bleeker stifled a reply with an audible effort and turned away. He went over to the pile of earth left by the grave diggers and picked up an entrenching tool. Bourke watched him with a slight smile until he'd started up the hill and turned back to the men standing at ease. Some of them were grinning openly now and Bourke knew he could count on at least half of them in a showdown. Corporal Ruffino was nodding approvingly and the kid, Dexter, would follow Ruffino through hell.

"Where's that Ozark boy who found the bayonet?" Bourke asked.

"Here, suh, Corporal Craddock."

"Craddock, you and Ruffino will be chief scouts. Craddock and I will be running the first patrol as soon as it's dark. The rest of you men fall out and bring your supplies up the hill. Lieutenant Blair, I'll expect you to see to it."

Blair shot the older man a murderous glance and then managed a strangled, "Yes, sir," and saluted.

"One thing more, Lieutenant," Bourke smiled, "from now on, we don't salute, and I'd put that gold bar in my pocket, if I were you. Their snipers like to pick off officers first, if they know who they are. I'm putting my bars away, while I'm at it."

The other men were out of earshot as Bourke added, "I'm sorry I had to sit on you like that, kid, but you've got to learn to fight with your *brains* instead of your *feelings* out here in this sector. I want to whip the Japs just as much as you do, Blair, but I want to do it the right way. Savvy?"

"Yes, sir," muttered Blair coldly. "Any further *orders*, Captain?"

"Yeah. We haven't much food and water, so I want you to gather up the supplies on hand and ration them until we figure some way to live off this island."

Blair nodded and started to salute again. Then he remembered what Bourke had said about saluting and contented himself with a frozen little nod before turning away.

"Conserve the water supplies," Maloney chuckled from where he sat on a palm log. "That's the best news I've heard yet, Dennis, me boy." He'd found a fresh bottle and suited the action to the words by putting it to his lips.

"You'd better go easy on that booze, Chief," Bourke said. "We may need some of that whiskey for medicine before we get off this rock."

"Well, at least you just saved a dozen of them from getting shot this afternoon, old buddy," replied the Chief owlishly.

"Let's hope we can keep it this way," Bourke shrugged. "It's going to cost us a few lives if there *are* any Japs on this island, but at least we can make them work at it, eh?"

"That we can, old soldier of mine. Say, Dennis, I been wonderin' about that regulation junk you recited to the Looie. Is there such a thing on the book?"

"Beats me. I guess if there isn't, I'll hear it soon enough from young Blair."

"Not so soon you won't," Maloney laughed, taking a small paperbound manual from his shirt pocket. "While you was indoctrinating the troops, I thought I'd better lift this from

the kid's duffle bag. Thought you might like to read it."

Bourke grinned as the Chief handed him the Lieutenant's official copy of *US Marine Corps Rules and Regulations* and mused, "Been years since I read this thing, Chief. I appreciate your finding me a copy."

"I kind of thought you might," Maloney answered.

IT was dark in the jungle. Sergeant Tamura and the others would have been completely lost had they not known every path through the undergrowth and been guided by the constant booming of the surf on their right. Contrary to orders, Tamura had gathered the other two patrols at the rendezvous and pressed on in the direction he was sure he'd seen the American plane headed as it went down.

Lance Corporal Hirano, moving silently in the grim wake of the Sergeant, wasn't happy. He distinctly remembered the Lieutenant's orders, and they made sense. The three patrols had covered more than three quarters of the island and, any way you sliced it, they were moving into any Americans who might be there.

Waiting until a night noise froze the Sergeant for a moment in his steps, Hirano moved up close enough to whisper, "Sergeant, have you forgotten what the Lieutenant said? It is well past the time he gave us for our return to camp."

"Somebody has to lead," Tamura snickered. "While that pretty little schoolboy moons about the camp, the rest of us will find out where the American dogs are and wipe them out!"

"But, Tamura-san, we don't know how many of them there might be!"

"Silence! I know what I'm doing!" hissed the noncom, moving forward quietly on the balls of his feet. Hirano sighed and motioned the four men behind him to follow. The Japanese patrol threaded along the narrow trail like a jungle snake.

From time to time, Tamura pushed through dense growth, allowing branches and vines to whip back in young Hirano's face. The Lance Corporal swore softly, keeping the muzzle of his rifle up to deflect the blows in the dark. There was no way of knowing whether Tamura was doing it on purpose or not. The eager Sergeant was always thoughtless of others, blundering headlong into danger like an angry bull.

Hirano was not sure just how far they'd come when the

man in front of him stopped and dropped to his haunches so suddenly that Hirano almost tripped over him.

"What is it, Tamura-san?" he whispered. And then, even before the Sergeant could grunt an answer, Hirano spotted what he had stopped for. There was a faint glow up ahead.

"A camp fire?" Hirano breathed softly.

"Too dim," the Sergeant muttered. "Keep me covered. I'm going closer."

Hirano gulped and took a position behind a palm trunk as the noncom moved down the trail in a low crouch. Behind him, Hirano was aware that Corporal Fujimoto had halted the others and moved up to see what was happening. In a couple of whispered sentences, Hirano told him what was up.

"He's not supposed to do that," Fujimoto swore. "The Lieutenant told us to come back with information, not engage an unknown number of Americans in a fire-fight!"

"I tried to tell him that," Hirano shrugged. "He won't listen. Says something about the Lieutenant doing all his fighting on a school blackboard, and pays no attention."

"The Lieutenant was head of his class in officers' school," Fujimoto began. Then both men stopped talking as they saw Tamura up ahead, motioning them to join him.

Fujimoto dropped back to his position in the rear of the patrol as Hirano moved down the trail in a crouch. Behind him, he heard the faint snick of a rifle bolt being drawn and hissed, "Watch that noise, dammit!" His own Arisaka had a bullet in the chamber with its safety switched on. This was a hell of a time to be getting ready to fire!

Silently dropping to his knees behind the crouching figure of Sergeant Tamura, Hirano saw, for the first time, what the older man had stopped to study.

There was a clearing in front of them. The moonlight shone softly on a welter of fallen palm fronds and bowled-over tree trunks. Just visible among the clutter on the other side stretched the wingless fuselage of the transport plane. Its white star was distinctly visible in the dim light.

There was a pale yellow glow from the gaping doorway near the tail section. Hirano leaned forward until his lips nearly touched the Sergeant and whispered, "A fire, do you think?"

"Not inside the plane," Tamura grunted. "Must be a lamp."

Neither man spoke for a time as they studied the scene in front of them. Tamura pointed with his chin at two pale objects across the clearing.

"Crosses," he murmured in a satisfied tone. "The Ameri-

cans place crosses of wood over the graves of their dead. They must have taken a couple of casualties in the landing, eh?"

"Perhaps, Tamura-san," Hirano answered dubiously. He wasn't really up on American customs and there was something about this whole thing that struck him as eerie. "Hadn't we better report back to our camp, Tamura-san?" he asked, plucking at the other's sleeve.

"No guards," Tamura answered, ignoring his plea. "Not even a lookout in the doorway! Hai, the fools are sitting inside drinking their Cora-Cora and waiting for a rescue party to come and get them!" He felt for the grenade slung on his webbing and added, "I'll rescue them, the Kirisutokoo dogs!"

"Sergeant! You're going to get us all killed!" Hirano gasped, grabbing Tamura by the sleeve.

The Sergeant swore and pulled free of the younger man's grasp as he snapped, "Cover me, Corporal Hirano! That's an *order!*" And then he was moving forward in a low cat-like glide. Hirano swallowed and slowly got to his feet, training the muzzle of his rifle on the dimly lit doorway of the plane.

"Where in the devil does he think he's going?" asked Private Arikawa beside Hirano.

"Just shut up and cover that plane," Hirano muttered.

The crazy bastard was going to get away with it, he thought. Tamura was well out in the clearing. If it had been a trap, the Americans should have spotted him by now. Maybe Tamura was right. Maybe the downed Americans thought they were alone on the island and hadn't taken elementary precautions, after all.

But something was wrong. The creeping things of the jungle, as if they agreed with Hirano, were silent and still. There were no crickets chirping in those bushes over near the crosses. No lizards rustled through the dried forest litter under Tamura's feet as he crept closer to the doorway. The whole night seemed to be holding its breath.

And then Hirano saw Tamura stand erect and hurl the grenade into the plane with a sudden movement. There was a frozen moment of time. Hirano could hear the metallic clatter the unexploded grenade made as it bounced on the floor inside and, although he couldn't have told you how, he sensed the plane was empty, even as the grenade went off with a muffled roar.

"Sergeant! Look out!" Hirano shouted, stepping out from behind the tree. Across the clearing there was a cigarette-

glow of orange flame and something warm and wet slapped Hirano's left leg below the knee. "Machine gun!" he sobbed, raising his Arisaka through waves of pain to return the fire.

The others were shooting now. Throwing hot lead as fast as they could at the two winking tommy guns across the clearing. One of the American guns stopped, then the other. The Japanese fusillade had either driven the ambushing Americans back or killed one or two of them.

Tamura raced back across the clearing and threw himself down by the others. "Bastards!" he shouted. "They hung a light in the plane to lure us. The whole set-up was a trap!"

DENNIS Bourke raised his head cautiously from the ground and whispered, "You ok, Craddock?"

"Shoot, suh, them Japanese country boys couldn't hit the broadside of a barn if they was inside of it. You see that bitty Jap boy jump when I opened up on him? Do-Jesus, I think I put some *lead* in *that* one!"

"You'd have done a hell of a lot better if you hadn't fired so goddam soon!" Bourke muttered. "Now shut up and keep your head down. I smell a grenade."

"You figure they aim to attack, suh?"

"Not until they think things over for a bit. Now shut up, Craddock, and that's an order!"

The two Americans lay in the half-rotted jungle muck for what seemed like an eternity before a voice from the darkness called,

"Hey, Joe? How are you *at*, Joe?"

Bourke shot a warning glance at Craddock in time to see the faint sheen of the hill-boy's knowing grin in the dim light. The ridge-runner was working out all right, Bourke thought. Maybe a little trigger-happy, but he'd been out here long enough not to fall for *that* old chestnut!

There was a metallic ping and Bourke pressed his face deeper into the deck as a grenade went off harmlessly a hundred feet to the left. There was a frantic fusillade of small-arms fire and a slug whammed off a nearby palm trunk to sink itself away in the night. Feet ran through forest litter and a voice shouted, "Isogimasyóo! Kotira e ikimasyóo!"

Then it got very quiet for a while.

"You reckon they've pulled out, suh?" Craddock whispered.

"Maybe, but let's just keep it down to a roar until we're sure, Craddock."

Bourke stiffened and added, "Behind us! Someone moving in fast!" He rolled over with incredible speed for such a big man and came to rest on his knees, with the muzzle of the tommy gun trained in the direction of what sounded like the charge of a sex-mad elephant.

"Diamond Formation, dammit!" an angry and familiar voice was shouting. "Hoxie, you're not keeping the proper interval!"

Bourke sighed and lowered the tommy gun with a disgusted shake of his head as Craddock gasped, "Do-Jesus! It's the Lieutenant and them others we left on the hill. For a second, there, I thought the whole goddam Jap army'd cut us off from the rear!"

"We know *one* thing," Bourke muttered, getting to his feet, "if there *was* a squad of Japanese *Boy Scouts* within a mile of here, right now the whole bunch of them would be picking Nambu slugs out of their teeth!"

"Take cover, men!" Blair shouted. "There's someone in those bushes up ahead!"

"Knock it off, you stupid bastard," Bourke yelled. "I thought I told you to hold your position on the hill until we got back."

"Captain Bourke?" Blair answered cautiously.

"If it was anybody else the whole goddam bunch of you would be dead about now, Blair. Didn't they teach you *anything* about following orders in OCS?"

"We heard shooting," Blair answered defensively. He and the others had moved closer now, and Sergeant Bleeker asked Craddock what had happened.

"Me and ol' Cap'n pulled us a foxy grandpa trick on the Japs, Sarge," Craddock grinned. "Had this lamp hangin' in the wreck to make her look like someone was to home, and all the time me and the Cap'n was in a hidey-hole across the clearin', like we was huntin' rail birds! Well, sub, after we waited until I had a right smart crick in my ass, this bitty Jap boy comes a pussyfootin' out of the trees like a he-coon movin' in on a henhouse. Me an' ol' Cap'n, we jest lay low, while this country boy from Nagasaki sniffs around at the bait, see? Do-Jesus, that bitty Jap thought he was about as smart as new yaller shoes, the way he Fu Manchu's across the clearing! Time he gets close enough to toss a grenade, you can see he's huggin' hisself over how goddam smart he is! Then this other Nip pops up and starts yellin' "

blue murder, and I climb the mother's frame with my tommy-gup!"

"Someday you can write a book, Craddock," Dennis Bourke cut in. To Blair, he snapped, "I gave you an order, mister! I ordered you to take command of our dug-in position up on that hill, and to *stay* there until Craddock and I returned. What in the name of Tokyo Rose are you doing off your post?"

"I left Corporal Ruffino in charge of the wounded, Captain," Blair began. "I thought my men and I would be of more use where the action was."

"You *thought*?" Bourke roared. "When the hell did the Navy Department start issuing brains to 2nd Lieutenants? Can't you get it through your thick skull that nobody in the corps *expects* you to do anything but learn how to stay alive out here? Time enough to start thinking when they issue you a silver bar, kid. Right now your job is to follow orders and learn your trade."

"I was trained to lead men in combat, sir," Blair answered in a stiff tone. "And no flying bus driver has any license to keep me out of action! Sure, you *say* you did a hitch in the peacetime infantry, but nobody on this island's seen your service record."

"That's telling him, sir," Sergeant Bleeker muttered.

Dennis Bourke didn't answer for a moment. When he did speak, his voice had taken on the cold matter-of-fact tone a professional hangman might use in telling the man on the trap door to move a little to the right. "Maybe you've never seen my service record, Lieutenant," he said, "but you've seen my Captain's bars. You've seen the articles of war, and even signed them. But, have you ever seen a drumhead court-martial, mister?"

"A drumhead court-martial?"

"That's right, mister. An extralegal power given only to a military commander in contact with the enemy, to deal in a summary manner with a *capital offense*!"

Blair looked stunned for a moment, and then he smiled weakly and said, "You . . . You must be *kidding*! Who the hell's committed any capital offense around here?"

"You have, mister! Misbehavior Before the Enemy as a starter, with Armed Insurrection and Defiance of Authority for the Board of Review to chew on, later on."

"Come now, Captain," Blair began. "You don't think you could make a charge like that stick . . ."

"The hell I don't, mister. Drumhead means right here and

now, with *me* as judge, jury, and executioner." Bourke raised the muzzle of his gun so that it was trained on the Lieutenant's chest as he snapped, "Corporal Craddock, as first witness, are you willing to testify that the accused defied my authority while bearing arms?"

"Well, suh, he's sure 'nuff bearin' arms . . ."

"Sergeant Bleeker!" snapped Bourke savagely, "did you, or did you not hear me order the accused to hold the position I assigned to him until such time as he should be properly relieved?"

Bleeker didn't answer for a moment. Bourke's gun muzzle moved a fraction of an inch. Nobody breathed for a million years.

"I heard," Bleeker mumbled through suddenly dry lips.

Bourke nodded and stood there in the moonlight. His face seemed the color of marble, but marble is a relatively soft form of stone. Dennis Bourke's dimly lit visage seemed about as sympathetic as a death mask carved from granite as he said, "Do you really want to carry this any farther, Lieutenant?"

He didn't sound like he gave a damn one way or another.

"Captain Bourke," Blair stammered, "I was only trying to reinforce you! I mean, there was never any intention on my part to stage an armed insurrection!"

"I don't give two hoots in hell about your *intentions*, mister," Bourke spat. "I want to know if you have any intention of carrying out future orders, mister! I want to know right here and now, understand? Because I can't spare the men you'll take to hell with you if you tear-ass across the boondocks every time the spirit moves you! I'm in *command* here, understand? I'm in command until we're relieved, or somebody kills me. And if *that* thought pleases you, Lieutenant . . . You've got a gun. Use it."

"Good God, Captain, you can't be *serious*?"

"You'll find out how serious, mister, if you disobey a direct order from me *again*. I'm through nit-picking with you, Blair. You'll receive, obey, and pass on my orders the way an officer in the United States marines is supposed to, or, by Christ, I'll kill you. Do you read me, mister?"

"Sir, I never intended . . ."

"Do you *read me*, mister?"

"Yes sir."

"Good," Bourke said, lowering the muzzle of the tommy gun. "The court is adjourned until further notice, Lieutenant Blair. Now get your ass back up there on the hill before the

Chief drinks all the booze. Rest of you men follow the Lieutenant and stay in those holes you dug. The smoking lamp is lit, but keep those butts cupped and out of sight. Sergeant Bleeker, front and center!"

"Yessir?" Bleeker asked in a worried tone as a thoroughly abashed Blair started back the way he'd come.

"I want Corporal Ruffino down here with Craddock and me, and, oh yes, seems to me I heard something back there when I was talking to the Lieutenant. Something about somebody telling somebody something? I'm not sure I got it just right."

Bleeker mumbled something noncommittal.

"Speak up, Sergeant," Bourke said in a curiously gentle tone, considering the look in his eye. "When a gyrene's got something to say, he ought to speak up and spit it out like a man. Don't you think so, Sergeant?"

"I... I ain't got nothin' to say, sir," Bleeker muttered.

"Fine. By the way, how's that sanitary head I asked you to dig, Sergeant?"

"I done it like you told me, sir. Six feet deep and ten feet long."

"Ok, now I want you to dig another one, just like it."

"*Another* one, Captain?" sobbed Bleeker.

"Yep. You see, we've got a lot of bull-shit around here, Sergeant Bleeker. And I can't think of a better place for bull-shit than a nice deep sanitary head, can you?"

"I think I understand, sir," Bleeker muttered, throwing a half-hearted salute and turning to follow the others.

Neither Bourke nor Craddock commented on what would go down in local history as Blair's Retreat until the Captain shrugged and said, "Soon as Ruffino joins us, we'll see about thinking up our next move. The kimono set's not likely to fall for anything that simple the next time..." Bourke frowned and went on, "What are you looking at me that way for, Craddock?"

"Can't figure you out, suh. Can't figure if you was handin' that poor Lieutenant Blair the biggest snow job since my great granddaddy sold a dogface a genuine key to the Halls of Montezuma, or iffen you was *really* ready to blip him."

Dennis Bourke bent down and picked up a full clip of ammo from the pile behind the palm log at his feet. "Put a fresh clip in your weapon," he said. "And then refill the partly used clips from that box of loose rounds we brought. Has Ruffino got a tommy gun?"

"If I know ol' Ruff, he'll know enough to bring one, even iffen it's somebody else's. You purely don't figure to answer

my question about that there drumhead deal, do you, Captain?"

"I'll tell you what," Bourke smiled, "you just bolo an order like Lieutenant Blair did tonight, and you'll find out."

"Not me," grinned Craddock. "The odds might not be much worse than buckin' the house in a tent show blackjack game, but, Do-Jesus, the *stakes* is plum awful! From now on, Cap'n Bourke, *you* are one man I don't aim to argue. Do you say a team of these mosquitoes, here, could pull a field gun and two caissons, this is one country boy what don't aim to argue. Ah reckon I'd just have to catch a couple of the little bastards and hitch them up!"

THE sky was still dark to the east, but it would soon be dawn: the sudden green flashing dawn of the tropics. In his hut, Lieutenant Kuroki crouched over his journal, the brush leaving a black trail of careful pictograms on the rice paper.

They were waiting, Kuroki knew. A few of them might be fooled, for the moment, by his pretended attention to routine. But he couldn't go on with this meaningless report all night, and most of his command knew it.

What use was it, anyway, to record Sergeant Tamura's actions for some zimúin at the War Office in Tokyo? Would any eyes but his own ever read these pages he'd just written? And if, at some time in a decidedly bleak looking future, his report *did* reach Tokyo, what did it matter? Tokyo had nothing to say about what had to be done *here* and *now*. Done in the age-old tradition of *Bushido*. Done according to a warrior's code older than the misty beginnings of his people's history.

Lieutenant Kuroki sighed softly and put his brush aside. Still on his knees, he pivoted on the pandanus mat to face his sleeping toko where the sword lay. For a time, Kuroki sat immobile and frozen-faced, while his mind whirled in a kaleidoscope of conflicting thoughts.

"This is fantastic!" he muttered, as if to the sword itself.

"I am an educated modern man. A university graduate. If it were not for this kanasii war, I'd be married to Keiko and working on the newspaper. I might even have finished that book I'd started. The one Keiko had been typing for me in the western script all the printers were starting to use."

He looked imploringly at the sword and added, "It was to have been a modern novel, with none of the old Fujiwara violence *you* were created for . . ."

The sword didn't answer. The flickering light from Kuroki's writing lamp gleamed on the triple hollyhock-leaf crest of the Tokugawa Clan, embossed on the worn hilt. Kuroki's family had been loyal retainers of the great daimyo war lords for uncounted generations. Two-sword men and samurai from the time when Tokyo had still been the provincial village of Edo . . .

"But, *I* am no samurai!" he nearly shouted, as sudden sweat stood out on his brow. There was a burst of laughter from outside, and Kuroki was aware of Sergeant Tamura's coarse voice as he shouted some pointless obscenity. Kuroki's lips twitched into the unconscious but characteristically Japanese set of a man who's just about finished coming to an unpleasant decision.

"Soo sikata, you most honorable and bloodthirsty old bastard!" he snapped with a slight bow to the sword his father had presented him with the day he left for the army.

Kuroki picked the sword and scabbard up in both hands and touched it to his forehead in a gesture half-ceremonious, half-ironic. Then he strapped it on, got to his feet, and stepped out into the suddenly very quiet camp.

Sergeant Tamura stood at one end of the fire, as if at the head of a table, while most of the others crouched or reclined in the sand at his feet. The wounded boy, Hirano, sprawled on a mat on the side nearest the Lieutenant. A dirty-looking bandage was wrapped around his leg, just below the knee. Young Hirano's clean-cut face was calm as he glanced up at the approaching officer, but Kuroki could see there was more sweat on his forehead than the present temperature called for.

Stopping to look down at the wounded boy, Kuroki nodded and asked, "How does it go, soldier?"

"I will be all right in a few days, Lieutenant-san," Hirano smiled, and nobody there but Kuroki could see the slight tremor of his pale lips. Kuroki was in the act of returning the smile when he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Across the fire, Sergeant Tamura had visibly relaxed and was smiling in a knowing way at Goro.

Kuroki's mouth tucked down at the corners and stayed that way. His voice coming out coldly between barely moving lips, as the two little muscles at the corners of his mouth hardened into knots.

"I do not find that bandage pleasing, Hirano-san," he said in the most formal and correct form of Japanese.

Now, Japanese, like many other languages, has several completely different forms of speech, depending on who is talking to whom, and whether that person is feeling rude, friendly, polite, or more polite than *anyone* but a Japanese can get. Although it's not a thing you can translate into English, try to understand that the form of grammar the Lieutenant was speaking at the moment is used by a Japanese gentleman only when he is speaking to someone a good deal above him in rank, at a formal religious function, or in the same room with a dying man.

Since Hirano was only a lance corporal, not connected in an official capacity with either the Shinto or Buddhist establishment, and didn't really think he was dying, in spite of the pain in his leg, he was worried. You see, there is one *other* time a wellborn Japanese becomes three or four times as dignified as a British archbishop speaking from the pulpit. That is when he has passed through anger, into hysterical rage, and beyond that to a dreamlike smouldering calm peculiar to certain peoples. A Malay juamentado's features take on the same set, just before he picks up his kris and goes amok. Mexicans, too, if they have much Indian blood, and you push them too far. If you ever find yourself in a long and bitter argument with a Mexican who has Indian eyes, and he suddenly stops yelling and starts treating you like a combination of his blood brother and the Pope... Well, unless you're a hell of a lot bigger than he, and know what he's got in his pockets... You'd better let him win the argument.

The only noticeable difference in this matter between a Malay, a Mexican Indio, and a Japanese, is that the Japanese are a little more so. Unless Lieutenant Kuroki was kidding, Hirano knew he was lathering himself up to commit suicide, or murder.

He didn't look like he was kidding around.

Kuroki waited until he saw that all Hirano was going to do was grin nervously up at him, then he turned stiffly toward Tamura and said, "Sergeant Tamura, I do not find the treatment of Hirano-san's wound pleasing."

"We are out of medical supplies, Lieutenant," Tamura shrugged.

"Oh, so?" Kuroki sighed, every movement of his face and features had taken on the stiff formality of court etiquette. His voice had taken on the affected "zzz zzz" tone the

Sergeant had been teasing Arikawa about, and Tamura's lip twitched as the Lieutenant continued. "With the entire Pacific Ocean at our disposal, Tamura-san, one would imagine it would be possible to arrange for a clean dressing at the very least."

"We didn't think of it," Tamura muttered sullenly. Was the fool trying to make him lose face again? That sibai performance he was putting on wasn't fooling anybody. Who did he think he was, the queen of the Kubuki dancers?

"We didn't think of it, Tamura-san?" the lieutenant purred. "This most humble reservist was under the impression that the illustrious veteran of a thousand battles made all the decisions by himself! Does the distinguished tactician from an Okinawan rice paddy mean to imply he needed advice from others in wrapping this filthy rag around a wounded man's injury?"

There was a stifled laugh from one of the men, and Hirano's grin had changed to relaxed amusement as Tamura shot a murderous glance around the fire.

"I am speaking to you, Tamura-san," Kuroki hissed.

"With all due respect . . . sir," Tamura tried, "my duties do not include playing nursemaid to the wounded."

"Ah, so? And may this humble searcher after military knowledge inquire just what the two-sworded tenant farmer's duties are?"

The bastard's been at my service record, Tamura thought. If he brings up that business about my leaving home over the oldest Kubuchi girl . . . I'll kill him!

Stiffly, the Sergeant said, "My only duty is to destroy the enemy wherever I find him!"

"Spoken in the best tradition of the Forty-Seven Ronin of Ako," Kuroki smiled thinly. "May this unworthy descendant of one of the lowlier samurai guardsmen of the senior daimyo of the Empire ask one question? May he inquire just how many of the enemy you destroyed in tonight's action?"

"*Beikoku-no* bastards!" Tamura snapped. "They are slippery as snakes."

"I did not ask for a physical description, Tamura-san. I asked how many you *destroyed*."

"Well, to tell the truth, Lieutenant-san," Tamura said, trying a friendly grin (*something* had to work on the bastard), "I don't think our luck was very good tonight."

"Ah, so? Then, as far as you know, the enemy soldiers have been properly informed of our presence, allowed to taste first blood, and been given time to prepare a new

defense position, without losing a hair of their heads?" Kuroki smiled sweetly and added, "I know little of the arts of war, beyond what I was taught at officers' school, and by the United States marines on Guadalcanal, Tamura-san, but it seems to one of my limited knowledge of such matters, one might have had a better excuse for direct disobedience of orders."

"Lieutenant-san, I thought . . ."

"You thought you were *obeying* my order to meet at the pool and report back, Tamura-san?"

"Lieutenant-san, I only followed the commands of my experience, rather than an order I felt to be wrong."

"Ah, so? And were the Americans waiting for you at the pool, then? Somehow, I have been under the distinct impression that Hirano-san was shot when you led your patrol, against my orders, into an elementary ambush as old as the wooden club. Of course, since your judgment is so much better than mine, there was probably a flame throwing *tank* waiting at the pool, iie? Tell me, Tamura-san, what is the Americans' strength? How many of them are there? *Where* are they, right now?"

Tamura didn't answer. His face was flushed and his knees slightly flexed as his booted feet fell, consciously or not, into the figure T position of a skilled karate fighter. The slight change in position was not lost on the Lieutenant, but he betrayed no change of expression as he nodded curtly and said, "You do not choose to tell me, Tamura-san? Very well, I shall tell *you!* Your direct disobedience has not only cost us the advantage of surprise; it has not only meant that my *own* plan of attack, based on what you and the patrols I sent out were able to find out, may as well be forgotten, since none of us have the slightest idea of what or where the enemy is, but it has cost one of *my* men a serious and uncalled for wound! Do you have anything, Tamura-san, and I sincerely mean *anything*, to say in your own defense?"

Tamura's eyes were slitted, and his own bull-like rage was giving way to a steel-edged sullenness. Through clenched teeth Tamura snapped, "I have no apologies for trying to destroy my enemy, and no apologies for going to meet him like a *man*, by Kámi, instead of zoo-zooing around in the jungle like a frightened virgin!"

There was a sudden intake of breath from the watching men. Up until now, this had been another of the Lieutenant's ass-chewings, even if he did look mad as hell. Some of the men had been getting pretty edgy, while others had openly

been enjoying Tamura's getting a taste of his own favorite tempura. But, as you know by now, there are several ways of saying the same thing in Japanese. The grammatical form Sergeant Tamura chose to answer that last time was *not* one of the *politer* forms. An ill-bred Japanese peasant might speak that way to a puppy he was housebreaking. A samurai, two hundred years ago, might have spoken in that tone to a slave, if he was in a lousy mood. But a Japanese enlisted man does *not* address an officer in that manner.

"How curious," Kuřoki murmured, as if he were speaking to himself alone while every man by the fire sat in frozen expectancy. "A few short years ago, a man of Tamura's birth fell on his face at the roadside if he encountered a samurai, or even a one-sword ronin. He lay full length in the dust, with his forehead to the earth, and counted himself lucky if he was still alive by the time his superior passed. Hai, they were harsh times for those born to the ploughing of fields and hewing of wood. Some of the younger clansmen, if they'd been drinking, or had a brand new sword in their belt, were known to cut a chance stranger in two, now and then. It was considered lucky to possess a sword you knew was capable of parting a man in the middle with one blow. Swords were rated and valued as one-body, two-body, or three-body blades, although I'm not just sure how they managed to line up three peasants long enough to slice through all three of them with one swipe . . . But then, peasants knew their *place*, in those days."

He looked thoughtfully across the leaping flames at Tamura. Then he nodded three times to nobody in particular and said, "Of course, they teach *everyone* the divine skills, these days. Perhaps that lends a certain courage, even to Okinawans who join the army to avoid punishment on rather bestial grounds, eh? I have heard it said, Sergeant Tamura, you have a certain skill at karate?"

"Hai, black belt, fourth class!" Tamura snapped. It was almost out in the open, now, like the first sight of a snake's head coming out from under a rock.

"Black belt, fourth class? I am deeply impressed, Tamura-san. Private Goro, would you be kind enough to hold Tamura-san's rifle up to him? Thank you. I presume, Tamura-san, the rifle is fully loaded?"

"My rifle? Certainly."

"Yoi, so you have a choice of your two favorite weapons, Tamura-san. Since you no longer take orders from me, I

shall not *order* you to defend yourself, *but*, Tamura-san, I most strongly *advise* it!"

Tamura looked blank for a moment. Then he smiled and asked, "You mean, right now?"

"Right now," Lieutenant Kuroki answered. Then he walked quite calmly toward the Sergeant, right through the fire.

By the time Tamura's jaw had finished dropping in astonishment, he was aware of two very unpleasant facts. Lieutenant Kuroki had aimed a vicious kick at his kneecap, which he only avoided in time to have his legs swept out from under him by the backlash of that bone-crushing kick. At the same time, in a blur of flashing steel, Kuroki's sword had leapt from his scabbard and was *knifing* through the firelight at the Sergeant's beefy neck!

Tamura was good. He hadn't won that black belt playing Ping-pong. As he went down, he twisted like a big cat to land on his knees in preparation for a headlong spring that might take him inside the sword's swing, and drive his own bullet-head into Kuroki's groin. But Kuroki, anticipating his counterattack, had already stepped backward far enough to bring a knee up into Tamura's face. The burly noncom's head snapped back and he sprawled awkwardly. "This is it!" he grunted, still trying desperately to crab sideways. There was a whimpering steel sound above him, and then the night exploded in a million stars as sheer agony shock-waved out from the point where Tamura's shoulder had, up to now, joined his neck!

"I am dead," thought Tamura. "I didn't think the little bastard could do it, but he did. I wonder how far my head rolled."

Then, he slowly became aware that he felt far too lousy even for a man on his way to hell. He opened his eyes. Someone twelve meters tall was standing over him in the firelight. It hurt to swallow, and a slight movement on Kuroki's part, when Tamura started to raise a hand to his aching neck, informed him painfully that the blued steel tip of a samurai sword was buried a couple of centimeters in the hollow of his throat.

For Sergeant Tamura, a million years went by.

"Tamura-san," Kuroki said, dropping the artificial formality and reverting to normal matter-of-fact speech, "I confess in front of everyone present, that I am not as strong a man as I might wish. You knew what I was doing. You knew I was working myself into a killing rage. And you really do *deserve* to die, Tamura-san. You've blocked me at every turn

since I've had this command. You've sneered at me behind my back, countermanded my orders, and tonight you finally defied me openly. You're a real bastard, Tamura-san. Do you know that?"

The Sergeant didn't answer. He didn't even blink his eyes. The old campaigner was no stranger to death, and he knew it when it stared down at him from tear-filled eyes. The point of the sword quivered slightly and Tamura was aware of warm, wet blood pooling in the hollow of his throat. The skin was soft and thin there, Tamura knew. A very slight thrust, and he'd be able to gargle his own gore for as long as he could last with no air getting to his lungs. The Lieutenant looked like he was waiting for an answer. Tamura didn't utter a sound. This was definitely not the time to say the wrong thing!

"I could say I turned the blade at the last, to give you one more chance, Tamura-san. But you would know it was not so. You would say the whole affair was a bluff, to put you on your good behavior. Is that not so?"

Tamura ventured a swallow. Kuroki pushed the point a hairsbreadth deeper and said, "Sergeant! Is that not *so*?"

"Lieutenant," Tamura husked, "what do you want me to say? You have humiliated me before the others. You have given me fair warning, and you have beaten me. My life lies on the tip of your *gūntoo nagái*. So be it. My people bear no crest. I was born with paddy mud between my toes. But a rice grower's son also has his pride. Do as you wish, Lieutenant. I will not beg like a dog!"

"If only I could trust you, Tamura. If only you would give your word . . ."

Grudgingly Tamura observed, "A man of honor may give his word to a leader he respects. In China, I respected a man named Nakamura. He was the only man I ever met who could beat me in a fair fight."

"Until now," Kuroki breathed.

"Until now," Tamura repeated soberly.

The sword tip moved. In which direction, Tamura couldn't tell.

"You swear, Tamura-san? By Amaterasu?"

"Koyasí, Lieutenant, I don't swear by any *zu-zu sun* goddess! I gave you my word as a *soldier*!"

Kuroki thought about that. He thought about that while Sergeant Tamura lay there sweating and wondering how he'd ever gotten the idea this guy was a weakling. Then he said, "Take back your life, Tamura-san." And he whipped the

sword up and away and into its scabbard in one smooth motion.

Turning away curtly, the Lieutenant snapped, "Corporal Fujimoto, you and Arikawa-san will help Lance Corporal Hirano to my hut. You will place him on my toko mat, hai? Fujimoto-san is in charge of such medical care as we can improvise under the circumstances. I do not find his present bandages desirable. See that clean fresh cloth is placed over that wound. Where is Leading Private Ando?"

"Here, sir!" shouted the carpenter, leaping to his feet.

"You are relieved from further detail until you finish the boat. I wish Privates Goro, Sato, and Ishii to relieve the men on guard. Private Okuda, you will get to sleep at once. We need those fish you catch in the morning more than ever, now. The rest of you men are on twenty-four-hour alert. Two hours on guard, four off, but restricted to the area and armed at all times."

He stopped for a moment. Then he asked, "Are there any questions?"

No one answered. Across the fire from him, Sergeant Tamura was getting to his feet, a horny hand holding the side of his neck.

"How about you, Sergeant Tamura," Kuroki asked. "Do you have anything to say?"

For the first time since Kuroki had known him, Tamura smiled in a friendly way, as he bowed a bit lower than the regulations required, and said, "Your orders shall be carried out to the *letter*, Lieutenant-san, with no further discussion."

Then he straightened up and bellowed, "And don't one of you other turtle-titted six-thumbed Yashiwara bastards ever forget it!"

BY sunup, the marine positions on the hill Dennis Bourke had chosen had been considerably strengthened. Lieutenant Blair, once he'd settled down to soldiering, had kept the able-bodied men working in shifts through the night. They'd circled the crest of the hill with a ring of well-dug foxholes, connected by a shallower communications crawlway. The few supplies they'd salvaged from the wreck had been brought up the hill and buried in several scattered holes, to minimize the effects of an enemy hit on any one of them. The radioman, Keller, had been given an even deeper dugout on the seaward side of the hill. Not because of any love the Lieutenant bore

Aircrewman Keller, but because the battered radio the kid was working over in that hole was worth its weight in gold right now.

More.

All the gold in Fort Knox wasn't worth as much to them at the moment as a working radio, enough food to hold out until somebody *heard* the damned thing, and water. Water was the one thing they didn't have up on the hill, and it was already shaping up to be one hell of a hot day.

By the time Bourke and Corporal Ruffino came back up the hill at daybreak, Blair had his men piling masses of thorn-covered brush downslope from the ring of foxholes. Bourke noted with approval that the younger officer had left easily defended gaps in the outer barrier to afford good fields of fire down the hill and escape lanes in case anyone wanted to get the hell out of there in a hurry. More than one soldier has been butchered by a victorious enemy as he tried to fight his way out of a blind-alley barricade he'd been too damned clever about building.

Private Johnson, the colored gunner, was working with Dexter, the baby of the outfit. They'd cut sharp poles from among the bamboos growing further down the slope, and Johnson was supervising a bit as he and Dexter drove the bamboo stakes down through the brush and into the ground. They anchored the brush and at the same time presented a belly ripping picket fence effect to discourage anyone from trying a running jump over the thorn-brush. As Bourke and Ruffino reached the barrier, the tall Captain heard Johnson say, "Both ends, Dexter. You have to sharpen both ends with the machete *before* we push them in the ground."

"Sorry," Dexter grinned, "I guess I'm not as handy with a machete as you are, Johnson."

Johnson swung his machete with a clean smooth action and left one end of the bamboo he was working on as deadly sharp as a broken beer bottle. "Nothing to it." He smiled as Dexter shook his head in wonder. "You've just got to get the right swing to it, like anything else."

Dexter suddenly spotted the Captain and started to salute.

"Knock it off," Bourke said softly. "No salutes until we're within mortar range of a Coke machine again." To cover the kid's obvious embarrassment, Bourke switched the conversation to the more mature gunner. "Your idea, Johnson?" he asked.

"Lieutenant Blair thought up the brush, sir," Johnson answered, waving one end of the bamboo to indicate Blair atop

the hill. "Dexter and I sort of got the idea these poles would keep the brush in place if the wind blew . . ."

"Like hell, sir," Dexter cut in, "Johnson had the idea all by himself. Shucks, Captain, I'm not too sure *yet* why we're doing all this stuff."

"At least you're honest, son," Bourke smiled. He nodded at Johnson and told him to carry on. As soon as they'd passed through the barrier and were out of earshot, he asked Ruffino, "You know this bunch better than I do, Corporal. Any problems back there I should know about?"

"You mean Johnson's being colored, sir? Nothing as far as I know. Not many Ku Kluxers seem to want to join the corps and Johnson knows how to handle it. Seems like a good egg. Besides, we got enough of a race problem on this rock with them Tokyo-joes."

Thank God, thought Bourke, he could forget at least one of the things that had been worrying him all night. As a man, Dennis Bourke couldn't see too much sense to having men in segregated units while they fought for democracy. But, as a marine, he knew better than to argue. All four of the services kept the races separate as of, and probably past, this war, and there wasn't anything anybody this side of the White House could do to change what had started out as a Presidential Directive by a man named Lincoln.

Someday, Bourke sincerely hoped, some president would have the political guts to change things. Then maybe these ridiculous situations wouldn't keep cropping up. At least Blair hadn't been as nutty as that base CO on New Caledonia had been about that poor colored army pilot who'd been sent the wrong way with mixed up orders, and had to sit all by himself for two weeks in a pup tent outside the BOQ!

Feeling almost mellow towards the young Lieutenant by this time, Dennis Bourke nodded approvingly as he reached the top of the hill and said, "Damn fine job, Lieutenant. Your men are shaping up like marines."

"Why, thank you, Captain Bourke," Blair exclaimed in pleased surprise. "Maybe it's a little Gung-ho and all, but I figured as long as we were sweating the little bastards out up here, we might as well keep improving our position."

"You thought right, Lieutenant. We sure as hell won't have much time to work on any improvements in the middle of a Banzai charge. And don't worry about Gung-ho. With the number of men we've got to hold off Christ knows what, we'll need all the Gung-ho we can get! Have you determined just how many men are fit for duty right now, Lieutenant?"

"A few of the men are still pretty shaken up, sir. And Private Roth's dislocated shoulder will be bothering him for some time, according to Maloney. But Roth's assured me he's still able to handle his rifle. Even volunteered to stand a turn at guard last night."

"Roth, eh? That's the good-looking guy they call Valentino?"

"Yes sir, he takes a lot of ribbing from the others about all the women he's driven to suicide, but he's all right. Got in on some of that mopping up near the end of the Guadal campaign. They say he's a steady man in a fire-fight."

Craddock, Ruffino, Johnson, Roth... Bourke was filing them in his brain for the future. There just wasn't time. Time to know his men. Time to know which ones he could count on and which ones would fall apart at the wrong moment. Blair knew his job. The way he'd built up this position showed it. But the kid was unstable. Overly proud of that lousy little brass bar in his pocket, and liable to go off half-cocked any time. Sergeant Bleeker was a type any old soldier would meet in his time. A thirty-year brown-nose who'd gotten his stripes by knowing a little about boxing and a lot more about sucking around the orderly room. Most company CO's in the peacetime services would put stripes on a baboon, if it meant a chance at the regimental boxing championship. Before Pearl, the corps had been lousy with clerk-typists who couldn't type, duty sergeants who had no duties, and mess sergeants who couldn't have boiled an egg with their mother helping them, all on the boxing or football teams.

Bleeker probably knew how to handle himself in a ring, Bourke thought, but he was too hotheaded to be a really good fighter, and, somehow, he didn't really expect any Japs to come up this hill wearing nine-ounce gloves!

"Did you leave Craddock down by the plane, sir?" Blair was asking.

Bourke shook his head. "They'd have to be pretty stupid to walk into that again," he said. "And if they do hit down there, they're more than likely to plaster the position with rifle grenades or mortars first. Craddock's a pretty fair man, and he was still full of piss and vinegar this morning, so I sent him out to scout around."

"By himself, Captain?"

"Haven't the men to spare for big patrols. And, if you can't send a big one, one man's harder to spot than three or four. And besides, I'd rather lose one man than three, any time."

Blair grimaced and said, "I suppose you're right, Captain, but you make it sound like a pretty cold-blooded business."

"That's what it is, Lieutenant. A business. People get killed, babies get burned alive in their cribs, and nice guys die with their guts spilled out of those pretty uniforms the women go for.

"But it's still just a friggen middle-class trade, like undertaking, or garbage disposal. And you never get no place in any profession, unless you go at it in a business-like way. These brass buttons, and all the bugles-in-the-sunset jazz the officers' ladies find so friggen romantic? It's bull-shit, mister! There's nothing romantic about war. Not once you've smelled that first poor slob who's been lying in the sun for a couple of days."

Bourke shrugged and snorted, "Hell, I'm starting to sound like Ernie Pyle. That's what happens when you try and describe the elephant to guys who haven't seen it. You don't know whether to talk about the blood, or the crud, or the lousy food and jungle rot or how a guy can go nuts without ever seeing an enemy, or hearing a shot fired in anger, just because he's been stuck on the same stinking island with nothing to do for longer than they'd have sent him to prison if he'd embezzled a million bucks. Or you think maybe he'll understand if you tell him about . . . Oh Christ! I don't know what the hell you tell *anybody*. You just keep plugging along at it, like a job you don't like, and if you're still alive when it's over, you'll have the rest of your life to figure out what the eff it was all about!"

Before Blair could think of an answer to *that*, Bourke had muttered something under his breath and walked away. He found Jim Maloney sitting on the edge of a foxhole with his cap on the back of his head and a bottle of Canadian Club in his hand.

"You'd better see about getting a helmet on that head, Chief," Bourke muttered, easing himself down on the piled earth banked to the rear of the foxhole. "You've got a pretty thick skull, but I don't think it would stop a round of 6.5, and that petty officer's cap might look like MacArthur to somebody who doesn't like him."

"You've gotten out of the swing of things, Dennis, me bucko. The Nips stopped issuing those little 6.5s after Guadal. Seems us big, hairy-chested *Beikoku-no* bassers are too *big* to be stopped by anything smaller than a 7.7, see? Saw one of their new Arisaka 7.7s some gyrene brought back

from Bougainville last month. Funny looking rifle, but it's got the strongest bolt action I ever saw."

Maloney stopped, took a sip of Canadian Club, and said, "What's eating you, Dennis? Tell it to your little ol' father confessor! I never tol' you I was a defrocked priest, did I? Got flung out on my can for spiking the sacramental wine, see? Poor ol' 'bishop got blotto and beat hell out of three altar boys. Don't see why the hell they blamed *me!*"

"Yeah," Bourke muttered, "I remember, it was right after you got out of the French Foreign Legion. What was that stuff about buy-cocoa you were spouting just now?"

"That's us, man. *Beikoku-no* means Americans in general, one American's a *Beikókuzin*, and so on into the night. Have a drink."

"This buy-cocoa thing means America in Japanese?"

"Hell no, man. If they want to talk about the *country* they call it Amerika." He sipped at the bottle and shrugged. "It's a kind of screwy language. Now look, ol' buddy, what were you and Blair talking about before that got you all teary-eyed? He try to introduce you to some of those quaint mating customs he learned in military school?"

"Nothing's eating me, dammit," Bourke snapped. "Is that really Canadian Club in that bottle, Chief?"

"Sure, I been trying to give you some," Maloney snorted. He handed the bottle over and said, "Here, this'll bring you out of that crying jag you've been on since Manila, Dennis, ol' buddy. I keep trying to tell you, you stupid bastard, that you'll never get it out of your system until you get good and soused, cry all over some floozie's shoulder and wind up with a dose of clap. Ain't nothing like a little dose to knock all the romance out of a guy."

Bourke stopped with the bottle halfway to his lips. He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and said, "I've *told* you, Chief. I *don't* want to *talk* about it!"

"So sorry, Gomennasái, and sóo desu tomo," Maloney sneered, "I shall say no more about Manila, my noble ol' buddy-boy. I shall keep my peace about cross-carrying sufferers, and when you go nuts some night and blow your own brains out, I will say I told you so."

Bourke shook his head and took a stiff jolt from the bottle. It was good stuff, all right, but he hadn't had a drink of water for a couple of hours and straight whisky was a little much. They had to find a water supply on the island, and soon. The canteens and jerrycans from the plane just weren't going to make it.

He grimaced, handed the bottle back to the Chief, and said, "No crap, Maloney. Just how much Japanese did you pick up from that broad you were living with before the balloon went up? I've got a reason for asking."

Maloney shrugged, "Sukósi, ká mo sirenai. Enough to make it from the ship to the nearest saloon. A guy knocks around the islands a few years and he picks up a little Malay, little Tagalog, few words of whorehouse Cantonese or beachcomber Kanaka . . . Yeah, I guess I can make a broad or find my way to the head on what Japanese I know. You figure on inviting any of those other cats to tea?"

"Might be able to pick up a prisoner, if somebody here could talk to him. Otherwise, it wouldn't hardly be worth the risk."

"Sounds reasonable," Maloney shrugged. "You catch one and I'll give it a try. Probably get more out of a goddam PW than I can out of *you*, you frozen-faced Mick." He burped and added, "Any more questions on your pointed little head, or did you just come over here to hold my hand and drink my booze?"

"Yeah, Chief, there is another question I've been getting around to, and I want a straight answer, for a change. You really know anything about medicine, Chief? I mean, if I wanted a medical opinion on something, something important, could you give me the straight poop?"

"Didn't I ever tell you I graduated from the Edinburgh School of Medicine, Denny?" Maloney began. "I was an intern for the Mayo Clinic, and then I wound up with this big office on Park Avenue, see? Then I made my one foolish mistake. This society girl came in three months gone and willing to pay anything to beat the rap. I knew it was an awful chance at three months, but . . ."

"Yeah, shut up and listen to me, Chief. This is important as hell."

"Had to stuff her down the dumb-waiter in brown paper bags. Not all in one piece, of course, but that's all in the past, ol' buddy, what's this terrible problem you're worried about? I feel it only fair to add that I do not have the facilities for a Wassermann test in this foxhole. Of course, if you want an educated guess . . ."

"Chief, how long can a man last without water?"

Maloney stopped in mid-flight and looked soberly at Bourke.

"You really want to know?" he asked.

"I *have* to know, Chief. I've got nineteen men to keep

alive, counting myself, and I don't think there's enough water on this friggen hill for one full day's ration!"

"Give Roth and, let's see, six of the other guys who got banged up in the landing a full ration," Maloney said. "With tissue damage, a guy needs water more than usual. Ration it out even and you'll have seven, maybe eight, guys checking out before they would have if they'd hogged the water. You and me and the other guys can last just as long without *any* water as they can on half-rations."

"I'll do it," Bourke nodded. Then he said, "How long, Chief? How long do you figure we can hold out up here?"

"Four, four, forty. That's what the book says. Four minutes without air, four days without water, forty days without food."

"Then, we've got four days to work something out?"

"You think so? What the hell you think I'm trying to stay drunk for, Dennis?" He looked up at the sun and grimaced. "Twenty-four hours, Captain. I make it twenty-four hours in this friggen sun before they start drinking their own urine."

"How about that stuff you're drinking, Chief?"

"It evens out," Maloney shrugged. "There's a little water in the stuff, and some more water's oxidized out when the alky's converted to sugar. But, in the meantime, you've excreted enough water getting rid of the toxins and fusil oil to make up the diff. In other words, I'll die of thirst just as fast on this booze as I will on nothing, but I'll die happier."

"Maybe Craddock will find something down there," Bourke mused. "These limestone rocks sure won't hold more than a few seepage springs at best, but let's hope there's at least one on the damned island."

"Let's hope there's at least *two*!" Maloney corrected. "One for us and one for *them*, if you know who I mean."

"Yeah, I know who you mean," Bourke nodded. He got back to his feet and walked over the crest of the hill, to where Keller was stubbornly trying to resolder a loose connection with a bayonet heated over a small, open flame.

"How's it coming, Keller?" Bourke asked, looking down. The young aircrewman shook his head, but grinned gamely as he insisted, "I'll fix the mother, Captain! I'll get this goddam radio working again if it takes me all year!"

They didn't have a year. But Bourke didn't think this was the time to point that out. Twenty-four hours, the Chief had said. Twenty-four hours before his men no longer functioned as rational human beings, but as thirst-crazed animals. He remembered that life raft they'd picked up last year. The

men in it had been without water for a week. As the corpsmen put it together, later, they'd been dead for a good part of it. The bodies had started to turn in the tropical sun, but that wasn't what had made such a ghastly mess of the smallest man's corpse. Even after he'd started to bloat and turn blue, you could see where the others had ripped him open, to drink his blood.

"You're doing a good job, son," Bourke said aloud. "Keep at it until you contact Base, and I'll personally see to it that you're wearing sergeant's stripes the next time we fly together."

"Yes, *sir!*" Keller brightened. As Bourke walked away, he could hear him stubbornly intoning, "Pelican X Nine Eight, calling Octopus. Come in, Octopus . . . Over."

There was a commotion over on the other side of the defense perimeter and Bourke saw it was Craddock, coming through the thorn barrier. He hurried over and arrived just as Blair was questioning the hill-man.

"I tell you, Lieutenant," Craddock was saying as Bourke came within earshot, "that Jap camp's a real Do-Jesus sonovabitch! We'd have been dead for sure iffen we'd tried to hit her in the dark like we'uns planned last night."

Bourke caught the guilty look Blair shot his way, but made no comment. Blair looked slightly relieved as he asked, "How big is their outfit, Craddock?"

"Cain't rightly say, suh. I was so goddam busy duckin' their sentinel line . . . Those boys was playin' it real *cool*, I mean. They had their guards well out from their perimeter. I come moseyin' along like a big-ass bird and damn near stumbled right into one of the ornery skunks. Bitty little Jap was all hunkered down ag'in a trunk right smack in the middle of some real dark piney woods. Iffen I hadn't heard him takin' a drink from his canteen, I'd have took him for another goddam stump in them woods . . ."

"Did you kill him?" young Dexter cut in. Craddock shot him a disgusted look and answered, "Not so's you'd notice it. I warn't riskin' my ass behind their lines to collect no bitty scalps. I was over there trying to get information! Right, Cap'n?"

"Go on, Craddock," Bourke said, "what did you find out?"

"Well, suh, soon as it starts gettin' light, I shinny up a tree to look around. They's dug in right well along this sort of bay over on the west side of the island. Got a big hill behind them, and guess what, they got this ol' Jap flag flyin' up on the hill like they own the goddam place!"

"Any way *in* there, Craddock?"

"Not without we'uns collects us a mess of Purple Hearts, suh! We'd have to swim to get at them from the bay side. I went pokin' around the other side of that there hill ahint them. Least ways, I *tried* to go pokin' around. Only, Do-Jesus, I don't reckon a skinny rabbit could get through that mess! Lots of the big trees is down. Looks like maybe a blue-norther come through here a few years back and knocked hell out of that stretch of jungle. Anyhow, all this goddam bamboo and sticker bush has grown up between them half-rotted trunks and, man, that is *one* way I'd hate to lead a cavalry charge! Honest injun, suh, I don't reckon you could hit that Jap camp from the *land* side with a squad of M-5 tanks!"

"Weren't you able to form any idea of their strength?" Blair insisted.

"Well, I seen Japs moseyin' around the camp. Noticed they was wearin' helmets, and packin' their shooting irons, but I couldn't rightly tell how many of 'em there was. Could have been anywheres from a dozen or so to a battalion. Don't figure it could be much *bigger* than a battalion. The *camp's* not big enough, and they only got this one bitty wharf stickin' out in the bay. Don't look like it's been used much . . ."

"You say there was a wharf?" Blair cut in. "Was there anything else? Supplies stacked up, for instance?"

"No, suh. Like I done said, this bitty wharf's sort of run down, the way everythin' made of wood gets out here. One thing was kind of interestin', though. Looked like they was buildin' some kind of a boat. Piss-poor job, too, iffен you ask me."

"A boat?" Blair breathed, shooting a triumphant glance at Bourke, and Maloney, who'd just ambled over to see what all the fuss was about. "What kind of a boat is it, Craddock?"

"One of them bitty fishin' boats them folks build, suh. I think they call them junks, don't they? That's a good name for them, they purely look like junk to me. Didn't have no paint or nothin' and the sail looks like it's made out of straw matting. Real tacky lookin', I mean."

"Junks are Chinese boats," Maloney snorted. "What you saw was a *húne*, if it was as unimpressive as you say it was. When they build anything bigger than a fishing schooner, they call it a *Maru*, which means dragon instead of ship, but they don't seem to mind."

He winked at Craddock and added, "Now, if you'd spotted a goddam *señtookān*, kid, we'd have something to worry about. *That's* a friggen *battleship*. An' if the japs are buildin' anything over there, them *señtookān* jobs are the worse kind."

"Knock it off, Chief," Bourke said. "How big was this boat you spotted, Craddock?"

"Could it carry nineteen men?" Blair interjected eagerly.

"Might squeeze that many aboard, sub, but there purely wouldn't be room to play shuffleboard. While I was sittin' up there like a cotton-pickin' monkey, I seen some of them bitty Japs loading baskets of what looked like coconuts on her."

"That cinches it!" Blair said. "With coconuts for drinking purposes, we could make it to Bougainville!"

He caught the look on Bourke's face and faltered, "Couldn't we, Captain?"

"Bougainville's a good hundred miles from here," Bourke mused. "A hundred miles in a makeshift boat, with the typhoon season coming on . . . Sounds pretty hairy, Lieutenant."

"We're not much better off where we are, are we?" Blair insisted.

Before the Captain could answer, Chief Maloney shook his head and shouted. "Hold it, you clowns! Ain't you kind of *forgetting* something? The way I got it, the *Japs* were building this ferry boat for *themselves*!"

"Maybe they're building it for *us*, and just don't know it." The Lieutenant laughed. He was eager again. Bourke saw, and this time he wasn't sure whether he wanted to sit on him or not.

They were safe, he knew, from anything less than a full-scale battalion assault, as long as they stayed up here on the hill. On the other hand, they *couldn't* stay for more than a few hours. They *had* to chance *some* move down off their strong position, if they expected to stay alive long enough to be rescued.

Moving down into the unknown jungle to search for water was risky. So was trying to hijack the boat Craddock had spotted. Neither plan sounded so hot. The chance of pulling off either without losing more men than he liked to think about, was less than fifty-fifty.

On the other hand, to sit here and do nothing was certain death.

Better the devil we know, he thought. Aloud, he said,

"Craddock, do you think we could get a boarding party in there, swimming along the shore, like you said?"

"Iffen it was dark as Tojo's heart, and we had the luck of them Jap boys who bombed Pearl that Sunday mornin', we might. I ain't sayin' we could, suh, I just said we might!"

"You crazy bastards do what you want," Maloney laughed. "Me, I'll take one of them nice grey buckets flying the stars and stripes."

"Sure, sure," one of the others snorted, "wouldn't we all? In the meantime, you know where you *find* a ship like that?"

"Right out there, you dumb bassers!" Maloney waved expansively at the sun-glared ocean and insisted, "Screw the goddam Jap ship! Who the hell wants to get killed swiping a goddam rowboat when we got that good ol' tin can out there?"

"What the hell are you raving about?" Blair snapped, glancing in the direction the Chief was pointing.

His jaw dropped and his eyes widened as he softly breathed, "It *can't* be! I've been taking my Atabrine tablets, and I haven't touched a drop of that goddam booze..."

"You ain't drunk, son," laughed Maloney, "but I sure as hell thought *I* was, until you saw it too."

Bourke and the others squinted into the sun in disbelief. None of them was quite able to grasp what they saw.

There, steaming less than three miles off shore, was a ship. You could see her battle colors, even from here. She was an American destroyer. Coming their way.

HAYAKU!" Lieutenant Kuroki shouted, handing the hastily folded bundle to Private Ando. "You know what it is you are to do?"

"Hai, Lieutenant-san, I will run as fast as my legs can carry me!"

"Not so fast that you run into another ambush!" Kuroki cautioned. "Unless you get there before that American destroyer sends a landing party ashore, all is lost! Now, *go*, Ando-san, and make sure it's that hill *directly* between us and the Americans!"

"Sóo desu tomo, Lieutenant-san!" Ando shouted, "I will not fail!" And then he was off and running, his muscular legs taking him at a killing pace that he alone was capable of.

"I should have gone with him, Lieutenant-san!" Sergeant Tamura sighed, as Ando's figure disappeared in the underbrush. "If he should run into those devils alone..."

"Neither of us could keep up with Ando, Tamura-san," Kuroki answered. "And three men are hardly better than one in a trap."

"Do you think he will get through, Lieutenant-san?"

"He's *got* to get through!" Kuroki answered. "If Goro was right about spotting what looked like a man sliding down a tree trunk this morning, the enemy knows our position."

"They carry few marines on a destroyer, Lieutenant-san. Even if they land, there's a lot of jungle between us and them. And, truly, we are in a most defensible position."

"I'm not worried about the damned landing party attacking us," Kuroki sighed. "In the first place, they'd be utter fools to try."

"Then, I fail to see, Lieutenant-san..." Tamura began, and then his voice trailed away as he got the picture.

"The destroyer!" he gasped, "indeed, they wouldn't have to advance a *meter* through the *jungle*, would they?"

"Kanarazu," nodded Kuroki soberly. "Once the Americans on shore make contact with that destroyer, we are finished. They simply have to give the captain of that damned ship our position and he'll steam around to our side of the island and open fire on us!"

"Can't we put up any resistance, Lieutenant-san? Our Nambus should be able to stop anyone coming across that beach..."

"Across the beach, Tamura-san? They'll stand a couple of kilometers off shore and simply pound us to bits with their long-range guns."

"We can fall back into the jungle," Tamura began.

"Hai, and then what? Shall we live like monkeys in the trees? We've stripped the jungle of what little food there ever was in the months we've been here, Tamura-san. Oh, certainly, we can exist for a time. A week, perhaps, and to what purpose? To be hunted down like rabbits at the Americans' leisure?"

"They may find *this* rabbit to have sharp claws!" Tamura grunted.

Then he brightened and said, "What are we fretting about, Lieutenant-san? Ando is a good man. He will get through."

"I hope so," Kuroki shrugged.

THIS is USMC transport Pelican X Nine Eight calling
US destroyer number 2489. Come in, destroyer, over."

"Keller, are you still farting around with that radio?" Bourke shouted, running over the crest of the hill. "Break out your smoke pots, on the double!"

The others were dancing around wildly now on the hill. A couple of the men had peeled off their green skivvy shirts and were waving them wildly to attract the attention of the men on the ship.

"Thank God!" Blair shouted, catching Bourke's eye in all the tumult. "We'll be off this stinking rock before nightfall!"

"Don't be too sure, Lieutenant," Bourke frowned. "We've no way of knowing that tin can's looking for us."

"Hell, Captain, they must have sent her out to search our flight path when we were reported overdue."

"Maybe. But, even so, she's searching the *water*." He turned to Keller to holler, "How's that smoke coming, Keller?"

"The signal pots are in place and lit, sir," Keller answered, pointing to three squat-looking canisters lined up in the dirt atop the hill.

"Spread them out a bit," Bourke said. "They've got to make out three distinct plumes of smoke to recognize it as a distress signal."

Keller and Ruffino hurriedly moved two of the smoke pots, even as the first plumes started to rise. "There's a damn sea breeze up here on this ridge, Captain!" Keller called in dismay. "The friggen smoke's blowing down the hill *behind* us!"

"She's not even slowing down!" Blair moaned. "We've got to signal that ship somehow! We can't just stand here and watch her steam right on by!"

"If only that damned plane hadn't ploughed into the trees," Bourke muttered. "They could almost spot her from the destroyer if they knew where to look. . . ." In a louder tone he called, "Keller, douse those signal pots for now. We'll take them down on the beach in front of the wreck and light them. The smoke should be visible as hell against the palms along the shoreline. If *that* doesn't work, we can always set the damn plane on fire. Where's Ruffino?"

"Here, sir."

"Corporal, I want you to gather an eight-man squad to cover Keller and me on the way down. On the *double*, Ruff."

"Yessir! Horton, Kolinsky, Swensholm . . ."

"I'll go, Corporal!" young Dexter volunteered.

For a moment the scar-faced veteran hesitated, then he nodded curtly and said, "If they're big enough, they're old

enough. Fall in, Dexter. Where the hell's Waller? Come on, Waller, get the lead out. Ok, Magee, and Neilson, fall in. How about you, Valentino? You gonna spend the whole war nursing that friggen arm?"

"You're talking about my *lovin'* arm, Corporal," Roth grinned, ambling over with his rifle.

"You up to it, Roth?" Bourke asked.

"Sure, Captain. I don't need my *lovin'* arm for them Japs, do I?"

Bourke nodded grimly and said, "Ok, let's move out on the double, before that tin can's hull down over the horizon."

As he started to lead the hastily assembled patrol down through the thorn-bush barrier, Blair fell in beside him, wearing helmet and side arms, and said, "I'm going with you, this time."

There was no time to argue, thought Bourke. At least, this way, he'd know just where the kid was. He nodded and motioned the others to spread out as they filtered down hill through the trees. Beside him, Blair whispered, "Do you think there's a chance of hitting any Japs this close to camp, Captain?"

"Can't say," Bourke muttered, keeping his eyes on as many places under the green forest canopy as he could at one time. "I know that if *I* was the enemy commander, and a US destroyer was off my island, I'd do my damndest to stop anybody from signaling her! So keep both eyes open, and your voice down, mister. We're getting close to the wreck, and I'd hate like hell to get ambushed in the same place I ambushed *them!*"

There was a blotch of sunlight up ahead, filtering down through a gap in the canopy and filling the thick muggy atmosphere with brilliant green light. It was the rip-torn path the plane had made coming in. Let's see, the plane should be over there to the left. That meant the beach was on the right. They'd put the smoke pots on the beach, first. Then, if there was still time to start a bigger fire near the plane . . .

Something was wrong up ahead. Dennis Bourke sensed it even before he realized that the parrot calling in the treetops was all wrong.

Sure, it sounded like a parrot, all right. There'd been millions of the noisy bastards on Mindanao, he remembered. He also remembered parrots lived on bananas and other soft fruits.

He hadn't seen a banana, orange, or mango since they'd landed on this rock!

"Watch it!" he hissed at Blair, at the same time making the hand signals to spread out and take cover. The squad stopped moving forward and melted down into the brush.

All except Private Dexter.

"Hey, *you*, fella!" Blair called aloud, as the recruit moved on, oblivious to the fact that he was leaving the others behind.

There was a blur of movement to one side and Corporal Ruffino broke cover to catch up with the kid:

"Down, Dexter!" Ruffino snapped, as the boy stepped out into the sunlight. Dexter, for the first time aware that something was wrong, stopped and turned back towards the cover of the trees. He never made it.

A crackle of fire lashed the air around him as Dexter suddenly came unstuck. From the far side of the clearing, a hoarse voice bellowed, "Koogeki-suru! Korosu! Korosu!" and Dexter seemed to dive headfirst into the underbrush at the edge of the clearing. Ruffino cursed, got to his feet, and moved up to where Dexter lay, firing his rifle from the hip until he'd reached the fallen boy. He dropped down beside him, cradling his rifle in one arm, and pulling Dexter's limp form by the collar with his free hand, as he crabbed backwards through the brush.

"Cover him!" Bourke shouted, leaping to his feet and letting off a full burst of automatic fire before dropping to his knees and rolling to one side. A vicious burst of Nambu slugs whiplashed a palm trunk behind the space Bourke's chest had been occupying a split-second before as he reloaded his weapon.

By this time, Ruffino had dragged Dexter back to cover and both sides slacked off the firing. A distant voice shouted, "Taru! Wa tuite iku!" And Bourke sensed it was fading in the direction of the beach. How in the hell did they know he was trying to get to the beach? he wondered. Oh, sure, the destroyer. They'd spotted the tin can, too, and weren't about to let him signal her, if they could help it.

"How's the kid?" Bourke called, moving forward to where Ruffino stood looking down at something lying in the grass at his feet.

"Blipped," Ruffino shrugged, in a desperately casual voice. The others were crowding in, now. Drawn by the ugly fascination of death. "Don't bunch up, dammit!" Ruffino snapped, and some of the men stopped sheepishly and waited to see what was next. Bourke sensed the figure of Blair

standing beside him as he looked down at what was left of Private Dexter.

"Jesus!" Blair gagged, "they must have used dum-dum ammo!"

"Happens that way a lot in the jungle, sir," Ruffino shrugged. "Time a rifle slug's ploughed through a dozen branches, or bounced off a trunk, it's moving ass-over-teakettle like a little buzz saw. Saw a guy get hit in the groin, one time, and the bullet came out under his ear. Left a tunnel you could have rolled a pool ball through, all the way." He grimaced down at the dead boy and said, "You learned young, baby. You learned it good. We gonna bury him?"

"No time, Ruff. We've got to attract that destroyer back here. Did you get a line on which way the Japs headed?"

"I'd say the beach, sir."

"Same here. Only we've got to get there, and fast. Any ideas?"

"I'll take most of the men and attack," Lieutenant Blair said. "Meanwhile, you and Keller can be lighting the smoke canisters."

"Yeah, Lieutenant?" Bourke smiled. "You have any idea where they are?"

"Well, they're somewheres between us and the beach..."

"Yeah. How about the old razzle-dazzle, Ruffino?"

"Might work this once," Ruffino shrugged. "You want to play Chinese new years, Captain, or shall I?"

"You take three or four and start a Mexican revolution as close to the beach as you can without breaking cover. I'll take Keller and most of the squad and see if we can sucker them again. You'd better stick with me, Lieutenant Blair."

"Certainly, Captain. But what's all this about?"

"No time to explain just now. Keller, you still have those pots?"

"Yessir."

"Stay close to me, then. The rest of you men, except for Ruffino's detail, follow me. Keep your heads down, and keep it quiet. The idea's to pussyfoot around the flank of the Japs while they think Ruffino's the whole show. You all set, Ruff?"

"Any time, Captain."

"Let us move out first. Then I want as much noise from your bunch as a brigade of Girl Scouts on an outing. Got that?"

"I know what to do, Captain."

"Carry on," Bourke nodded. He motioned the others with him and the two groups fanned out on divergent courses

toward the beach. Dennis led his section in silence for a few hundred yards, then suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"What's up?" Blair whispered.

"Jungle trail. Looks like it's been used fairly regularly."

Blair peered past him, down at a wide, well-worn sandy path through the brush and tree trunks. "I get it," Blair grinned, "the Japs use this as one of their paths to the beach. We can move down it and catch them from the rear!"

"Could, if we knew which way they were, and where they were heading," Bourke shrugged. "Let's just set a spell and see what happens when Ruffino begins the concert."

As if in answer to his comment, there was a sudden crackle of small arms fire off to the right. A couple of grenades went off and someone, it might have been Magee, gave a wild rebel yell. Bourke recognized Ruffino's gruff voice shouting, "Kill, kill, kill the Buddha-headed bastards!"

"Someone's coming back up the trail!" Bourke warned. "Keep your heads down." He crouched in the leaves by the side of the trail, frowning. He'd expected to catch enemy troops moving *toward* the sound of blood and slaughter Ruffino was making. At most, he'd figured to come up on them from the rear as they lay in cautious ambush for the Corporal's decoy party. But these guys seemed to be high-tailing it *away* from Ruffino as fast as they could go. Either they thought all that uproar was the Seventh Cavalry to the rescue, or, what was more likely, they'd finished whatever it was they wanted to do on the beach and were headed home for chow.

Neither made sense.

If they'd come all the way over here to do something else than fight, what the hell was it? He'd been sure they wanted to keep him off that beach, where he could signal the destroyer. Now, he wasn't so sure.

"I see one!" Blair shouted, pointing down the trail. Actually, there were at least three Japanese soldiers coming up the trail from the beach. Or at least, there had been, until Blair advertised their ambush by shouting.

Bourke had barely time to raise his tommy gun before the startled Japanese dove sideways off the trail for cover. "Son-of-a-bitch!" Bourke grunted, firing at a moving blur of mustard-colored cotton moving through the trees across the way.

"Káiiiiiii!" wailed a terrified voice, and Bourke savagely fired again at the sound. The moment he'd finished his burst, he dropped and moved to one side, but there was no answering fire. He waited for a few moments, frowning. They might

be playing possum, he knew, but he was sure he'd heard them moving away through the underbrush. As if they couldn't put enough distance between themselves and any Americans around. It was a hell of a funny way to run a railroad!

"Roth," he said, finally, "cover me from here. I'm going over for a look-see."

"I'll come with you . . ." Blair began.

"You stay here. That's an order, mister!"

And then Bourke was moving across the trail and into the trees on the other side in a running crouch, as the others trained their weapons on the inscrutable green curtain.

For what seemed like a hell of a long time, there wasn't a sound over there, after Bourke vanished among the leaves. Then they could make out his tall figure waving them across.

"Anything over there, Captain?" Blair asked, crossing the trail.

"Not now, there isn't," Bourke answered. "There's a mess of blood spattered on some crushed leaves over in there. Looks like somebody took a pratfall and donated a pint or so before he got up. Must have winged him pretty bad, but they've taken him along home for chow, I guess. You'd better keep close to me with those signal pots, Keller. The beach is right over here a little ways."

"You scouted all the way to the beach?" Blair asked.

"Yeah, right this way. It's that little fishing cove I told you about before. The tin can's hove to out there, now. Must have spotted the men waving from the hill."

By this time, they'd reached sight of the beach through the trees. Blair stepped forward eagerly and shouted, "I see her, Captain. She's closer in than before. Say, is she training her forward turret this way?"

"Be damned foolish not to," Bourke shrugged. "A gyrene's battle dress don't look that much different than a Jap's, at that range. This island's not listed on her charts as American owned, either. Her skipper's playing it close to the vest until he sees some signal he can find in his code book."

"Keller!" Blair shouted, "let's go with that smoke, dammit!"

"Hold it," Bourke snapped. "Let's not be too quick about stepping out on that sand."

"Why? What's the matter, Captain?"

"I was just thinking. The way those Japs were acting . . . They could have kept us pinned down longer than that,

if they really wanted to keep us off this beach. . . . They must have something going for them. Something we'd better figure, before we make any sudden moves."

"You said they'd taken off, Captain."

"That's right. Like big-ass birds, without putting up as much fight as a San Diego whore on payday. I've heard of *dumb* Japanese soldiers, Lieutenant, but I haven't heard of many really *yellow* ones. It's almost as if they *wanted* us to come this way. As if, maybe they left us something to remember them by. . . ."

Blair caught the way Bourke's eyes were looking. He frowned at the innocently smooth sand just out of reach and murmured, "You mean . . . mines?"

"Wouldn't be the first time. Generally, when a seasoned soldier exposes himself to you, and then runs off without putting up a fight, it's because he wants you to chase him. Most times, it's in the general direction of a machine-gun nest, a mine field, or a zeroed-in target area for his artillery."

"Someone's coming, sir," whispered Roth at Bourke's side.

"I hear them. Move over behind that pandanus and give the challenge. We'll cover you from here."

Roth nodded and stepped far enough to the side of the patrol to draw any likely fire away from the others. He crouched behind the pandanus fronds, cupped both hands to his mouth so as to confuse the direction his voice was coming from, and shouted, "Walla Walla!"

There was a moment of silence as the oncoming sounds stopped short. Then a voice answered, "Wellington."

(Walla Walla, and Wellington, were among the favorite password and countersign combinations in either theater during that war. Even if some enemy soldier got wise, it was almost impossible for any German to pronounce the letter W, while the Japanese, who have no letter L in their alphabet, pronounced them Warra Warra, and Werrington.)

"Over here, Ruffino," Bourke called. "By the beach. See anything on your way?"

"Nothing, Captain. Not even a forwarding address. Looks like they took off the second we went into our act."

"They panicked," Magee grinned. "I cut loose with a couple of real hair-curling hog calls, and their nerves couldn't take it."

"Not Japs," Ruffino objected. "You worry a Jap long enough, or really scare the piss out of him, and he panics,

just like anybody else. Only, with a Jap, it's usually *at* you instead of *away* from you."

He got a distant look in his eyes as he murmured, "Like them last days on Guadal. . . We'd pushed them back, inch by inch, the whole stinking length of the island. They fought us like pros, all the way. Didn't miss a trick. Sniped at us from the trees all day, crawled in on us at night trying to buddy up to us in English. They played the terrain for all it was worth. In the virgin rain forest, where there wasn't much underbrush between the trees, they'd be dug in way back in the shadows with a Nambu. In the cut-over jungle and overgrown coconut plantings, they'd lie closer and fire blind through the leaves at your footsteps. And in the friggen *elephant grass*, man, they were at *home* in elephant grass! The goddam stuff grows ten or twelve feet tall in the open country on Guadal, see? They'd move around like friggen cats in them split-toed, rubber-soled boots they wear until they heard some clodhopping gyrene coming through the elephant grass, then they'd freeze and lay for him. Pick out his position from the sound of the swishing stalks and then thrust blind through the grass with their bayonet. If the guy yelled, they'd fade back. If he went down quiet, they'd stand over him waiting for another sucker to come looking for him. Found three of our guys piled on top of each other one time. Friggen Nip blipped the first two as quiet as a mouse, and got away clean after the third guy screamed going down."

"Captain Bourke," Blair cut in, "we can't just stand here all day telling war stories! Can't Keller set off the smoke right here?"

"That same wind's blowing on shore, Lieutenant. Plumes won't rise more than a few feet before it takes them back through the trees."

He shook his head wearily and said, "Let me have that bayonet, Magee. I'm going to play in the sand for a while."

As Magee unfixed his bayonet and handed it over, Bourke said, "Ruff, I'd like a couple of good men covering this section of beach from that rock jutting out onto the sand over on the right. Rest of you keep an eye peeled along the shore to the left." He stopped, looked at the point of the bayonet, and then grinned crookedly at Blair. "Be back in a minute, mister. I hope. If I blow my fool head off, move the men out of here in a hurry. That destroyer's liable to take a sudden explosion from the shore line the wrong way. Play hell to be shelled by your own side, wouldn't it."

Then he stepped out onto the edge of the sand.

Aboard the destroyer, a Lieutenant Commander raised his binoculars to worried eyes and asked, "What do you make of it, Lieutenant?"

"Definitely somebody home, sir," the fire control officer replied. "I make out a dozen men or so on that hill to the left. The one nearest the beach with a slightly higher one almost directly behind it . . ."

"I see them," the Lieutenant Commander nodded. "Damned good position. High ground covering the shore, and that hill behind them to keep them from being outlined against the sky. Trouble is, I can't make out who's signing their payroll from here."

"Could we move in a little closer, sir?"

"We're already within range of anything bigger than a French 75, Lieutenant. I don't intend to risk my ship any further until I get an American recognition signal."

"They seem to be waving, sir. And they must be able to make our colors from shore. Do you suppose it could be the survivors of that marine transport listed as overdue? As I recall, it was about in this area we were asked to keep a lookout for them."

"Could be, but where's the plane, if it's them? It would be suicide to put her down in the jungle, and her tail fin would be above water if he ditched inside the reef."

"What if he landed out here in deep water, sir?"

"Then those aren't the survivors, because the survivors are all dead. You ever see the *size* of those sharks cruising just outside a coral reef in these waters, Lieutenant?"

"They could have landed on the other side, sir . . ."

"They could have. But why take up positions over here? The book says to stay near the wreck until someone spots it. Even the marines know that . . . Say! Is that another man I see? Down on the beach, just to the side of that big rock jutting out into the water . . ."

"I see him, sir!" the younger officer replied. "Looks like he's crawling around on his hands and knees in the sand!"

"Now, why in the hell would he be doing that at a time like this?"

The junior officer, who had something of a reputation as a wardroom wit to keep up, ventured, "Maybe he's digging clams?"

Nobody on the bridge laughed.

"Nothing coming through on the air, Sparks?" the skipper asked.

"No sir," another officer replied. "We've been calling them since we spotted the island. Both a general CQ, and Pelican X Nine Eight, the code signal for that missing plane. Haven't heard so much as Tokyo Rose's interference."

"Transmitter could have been smashed in a crash..." the Lieutenant Commander mused. "Don't they have smoke canisters and signal mirrors in the regulation survival kit?"

"Rocket flares and dye markers too," the fire control officer put in. That same nut was still down on his hands and knees over there. What in the hell was he *doing*?

"Sun's on the wrong side for them to use a mirror," the signal officer objected. "Still, they ought to send up a flare or some smoke. If they are our people, they've either used up all of their distress signals, or else somebody forgot to pack."

"And if they're *not* our people," the commanding officer said, "we just might be due for some incoming mail. You're ready for instant counter-fire, Jenkins?"

The Lieutenant nodded, a trifle grimly for the wardroom clown. "Gun crews manned and at their stations, sir," he said. "Our forward guns are on target and we're dead in the water. If they make one false move, we'll make fresh sukiyaki out of the little brown brothers!"

"Hold your fire until we're dead certain," the older man warned. "We don't know they're Japs, yet."

That was the trouble, he thought. He just didn't know *anything*! The island was listed on his chart as uninhabited, but the chart was obviously out of date. Someone *was* on shore. Men who looked like they were in uniform. At least, they all seemed to be wearing the same shade of nothing-colored material. Both sides wore nondescript greens and browns for jungle fighting, he knew. The standard Japanese summer uniform was a mustard tan, but the American tropical khaki was nearly the same shade. Both sides wore darker battle dress, in several different shades each... And you couldn't tell from here whether a man had slanted eyes or not!

The others were waiting, he knew, for him to crap or get off the pot. He should either send ashore a landing party, and *ask* what the hell was going on, or order full right rudder and get the hell out of here before someone salvoed a few 155s down his smoke stack!

"We'll wait a bit," he said. "I'm not risking a man from this ship on what could be a Jap ambush, and I can't steam away knowing a handful of poor devils may be starving on that lousy little makatai! We've signaled them by radio, by

heliograph, and Signalman Ferris has been waving his arms off at them out on the wing for ten minutes. If they want us to do more than that, it's up to them."

Meanwhile, back on shore, Dennis Bourke was coming to the conclusion that he might have been wrong about the enemy mining this strip of beach. At least, he'd soon have probed a large enough area in the sand for Keller to safely set up his signal pots.

"What's that swabby doin' with them flags, *now*, Keller?" one of the men was asking.

"Same as before," Keller answered. "See, he's signaling I...D...E...N... Identify yourself. Same as before, dammit." He leaned forward and called, "Captain, can't I run back up the hill for my signal flags? I used to be pretty hot with this semiphore jazz."

"No deal," Bourke grunted. The tip of his bayonet touched something hard and he stopped breathing as he withdrew it. Then he said, "Even if you made it, Keller. I'd have a space cleared for you to spread the smoke before you got back. And, if you *didn't* make it, I'd play hell breaking Sergeant Bleeker in as a signalman third."

"I'm fast on my feet, sir," Keller insisted, "and Ruffino's scared all the Japs away."

"They didn't *scare* away, baby," Ruffino muttered. "They never scare *away!*" His eyes smouldered as he softly added, "We had them cold, see? Out of food and ammo, and backs to the sea. I mean, *really* backs to the sea. Maybe a couple of thousand guys standing knee deep like it was Coney on a hot day. We stood in the trees and poured it on them like they was ducks in a shooting gallery. Lots of them had lost their rifles, and them that had them were out of ammo. They couldn't do a friggen thing but stand there at the water's edge and take it. I mean, it was like we was a firing squad. A couple of thousand gyrenes standing almost shoulder to shoulder and pouring it to them as fast as we could reload. There was so many of the poor bastards you couldn't miss, see? You'd fire, and see the guy's head snap the way it does when a guy takes a bullet. If you hit him good, his head would snap so bad his cap would fly off, but sometimes they still stayed on their feet for a while. It didn't matter. Sooner or later another slug would hit him right and he'd go down. After a while, the bodies were piled up so bad some of the dumb Japs climbed up on them to keep their feet out of the water. Our guys was loading and firing so fast the rifle barrels turned red at the ends, and lots of guys were cracking

up. Guys were laughing and crying and some dumb chaplain was running up and down with a Bible yellin' 'Koosan, Koosan, Koosan,' like he really expected one of them Japs to surrender, or one of our guys to let 'em! Those boys hadn't come all the way to Guadal to surrender."

"Jesus!" Magee grimaced. "You killed every one of 'em?"

"Time we got through, we did. The whole friggen ocean was red with blood, and I remember how funny it looked to see them little waves run up on the sand like catsup. Takes a long time to chop down a thousand men, you know. Even if you fire as fast as you're able. Takes a *hell* of a long time."

"They just stood and *took* it?" Lieutenant Blair frowned.

"Mostly, sir. They'd fought us to the last round, and the last foot of the island. There wasn't nothing to do *but* take it, I guess. Here and there you'd hear some guy hollering. One officer was waving a damn sword with his back to us for a while. He was facing his men and yelling 'Banzai, Banzai', over and over until my buddy Smitty shot him. Some of them was crying, and a couple was down on their knees in the water, praying, like. But mostly, they just stood there. We was close enough to see their faces. First time, really, in the whole campaign. Some of them looked kind of unhappy, and some of them kept it like they was in a poker game. Lots of them looked sort of embarrassed about the whole thing. I remember drawing a bead on this one guy, see, and just as I'm squeezing off a round he catches my eye. And then he grins that funny way Japs do when they're embarrassed and drops his eyes, like when you're on the subway and you find yourself staring across the aisle at a guy. Didn't look back at me once. Not even when I shot him."

"Like I said," Blair snorted, "they're all stupid. Stupid or crazy. Can you see Americans dying like that, Ruffino?"

"I wouldn't be ashamed of them if they did," Ruff muttered. "I don't like the mothers, Lieutenant. Lost too many buddies in this war to ever *like* them. But you can't say the little bastards ain't got hair on their chests."

"I don't see what that's got to do with the price of beans right now," Keller objected. "We saw *our* Japs take off."

"I'm trying to tell you," Ruffino said, "them Japs just now was up to something! They didn't panic when we fired a few rounds over their heads. I've *seen* Japs panic! I mean, back there on Guadal, at the last. There was maybe a hundred of the poor slobbs still on their feet, and half of them were dying. Our guys were sick of it by now, and the fire was sort of slacking off. There'd be a rattle of fire up and down the

line and then a couple of seconds in between of dead quiet. Sort of creepy. Now and then the rifles would let up and you'd hear this low quiet moaning coming from all along the pile of stiffs at the water's edge. Two Japs near me was carrying on a conversation for a while. You could hear them talking when the firing stopped. Sounded like they were talking about a book they'd read, or something. Then, during a lull, this one Jap starts to giggle. Giggles like a damn altar boy somebody's made a face at during Mass, you know? Pretty soon the others are catching it, like kids in school, trying not to laugh, and not able to help it. I guess by now, most of them must have been ready to go nuts, anyway. Guys started to break down and bawl, shake fists at us, things like that. Then, this one guy screams just like a dame seeing a mouse and comes for us. I mean, one Jap comes at a couple of battalions of US Marines all by himself, with an empty rifle. I guess maybe five hundred guys all shot him at once. Anyway, what hit the dry sand a couple of feet from the water looked like it had been run through a meat grinder first. This sort of sets the other Japs off. Guys start screaming and rolling their eyes around and generally going psycho before they just forget what's going on and bolt. But, I'll tell you no lie, kid. Not *one* of those mothers bolted away from us! Sure, they couldn't have waded out more than a few yards, but that's not the point. These guys had gone completely nuts, see? They'd been driven right out of their minds and into a blind funk. But every one of the little bassers remembered to hold his bayonet right, if they had one. Laughing, crying, screaming, praying, some of them with that blank look a guy gets when he finds out he got off at the wrong station, every damned one of them kept boring right in with that friggen bayonet until they went down. And some of them took a bit of killing."

"They get any of you guys?" Magee asked.

"Hell no! The friggen *army* couldn't have boloed a setup like that. For every Jap coming up the sand yellin' 'Banzai,' there was a couple of squads of combat marines firing point blank." Ruffino shook his head and added, "You'd be surprised at how far some of them got, though. Guy from *LIFE* magazine came along later and took some pictures, but they never printed 'em. Not *all* of 'em."

"I'm about ready for that smoke, Keller," Bourke called. "Be careful you don't step outside the chopped-up sand where I've been digging. Nothing but stones, so far, but let's not push our luck."

"Yessir," Keller said. He picked up the smoke pots and was just stepping out from between two trees when there was a puff of dirty brown smoke from the destroyer.

"Down!" Bourke shouted, bowling Keller over as he left the open sand in a headfirst dive.

"Hit the deck!" Ruffino bellowed, dropping down beside a fallen log.

Lieutenant Blair stood rooted to the spot as he tried to make sense out of what was happening. Behind him, there was an earsplitting roar and the earth heaved under his feet. Before he could turn his head in the direction of the explosion, the sound of the ship's gun had followed its first shell to the island. Blair stared in horror as two more dirty smoke clouds mushroomed out from the bow of the American ship.

"Bastards!" he shouted, dropping down to where Bourke was unscrambling himself from Aircrewman Keller. "The stupid bastards are shooting at us!"

"So, what else is new?" muttered Bourke. "I knew those Japs had something going for them. They finally got the navy on their side."

"Do something, Keller!" Blair snapped. "Make those blind swabbies see we're American!"

"Yessir," Keller answered. "You tell me how, and I'll do it."

"Heads up!" Ruffino muttered.

A shell slammed down along the shore line in front of them. A column of sandy sea water geysered up above the tree-tops, to send a cascade of wet shells and pebbles on their backs and helmets.

It was followed by another one, hitting further inland directly behind them, which sent shattered wood and palm branches fluttering down over an acre of tree-tops.

"Close," Ruffino grunted.

"They've got us bracketed!" Bourke shouted. "We've got to pull out of here, right *now*! Ruffino, you bring up the rear. Keep an eye out for wounded, but pass them by until the barrage lifts. I just want you to remember where they are, in case we have to come back for anybody later."

"I know the form, Captain."

"Right. Blair, stick with me. Rest of you men follow the Lieutenant in the same order we've been using. Column of files on your guts; let's move!"

With that, Bourke was snaking along the ground on his belly in the direction of the big rock Horton and Kolinsky were posted behind.

Even in his confusion, Blair was still enough of a soldier to follow Bourke's lead as he bellied through the underbrush, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. There'd been so much to absorb at OCS, and so little time to learn it all in. What the hell did Bourke mean, they were bracketed? Oh, yeah, he'd had that in Artillery Observing. After you lined your big guns up on the target, you fired for effect, and watched where the first shell hit. If the shell landed your side of the target, you knew you were under, and fired the next one farther. When you had shells coming down *under* the target, and *over* it on the far side, you had it bracketed. All you had to do was split the difference in your elevation and the next salvo was bound to land *on* the target.

The sudden realization of what Bourke had been getting at lent wings to his elbows as Lieutenant Blair felt a sudden urge to be *anywhere* else!

As if to confirm his desire for travel, another salvo of four rounds screamed down to heave the earth under him, set both ears to ringing, and spatter him with sticks and stones, and what he sincerely hoped was sea water. The air was thick with the acrid steel-wool taste of explosives and the juicy florist's-shop smell of shredded vegetation. A pall of smoke and coral dust made it hard to see where they were going, and Blair wriggled forward in a burst of sheer fright until he spotted the Captain's boots dragging through the forest litter in front of him.

From behind him, Blair heard another fantastic multiple roar as several shells dropped just about where they'd been a few moments ago. Blair was a lot happier about them finding the range after he'd crawled away than he would have been if he hadn't.

There was another shell burst, up ahead and not so close this time, and then the destroyer dropped one just offshore near the head of the crawling column.

"Short round, you poor blind mop-jockey!" Blair snorted in somewhat restored humor, now that it looked like he might live, after all.

A shell dropped far away. Either back in the jungle or up on the hill. Another one fell, even farther; its explosion rumbling through the trees like distant thunder.

"Keep up the good work, swabby!" Blair laughed. "At this rate you'll wind up missing the whole goddam island!"

And then Lieutenant Blair didn't feel so much like laughing.

They were passing the big rock where Horton and Kolin-

sky had been covering the beach. The rock was still there, part of it, anyway.

But Horton and Kolinsky were now a mixture of tunafish salad, raspberry jam, and shredded rags, spattered like spitballs on the blackboard against those palm trunks still standing near the shell crater behind the rock.

Swallowing the green taste in his mouth, Blair tried not to look as they crawled through the area, but his hands kept touching things in the forest litter that felt like warm wet worms, and in a moment of inattention, he allowed his eyes to focus on what he took for a fallen tropical fruit of some kind.

A second glance informed Blair, who had an unfortunately good knowledge of anatomy, that it was a human kidney.

He didn't throw up until later.

"Hold it!" Bourke called back, after they'd crawled a hundred yards past the shattered rock. "They're turning away."

He raised himself up on his arms until he was sure he saw rightly, then got slowly to his feet.

Blair rose and stared after him. For a moment, neither spoke. Then, as Keller and the others got up out of the dust and litter, Blair whispered, "They're just . . . going away! Just like that?" as if he were secretly hoping someone would argue the point.

Nobody did.

Ruffino joined them and said, "Horton and Kolinsky gone, sir. Rest all present and accounted for."

"We'd better get on up the hill," Bourke said softly. "See how they made out up there."

"Why?" Blair kept saying, as they trudged wearily back towards their camp. "Ok, so maybe they *didn't* know we were American. But that's no reason to shell us, is it?"

Nobody answered.

Nobody had an answer, and they were too heartsick and disgusted to really want to think too much about it.

They got as far as the slope leading up to the camp, and then, as Dennis Bourke stepped out of the jungle's edge, he suddenly cursed, took off his helmet, and threw it viciously on the ground.

"Suckered!" he roared. "Screwed, blewed, and tattooed, by Christ! I *knew* the bastards had something up their sleeve! But I thought it had something to do with the beach, just like they *wanted* me to think!"

Ruffino was the first to catch on. He looked the way

Bourke was staring with disgusted eyes and nodded, "Knew they didn't want a fight back there on the beach." He sighed, "All the time they was trying to keep us busy down there, while the real action was somewheres else."

Blair looked up the slope, and at first he didn't see anything. Then he realized Bourke and Ruffino were looking up at the higher hill on the landward side of their base. From the sea, both hills would line up, so that the crest of the rear hill would appear to be a sort of second peak to the one their camp was on.

Blair stood there, trying to remember he was an officer and a gentleman by act of Congress, but he was barely old enough to shave. After all, there *was* a girl back home who'd said she'd wait forever, and the folks would . . .

Nobody commented on the tear that ran down through the grime of Lieutenant Blair's cheek as he husked, "No *wonder* they shelled us and pulled away. No American ship will *ever* put in here, after that tin can radios what happened. Why . . . My God! We'll be on this stinking little scab of rock *forever!*"

Bourke turned to gaze seaward, where the US destroyer was already near the horizon. Then he nodded and added, "It'll seem a lot longer than that."

Keller, who'd been so busy with his still untested smoke pots that he'd failed to keep up with the view, nudged Ruffino and whispered, "What's up, Ruff?"

"Up there, baby," Ruffino pointed. "Up on that hill behind ours. While we was playing tag in the jungle, some *other* goddam Jap pulled a real cute trick."

Keller looked the way he was pointing. Then he gasped, "Oh, Jesus!"

Flying proudly from the palm trunk where Ando had nailed it, on the highest peak of the hill, and lined up smack behind the American camp, flew the tattered red and white banner of the Japanese Empire!

THE sun was blazing off the water on the other side of the island. Sea, sky, and sand seemed to offer slightly different shades of pure blast-furnace glare. It was hard to keep them separated, in this heat, and Corporal Craddock plodded along in the sun like a man suspended in a limbo of light. There was a thin strip of shade under the palms, where the vegetation gave way to sand. Craddock tried his best to

keep to it. Not because it was any cooler, the heat rays lashed as far back in under the trees as a man could walk without a machete, but because the pale purple shadows offered a minimum of camouflage, and Craddock was far behind the enemy lines.

He had to be getting back, he knew. His eyes were turning into a pair of hot coals in his skull, and he was lightheaded from dehydration. Between the heat and the thirst that was slowly blowing his tongue up inside his mouth, Craddock was on the knife-edge of sunstroke.

Unfortunately, he'd passed so far into the never-never land of men who overtax their bodies, that he was beginning to think he was getting his second wind.

He wasn't.

The cigarettes helped, he thought. Not that a man dared smoke on a jungle patrol inside enemy territory, but chewing a couple of them for a while had seemed to ease his thirst. Not that a couple of Chesterfields beat a dip of Copenhagen snuff for getting a man to where he could spit again, but they were better than nothing.

"This is a hell of a time to be thinkin' about Granny Wilkes and that dip of snuff she always kept tucked under her lip!" He blinked, stopping in his tracks and taking a cautious squint around. "Do-Jesus, boy!" he told himself, "you been wool gatherin' again! You want to walk right into Tojo's dinner pail like a big-ass bird? I swear, Craddock, you ain't looked to right nor left for nigh a country mile!"

He rubbed a hand across his eyes, squinted up the beach as far as he could see, and muttered, "We'uns'll scout as far as that next bend in the coast ahead, Craddock. Then, we'uns best get back to camp. An' stop talkin' to yourself thataway! Do-Jesus! You'll wind up on the county like poor ol' Thedie Hanks!"

He took a firmer grip on his rifle, lowered the brim of his helmet against that part of the glare that came from above, and trudged on.

It was hard going up here in the dry sand. A man could walk a lot faster, and farther, down by the water's edge. But somebody in the shade strip near the trees would see him a lot further off than he could see them! And the sand was a hell of an improvement over the underbrush, if a man wanted to cover ground.

Funny how old Thedie Hanks had gone off her rocker like that, Craddock thought. Folks around home never thought she was exactly bright as a pin, or anything, but they'd never

figured on her coming down to the Sunday-go-to-meeting-on-the-green with no clothes on, like that. Do-Jesus! Parson Wilkes had gotten the young'uns simmered down, and was just figuring to save a couple of souls, when he looked up and there was Sister Thedie coming in the camp grounds gate, wearing a big red ribbon-bow in her hair, and not another stitch of anything else.

"Bare-ass naked," Craddock mumbled to himself, stepping over a nondescript bundle of some sort in his path. "Didn't try to cover nothin' with her hands, even. You could see *ever'thing* just as plain as day! Right nice shape on ol' Thedie, even if she was part Cherokee, and crazy as a coot. Never admitted it to nobody, but I've purely wished I'd knowed how she felt about takin' off her clothes afore the deputy took her off to the County Home . . ."

Corporal Craddock suddenly stopped, stood in the sun shaking his head, and muttered, "What's *wrong* with you, boy?"

Then he turned around and went back to have another look at the bundle he'd stepped over. He blinked his eyes a couple of times, staring down at what lay on the edge of the sand, and said, "That's what I *thought* I saw, you dumb bastard!"

At his feet lay a folded Japanese army uniform jacket, with the cap to go with it lying on top of it. Beside the clothing, its bolt action kept off the sand by a carefully folded ammunition belt, lay a 7.7 Arisaka bolt-action rifle.

It had not been issued by the United States marines.

"Well, now," Craddock grinned, looking up and down the beach expectantly, "'lessen some Japanese country boy's got hisself so homesick he's trying to swim back to Tokyo, the feller that owns this here squirrel-iron ought to be comin' back for her!"

Craddock thought about that, while the sun did its best to fry his brains inside his helmet. There was a smart way, and a dumb way to do everything, Craddock remembered. Just now, it was sort of hard to think about it. Now, if he'd taken ol' Thedie out to Willow Lake some Saturday night . . . Over in them weepy willers that hung clean down to the water along the far side of the lake. The side where most folks never rowed . . .

"Do-Jesus!" he muttered, "I'm doin' it *ag'in!*"

There was a clump of pandanus just off the sand a bit. Craddock walked around behind it, started to unfasten his fly, and remembered that wasn't what he'd stepped in there for.

He took a moment remembering what he *had* started out to do, and sank to his haunches behind the shrubbery, his back braced against a tree trunk.

From here, he had a good view of anyone coming up or down the beach, and he knew from experience no one could slip up behind him through the brush without cutting his way. Craddock propped his rifle across his knees, pulled the brim of his helmet down until the cruel sky was blotted out, and settled down to hunt ducks.

Lots of ducks along the Strawberry in the fall, since the government built those new dams, he thought. Come fall, he'd have to take a few days off and see if he could bring home a brace of nice fat mallards. The old man would raise ned over leaving him shorthanded at harvest time, but he'd simmer down, did he get his store-teeth into roast duck stuffed with sour mash. Duck? He thought, hungrily, Do-Jesus, he wouldn't waste his time on bitty ducks. He'd take ol' Blue and mosey up by that farm the Daltons had run off and left back in the thirties. Nobody'd bothered with the played out old hoe-farm since then, and the fields had gone to ragweed and blackberry bushes. Might be ring-necks, or even an old tom turkey or two, grown fat and sassy on berries and timothy seed with nobody hunting them. You get an old tom turkey, now, one who's been hiding up there days and coming down to the hollows at night to stuff himself on Golden Bantam or even flint corn . . .

Damn! He was hungry. A feller could chew cigarettes to keep spit in his mouth. Thank God they had all them cigarettes. But to go without food at the same time made a feller weak across the middle.

There was a fat little feller coming up the beach, he saw. Had a fishing pole over his shoulder, walking along on the hard sand near the water's edge. Maybe *he'd* know where a man could get a bite to eat, or something to drink on this goddam island. Have to talk to him about walking out there in the open like that, though. Wouldn't want a nice fat little feller like that to walk into the Japs.

And then, quite suddenly, Corporal Craddock was wide awake.

Private Okuda had had good luck that morning. On the theory that the fish were getting wise to his fish-spear in the shallows, Okuda had switched back to a pole this morning, to keep them guessing. He'd tried a new spot, wading out to some offshore rocks, and an old lure, the reliable streamer of white sea gull feathers most salt water fish seemed to strike

at. He'd caught a couple of bonito, one of those nasty little scorpion fish you had to watch out for among the coral heads, and nearly two dozen of those plump blue and yellow beauties that nobody he knew could identify. (Although he knew they'd *eat* them willingly enough.)

He was nearly to the spot where he'd left his jacket and rifle, Okuda knew. Funny, he hadn't intended to stray so far when he put them there. He'd started out surf casting along the shore, with absolutely no luck, until he'd spotted the rocks and decided to wade out to them. Now, except for the scorpion fish he'd thrown back (carefully extracting the hook so as neither to injure the fish needlessly, nor wind up with a finger swollen like a Daikon radish), Okuda had more than enough for a real tempura dinner this evening, and all was right with the world.

There lay his jacket and rifle. Just as he'd left them hours before. Okuda left the cool hard sand near the water's edge and plodded up the slope of hot dry sand, his head slightly bowed with the effort.

There was a sudden rustle of leaves in front of him, and Okuda looked up, just as Corporal Craddock, USMC, stepped between him and his rifle, shoved a bayonet forward until it just touched Okuda's fleshy belly, and said, "Ok, Mr. Moto, just freeze right in your tracks and don't move a muscle, 'lessen you want six or eight inches of steel in that fat gut." He shook his head and mumbled, "Let you have a might more, 'lessen you do just what I say, savvy?"

Okuda, completely dumbfounded, could only mutter, "Gomennasái, tomodati. Wakarimasen!"

"Look, let's not pull none of that chop-suey talk on *me*, boy!" Craddock insisted. "I read how all you Buddha-heads come over before the war to go to college. Do-Jesus! I bet some of you cotton-pickin' Japs talk better English than my folks does. None of us Craddocks ever went to Princeton or Yale. Now, how 'bout it, Mr. Moto? You gonna talk right, or do I hari-kari your ass?"

"Harakiri?" Okuda asked. "Yukkúri hanasite kudasái."

"You know what I'm talkin' about!" Craddock said, raising his voice the way many Americans do in an unconscious attempt to blast through the language barrier by sheer volume control. "I'm gonna count to ten, Mr. Moto. And then, iffen you're still giving me this Charlie Chan stuff, I'm purely gonna ream your belly button!"

"Kyóo wa atatakái desue née," tried Okuda pleasantly.

You couldn't get in trouble with *anybody* if you talked about the weather, could you?

"Boy, I been real patient with you, up to now, but that's done tore it. No shit now, Mr. Moto. I'll count to ten, see?"

He nodded grimly and started, "One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . ."

Okuda's simple face broke into a wide grin.

"Hai!" he said, "wakarimásu!"

"Six . . . seven . . . eight . . ."

"Issi . . . nise . . . san . . ." counted Okuda happily.

Craddock stopped and asked. "You mocking me, boy?"

Okuda bowed as far as he was able. with a bayonet point touching his middle, and agreed, "Hai! Isse . . . nise . . . san . . . yan . . . go . . . roku . . ."

"Knock it off, you crazy Jap," Craddock growled in disgust.

He stood there, while Okuda beamed at him, and then he shook his head and said, "I reckon you really *don't* talk English, you poor ignorant bastard. Maybe Captain Bourke would want to talk to you, though. They say the Chief talks a little Nip . . ."

He stood there, undecided. Then he shrugged and motioned with his head down the beach. "Ok," he said, "let's go, buddy."

"Go?" Okuda frowned, holding up five fingers with his free hand. Seeing the look of bewilderment on Craddock's face, Okuda waved all five fingers and said, "Go . . . roku . . . si-ti . . . has . . . kyúu . . ."

"Aw, shut up," Craddock muttered. There had to be some way to make this silly bastard understand he was a PW. Otherwise, he'd just have to kill him and forget about it.

"Wouldn't be so bad iffen I could just shoot you," he sighed, "but I dasn't fire a live round this close to your buddy-boys. And, Do-Jesus, it's a hot day to bayonet anybody!"

"Yoku wakarimaseñ desita," agreed Okuda amiably.

"Yeah," muttered Craddock, looking him over wearily. His eyes stopped on what looked like a canteen hanging on Okuda's left hip.

"Hey, is that *water*?" Craddock asked, pointing with his chin.

Okuda followed his glance down past the sliver of blued steel poised at the level of his navel. Very slowly, so as not to upset this obviously crazy young man, Okuda moved his free hand down, the other being occupied with the pole and

his string of fish, and raised the canteen questioningly.

"Mizu ga hosii desu ka?" he asked.

"I don't know what that means, Mr. Moto. But iffen that's water, or just about anythin' else, I purely want some!"

Okuda unfastened the canteen and handed it over to Craddock, helping him unscrew the cap with his own free hand, while Craddock kept the rifle trained on his middle with one forearm.

It was water, Craddock discovered with delight, tasting what was in the canteen. Quite suddenly, water was much more important to Corporal Craddock than his prisoner, or any other Jap on this goddam island!

Okuda watched sympathetically as Craddock guzzled the water down like it was nectar of the gods. It was warm, he knew, and the metal of the canteen made it taste tinny and flat. But then, he wasn't as thirsty as the American.

Craddock suddenly became aware that he'd dropped his guard as he swilled the first decent drink he'd had since the day before. The point of his bayonet had strayed down and to one side. His eyes had been off the Jap for a full ten or fifteen seconds. The guy wasn't nearly as soft up close as he'd looked from a distance, and Craddock felt a wave of foolish guilt as he realized how easy it would have been for Okuda to brush the rifle aside and knock him on his ass while he was slopping water like a pig.

"Thanks," Craddock muttered, handing back the almost empty canteen. He felt a little foolish as he brought the muzzle up again to cover the guy, but, what the hell, he was a Jap!

"Let's see what else you got on you, Mr. Moto," he smiled.

"You really hit it big with that ol' cane pole of your'n, didn't you? That's a right smart string of fish, boy."

Now, how in hell did a guy say fish in Jap talk?

"Sakana ga hosii desu ka?" the other asked, holding out the string of fish to Craddock. Without waiting for an answer, Okuda detached one of the bonito and a couple of his unclassified victims.

Craddock started to reach for them and then he stopped and fumbled in his jacket with his free hand. He brought out a pack of cigarettes and held them up. "You've been right neighborly, for a Jap," he said. "Least I can do is give you a couple of cigarettes. Shoot, we got plenty of them!"

Okuda didn't understand a word Craddock was saying, but his eyes glittered with longing at the sight of the tobacco he

hadn't tasted in months. "Tabako ga hosii desu!" he grinned.

"Tabako, eh? Ok, Mr. Moto, I reckon that drink and them fish is a fair swap, huh? Tell you what. You just keep the rest of the pack, huh?" He handed the partly finished pack of cigarettes to Okuda, who gave him the three fish he'd detached and bowed politely.

"Arigatoo gozaimasu!" he grinned. Then he quite calmly brushed the bayonet aside and bent over to pick up his things.

"Just the jacket, buddy-boy," Craddock warned. "I reckon you'll need your cap and jacket where I aim to take you. But leave that cotton-pickin' rifle where it is, savvy?"

Okuda nodded politely, put on his hat, threw the jacket over the same shoulder the fishing pole and his string rested on, and then he took up his rifle and ammo belt in his massive free hand.

"Look here, buddy . . ." Craddock warned.

Okuda stood up, facing him, and said, "Siturei desu ga . . ."

"Look, buddy, I mean it, now . . ."

"Siturei-simasu," smiled Okuda. He bowed very politely to Corporal Craddock, said, "Sayonara," and turned away.

"You come back here, you dumb bastard!" Craddock called, raising his rifle. "You know damn well you're my prisoner! Dammit to hell! I'll let you *have* it, boy! I mean, I'll let you have it right in the ass!"

He stood there, fuming, as the Japanese fisherman ambled off down the beach with his burdens. "Psycho!" he muttered. "Goddam Jap must be psycho! Or else a lot smarter than my mammy's little boy!"

Well, he thought, if he was going to shoot, he'd better be getting on with it. The crazy Jap wasn't hurrying, as far as Craddock could see, but he wasn't making a better target as time went by, either.

Craddock watched for some time, until Okuda's broad back was a distant blur in the solar haze. Then he lowered the muzzle of his rifle and muttered, "Me too. I'm goin' nuts. Everybody on this friggen island's goin' nutty as Thedie Hanks!"

Then he held up the three beautiful fish Okuda had given him and laughed, "At least I got something to show for it!"

RUFFINO'D brought some coconuts in that night. Seven he'd found in a grove the crabs and their Japanese

neighbors seemed to have missed. Two of them turned out to be rotten, but there was enough coconut water in the other five to afford a few sips to each man on the hill before he turned in.

By the next morning, they were really hurting.

"Captain Bourke," Lieutenant Blair croaked, watching the white-hot sun balefully peeking over the horizon, "it's going to be another really hot day. Maybe hotter than yesterday, the way that goddam sun's starting out already. What are we going to do about getting something to *drink*?"

"That's a good question," Bourke muttered. He didn't sound like he had any answer. They were sitting on the landward side of the hill, near the crest, catching the last fitful puffs of the night-blowing land breeze. It would be dead still in a little while, and the top of the hill would be as hot and dry as a lime kiln by the time they got the sea breeze in the afternoon.

"Ever notice how long it takes out here to get enough thermal imbalance for a breeze?" Bourke muttered. "Time the sea breeze really starts blowing hard enough to dry your sweat, the goddam sun goes down and you sit half the night slapping at bugs in a goddam steam room. Then, just as there's finally enough wind blowing out to sea from the hills to cool things off a couple of degrees, the friggen sun pops up and opens the oven door again."

"That's not answering my question, Captain," Blair insisted. "The men and I feel we're entitled to some answers."

Bourke looked up. Aside from him and Blair, sitting on the edge of Maloney's foxhole (by unspoken consent, the semi-official headquarters, for no reason anyone could have given), there were no men within earshot but Craddock, Ruffino, and Maloney.

Sergeant Bleeker sat sullenly alone in his hole, a few yards away, but seemed to be paying no attention to anything they were saying. Bourke smiled crookedly at Blair through cracked lips as he asked, "The men, mister? What men?"

"Oh, they've elected to let me speak for them," Blair shrugged. "And I'm sure I speak for *all* of them when I say that we are not satisfied with the way you're handling this water situation."

"I'm satisfied with it, Lieutenant," Ruffino muttered.

"Well, that's more than I can say," disagreed Bourke. "I'm not satisfied worth a damn, trying to live on a thimbleful of coconut water a day. Anybody got any ideas?"

"I thought you were in command," croaked Blair.

"That's right. I am."

"All right why don't you *do* something, for chrissake? We've got to find water, and fast."

"No argument about that," Bourke frowned. "Trouble is, the other side seems to *have* all the food and water on this rock."

"Then, why don't you attack?" cried Blair. "Anything's better than just sitting here, dying of hunger and thirst."

"It's thirst and hunger, son." Maloney croaked, looking up from the bottom of the foxhole where he'd tried to find some small sliver of shade. "Thirst gets you way the hell before hunger does. If I had my way, survival kits wouldn't have all them pressed fruit bars and dog biscuits. I'd have just water. A guy'll drink all the water he can carry with him, long before he's in any danger of malnutrition. You know all them stories you read about guys in life boats eatin' each other and all? It's not hunger does that to 'em. A guy with water in him can starve to death with nothin' but a few cramps the first week to bother him. But leave a guy out there tasting salt for a few days and he's liable to do *anything*! Eat his best buddy, jump overboard, or just sit there singing nursery rhymes while he pulls his hairs out one by one."

"I'm not about to disagree with you, Maloney," Blair said. "I know what thirst can do to a man in this sun. My mouth's lined with sand paper and my head feels like somebody's been rubbing two Boy Scouts together inside it. A bit more of what we went through yesterday, and I'll start seeing little green men for sure. What I'd like to do is hit those lousy Japs *before* that happens!"

Nobody answered. Blair looked at Craddock, who'd been keeping sort of quiet after coming in with those fish he'd "caught" last night, and said, "You've been over there more than anyone, Corporal Craddock. Haven't you found *any* approach we could surprise them with?"

"Beggin' your pardon, suh," Craddock shrugged, "we'd be dog meat iffen we hit that camp with the men we'uns has."

"What's wrong with these men, dammit? They're marines!"

"Yes, suh, only there ain't as many of them as there used to was. Do-Jesus, suh, the way they got themselves dug in, they could hold us off did they only have a dozen men!"

"That *your* opinion, Ruffino?" Blair asked.

"I'd say it was a Mexican stand-off, Lieutenant." Ruff shrugged. "They're too smart to try and take us by storm up here. And we're just not strong enough to banzai *them*."

Them and us is sort of in the same boat, if you want to call this rock a boat."

"Except for one thing," Maloney cut in. "They're sitting on food and water, and we're not. Couple of those kids that got cut up a bit in the shelling yesterday are starting to worry me."

"We didn't have any serious casualties, Chief," Blair began.

"That's the hell of it," Maloney swore. "Except for the two who've died on us, we haven't had an injury I couldn't take care of with Mercurochrome and a slug of booze. These kids are young and in good condition, and ought to be able to take a little chink of shrapnel in their stride. But you let the blood serum level drop and a three stitch laceration gets to be a goddam major operation."

He lowered his voice and added, "Roth was delirious last night. Had to use some of my last sedation to keep him from climbing a wall. And there's not a damn thing wrong with him that a little high protein and plenty of water wouldn't cure. The boy's shoulder muscles have sucked him dry, see? Like he was going into shock. Only he wasn't hurt bad enough to go into shock. Not if he could have plenty of liquids while that shoulder heals up!"

"Liquids?" a husky voice shouted. Bourke looked over to see Sergeant Bleeker climbing up out of his hole with his rifle. He stared blankly at them for a moment, and then he frowned and shouted, "Liquids! All this friggen talk about liquids, and none of you goddam Napoleons does nothin' about *gettin'* any!"

"That'll be enough, Sergeant Bleeker," Blair warned.

"Enough my ass!" Bleeker exploded, and Bourke could see tears running down his cheeks. He looked quizzically at Maloney who shook his head and muttered, "Could be. Big lug like him needs lots of liquid in his system."

"I heard that, you friggen back-door abortionist!" Bleeker shouted. "You say I gotta have liquids, huh? Big deal! Big friggen deal! You hadda go to a friggen *college* to know a guy's gonna *die* if he don't take a drink once in a while?" He swayed on his feet and Bourke thought for a second he was going to keel over.

Instead, Bleeker pointed an unsteady finger at them and shouted, "Has-beens! That's all you are! Bunch of goddam has-beens! All except you, Lieutenant. You ain't no has-been, you're a friggen *never-was*!" He slapped himself on the chest and cried, "Well, *I* ain't no goddam has-been! I'm Butcher

Bleeker, see? The goddam admirals and generals and their friggen ladies all cheered when I decked the champ of the Pacific Fleet that time in San Diego! Won in four rounds and the mother never laid a glove on me! Been Regimental Champ every place I been, and you friggen has-beens say I need liquids. Goddam A, I need liquids! And not one of you goddam sonsabitches better try an' stop me, see? I ain't had no drink all night, and the Captain said it was jungle law out here!"

"What are you trying to prove, Bleeker?" Bourke asked mildly.

"Jungle law, that's what I'm tryin' to prove! This is a friggen jungle! Only we got no ships, and no radio, and no food, and no goddam *liquids!*"

He suddenly stopped and looked over his shoulder furtively. Then he tittered in a high girlish laugh that was startling as hell from a man that size as he confided, "You creeps think you're so friggen smart, eh? College educations and big deal commissions instead of *brains!* That's all you goddam has-beens has!"

"You're talking to at least two charges of insubordination, Bleeker!" Blair snapped, starting to rise.

Bourke held him by the elbow and said, "Uh-uh, that's an *order.*"

"Order?" Bleeker blinked owlishly. "You give that Little Lord Fauntleroy all the orders you want, flyboy. You don't order me, though, see? 'Cause this is *Jungle Law.* An' me? I'm *King* of the *Jungle!* I'm rough an' I'm tough, I'm a whale of destruction, and I'm gonna get some *liquid!*"

He pointed the rifle suddenly as Bourke slowly rose to his feet, and hissed in a cunning tone, "It's *mine,* flyboy! Every friggen drop of it, see? You guys was too goddam busy talkin' about how smart all them colleges made you, and you never seen it! Ain't that a bitch? Whole goddam ocean of water out there and you dumb bastards sit here sayin' how goddam smart you are. Well, it's too late, now! I seen it first and I'm *King* of the *Jungle!*"

Other men were drifting over now, attracted by the commotion.

Bleeker moved the muzzle of his rifle in a horizontal arc, threatening everyone within earshot, as he snapped, "That goes for you other mothers, too. It's *mine,* see? Every goddam drop! One of you mothers tries to take any without I say so and I'll *kill* you!"

From where he was standing, Bourke could see Ruffino

edging around to the blind side of Bleeker. The hard-eyed Corporal's eyes caught Bourke's as he slowly raised his rifle, and Bourke shook his head in a barely noticeable negative. Ruff shrugged and lowered the muzzle.

"Give me the rifle, Bleeker," Bourke said, taking a step in the noncom's direction.

"I'll give it to you, flyboy. All eight rounds! You want 'em stitched up your gut like buttons, or across?"

"Let him go, Dennis," Maloney said. "If the Japs don't kill him, the salt water will."

"You're full of crap!" Bleeker snapped, sneering down at the Chief as Bourke took another step. Then he swung the rifle back and leered, "Uh-uh, flyboy! This is the *Jungle*, and I'm *King!*"

"Long live the king," Maloney snorted, working with Dennis on the psycho, "only you'll be deader than George the Third if you start lapping up any of your royal ocean water."

"You're jus' sayin' that!" Bleeker frowned, taking his eyes away from Bourke again to insist. "I heard all that crap about not drinkin' sea water. Been hearin' it for years, an' even believed it. But I got it all figured out now, see? Came to me this morning, lookin' out at all that water while my tongue's turnin' to spun glass an' you friggen geniuses are sayin' we can't have no *liquids*." He glanced significantly around at the men who were standing very quietly, moving nothing but their eyes, in quick worried glances.

"It's the officers," Bleeker confided loudly. "Everybody knows the friggen officers got everything good sewed up for themselves. Best quarters, best chow, best *everything*. Back in San Diego I was goin' out with a Mexican broad, and me regimental champ! You see what kind of quiff hangs around the Officers' Club? You couldn't lay stuff like that for less'n a hundred bucks a night! French perfume and real silk stock-in's, even in wartime. None of that leg make-up all the other dames has to wear back in the States to look like they got stockings on. Goddam *officers* can get silk stockings, or unrationed gas, or Canadian Club in their bar while *we* drink three point two beer."

"We officers have to pay for our own food and uniforms, Bleeker," the Lieutenant said. "Anything extra you see an officer with, he paid for it out of his own salary. You guys may not have as fancy a service club, but you don't have to pay dues to belong, either."

"Big deal!" sneered Bleeker. "I know you goddam brass hats, now, junior! You ain't foolin' me no more with that

bull-shit about lookin' out for us poor enlisted swine. I'll admit you had me fooled. Sure, I used to believe things about nurses needing commissions to be able to give patients a direct order, if they hadda, and how you wasn't supposed to drink sea water, no matter how thirsty you was. Sure, I believed it. But...now I *know*, junior! I *know* you guys commission the nurses so none of us guys can get near one of them. Enlisted gyrene gets caught banging a goddam nurse and he gets that 'Death or such other punishment as a court-martial may direct!' Yeah, I know all about it! I *know* why they hung them four swabbies at Henderson for boffin' that army nurse. They said it was rape, but that's a crock and you goddam officers know it! They hung them 'cause you goddam officers keep all the good stuff to *yourselves*; that's why! Guys out here three years without a dame and they fly college girls soaked in perfumed silk out here to sleep with the brass. Nurse and Red Cross girls you call 'em? Who we kiddin'? I'm on to you friggen officers, now. I'm King of the Jungle an' I know how you put all the *good* stuff aside... Like down there! You guys thought you'd put it over on us, but I wasn't fooled by all your talk about your poor little enlisted slobs needed liquids, and not one of you mothers even *looking* at it. Oh, I know how sneaky you guys are..."

"Looking at what, Bleeker?" Blair insisted. Good boy, thought Bourke, he's picking it up from the Chief and I'm almost close enough...

"Looking at your goddam emergency water supply, damn you!" Bleeker screamed. His eyes were glazed and a dry-looking slobber of salty foam was running down his chin. "You think I didn't know the goddam officers was keeping the ocean all for themselves to drink? Pretty goddam sneaky, if you ask me! All that goddam water out there an' we're not supposed to have one lousy sip, because you goddam officers wanna *hog* it all!"

Dennis Bourke touched him gently on the shoulder, and then, as Bleeker whirled in the boxer's reflex Bourke was expecting, the Captain's big fist met Bleeker's jaw. Right on the button.

Bleeker stiffened, shook his head once from side to side, and then went over backwards as Bourke deftly snatched the rifle out of his numb hands. Maloney caught him from behind and lowered him into the comparative coolness of his foxhole.

"The moronic bastard!" Blair sneered, shaking his head. "After the way he's been sucking around me . . . Did you *hear* the things he said about officers, Captain?"

"Might have done him some good to get a little of it out of his craw," Bourke shrugged. "Can you do anything for him, Chief?"

"He's dehydrated and overheated," Maloney shrugged, rummaging around the rat's nest of bottles and medical supplies he'd piled along one side of the dugout. Maloney poured some bourbon on a rag and wiped Bleeker's flushed and throbbing forehead. "Skin's dry as a bone," he muttered, pushing Bleeker's helmet aside and opening the husky sergeant's blouse all the way down the front. "I can cool him off a few degrees by rubbing him down with booze, Denny," Maloney said, "and I got a little water I been saving for a celebration in that gin bottle. I can bring him out of *this* one, old buddy. But he's just the *first*. Roth's about due to start thinking the sea water story's enemy propaganda, too. And I've been keeping an eye on Searcy. Don't like the looks of Searcy at *all!*"

Bourke watched Maloney dribble a little tepid water between Bleeker's lips as he held the big pug's head in his lap. He saw there wasn't much left of the Chief's remaining reservoir. His own canteen had been empty for some time.

"Searcy's that fellow who won all that money back at Henderson, isn't he?" Blair asked.

Maloney nodded, "Playing blackjack with Slicker Searcy will run a gyrene broke quicker than shooting craps on an army blanket. Used to deal for a house in Vegas, they say. There's even a story going around back on Guadal about Searcy not bein' the kid's real name." Maloney grinned and whispered, "Only one guy in the country deals like the Slicker, see? The brass will deny it, 'cause a full colonel at Camp Pendleton's taking a couple of grand a week in kick-backs to look the other way, but the real poop about Searcy is this . . . He changed his name and lied about his age to get in on the real money out here in the islands. Searcy's really Nick the Greek in disguise! Only, keep it under your hats, all of you. Nick's a friend of mine."

"He's coming to," Blair observed.

"Yeah," Bourke muttered. "Get to the point about Slicker Searcy, Chief."

"No point to get to, except the Slicker's about to go ga-ga," Maloney shrugged. "You remember how he was always

dealing and shuffling that deck of cards he packs around, Lieutenant? Keeps his hands supple doing card tricks and dealing tricky hands for the guys. Or, at least, he *was*."

"Don't tell me he lost those damned cards at last," Blair smiled. "At least he won't cheat any more of the men out of their pay on *Bougainville*."

"Searcy's no mechanic!" Maloney said in what was for him rather sober annoyance. "Just 'cause a guy's a pro don't say he's a crook, Lieutenant. Matter of fact, the guy who riffles the cards like a riverboat man is hardly ever slipping them from the bottom. Guys like Searcy and The Greek win by knowing the cards. They don't have to cheat. It's that little guy in the hornrimmed glasses and seersucker suit you gotta worry about. Couple of mechanics working the club cars or salesmen's conventions together never look like pros. Worse thief I ever knew dealt and shuffled like a housewife at a PTA bridge party. Parted his hair in the middle and didn't get half the cracks the Johns made. Poor slobs never knew what hit them . . ."

"What . . . What happened?" Bleeker mumbled. His lips were flecked with foam and he looked like hell, but Bourke could see a few little beads of sweat standing out on his forehead, now.

"Just lay still and let mommy make it well," Maloney said, dabbing more alcohol on his bared chest. "This Searcy, now," he continued. "He's been sitting in his hole since last night, dealing solitaire and not winning, which is *not* the way a guy with hands like his *has* to deal, see? Then, this morning, I pass by on my way to the head and Searcy's sitting there dealing his own fortune. You know how you read that Gypsy jazz? Never mind, take my word for it that dealing yourself the ace of spades ain't good. I stop a minute to watch. Always like to watch a guy who knows how to use his hands. Anyhow, Searcy's not lookin' at me, see? Don't think he'd have looked up if I'd sung the 'Star-Spangled Banner.' Anyway, Slicker just sits there, sort of muttering to himself. And he deals them cards six different times. And six times that ace of spades tells him he's in big trouble. Kind of made me want a drink, which I took as soon as I got back to my own hole, you'll be glad to hear. But I can't get it out of my head. The way Searcy kept dealin' them cards like he was trying to tell himself something, maybe. And the way he laughed. Dry. Dry as hell, like you'd expect one of them Egyptian mummies to laugh. if you told it a real dirty joke some night when the museum was closed. Real Karloff laugh,

you know? That boy's throat must be as dry as King Tut's toenails about now for him to sound like that. There's a hell of a difference in how different people metabolize water, you know. Searcy's one who ain't got much camel blood in him. Another day in this hot sun with no canteen and . . . Well, stop and think a minute, Denny. Every *one* of these guys has a *loaded gun* handy!"

Bourke didn't answer. He seemed to be thinking to himself as he idly watched Sergeant Bleeker's eyes trying to focus. The big noncom suddenly realized where he was and muttered, "What's that you're doin', Chief? You got me smellin' like a wino."

"That's me you smell," Maloney grinned, "I've *been* a wino since I was eight. You was stationed at Dago before the war, Sarge? I been wanting to ask you about something that's been buggin' hell out of me, about Dago, I mean." He wiped Bleeker's chest dry and said, "You better leave that open for a while, Sarge. Lissen, while you was at Dago, did you ever run into Benny the Morph?"

Bleeker blinked and then his scarred lips broke into a normal healthy grin. The first really healthy grin Bourke had ever seen on his battered face. He knew what Maloney was doing, and wondered, for a moment, if that was what the Chief was trying on *him*. And then he quickly shoved the thought under the rug, before he caught too good a look at it.

"You heard about Benny the Morph, Chief?" Bleeker laughed. "Where the hell you find out about *him*?"

"I got spies, and I collect ghosts, Bleeker. Some day I'll tell you about the Salt Flat Redhead, and the Second Lieutenant of Highway 101. But first you gotta tell me if you ever met Benny the Morph."

"Not personally," Bleeker muttered, sitting up. "But I heard a lot about the Morph while I was in Dago. Jesus, my jaw hurts."

He suddenly remembered how he'd gotten in Maloney's lap and where he was. Bleeker's eyes widened and he looked up to see the Captain, Lieutenant Blair, and Craddock looking down at him, while Ruffino studied a spot of very interesting nothing off to the side.

"Jesus, Captain!" Bleeker managed. He licked his lips and tried again. "I don't know what to say, sir. I just don't know what got into me for a minute there . . ."

"I'll tell you what got into you, Sergeant Bleeker!" the younger officer snapped. "A court of inquiry the moment we get back to our lines! We'd better leave it to the headshrink-

ers to decide whether you deserve a medical discharge or a good stiff dose of the brig!"

He turned to Bourke and added, "I consider it my duty to apologize for this man, Captain. Quite frankly, if I hadn't encouraged an attitude of disrespect . . ."

"Quite frankly, you're probably right, Lieutenant," Bourke cut in. "But let's drop it for now, huh? It's too damn hot for playing true confessions."

"Thank you, sir. I . . . I've been sort of *wanting* to drop it! I mean," he flushed and looked at Craddock, who seemed to be very busy running a patch through the bore of his rifle just then. Ruffino, with that odd contrariness of his, was gazing steadily at the young officer, a faint look of approval on his hard battle-scarred face. Blair raised his chin a fraction of an inch, drew his shoulders back a trifle, and said, "I mean I've been bucking you like a jealous kid, sir. Maybe because I *am* a jealous kid. Anyway, I'm ready to back you, sir. To the best of my ability."

"For chrissake!" Chief Maloney sneered, getting both Bourke and the young Lieutenant out of a mutually embarrassing position with a crack, "Are you guys gonna get all musty, or are we gonna figure out what the hell we do next?"

"You're right, Chief," Blair grinned. He looked thoughtfully down at Bleeker and said, "I'm waiting on your command, sir. Do you want Sergeant Bleeker placed under arrest?"

Dennis Bourke looked thoughtfully down at the man in the hole with Maloney. Bleeker looked like a man who'd been through a lot in the past few days. Matter of fact, he *had*. Some of the phoney arrogance of the bully seemed to have been burned out. A good bit of the brown-nose, too. One thing was for sure, as long as he served with the men who'd just heard him bare the pitiful little spites of his threadbare soul, he'd have to drop a good part of the act.

"Old Chinese fellow I knew back in Manila told me something one time, about apes. Told me the reason nobody bothers to make pets out of them big gibbons on Zamboanga is 'cause you can't housebreak them. Can't housebreak any member of the monkey family. You can teach them to use a fork, and turn the lights off and on, and just about anything you'd expect a bright kid to do. Only they just won't learn to go outside."

Bleeker was frowning in concentration, trying to figure out what the hell this had to do with *him*, for chrissake, when Bourke suddenly grinned and said, "But, you know, Sergeant

Bleeker? One thing I've always thought might be useful as hell to have around in a fight would be a domesticated gorilla. If only you could teach it not to spread so much crap around. . ."

Bleeker's face broke open in a relieved grin as he said, "I think I read you, sir. I'll try and remember to go outside."

"Well, now that we know you ain't gonna die of sunstroke or false modesty, Bleeker," Maloney cut in, "would you kindly get the hell off my lap? I got better things to do than sit here holding your head all day, even if you are an old friend of Benny the Morph."

"Hey, wait a minute," Bleeker objected, getting up to crawl over the side of the Chief's foxhole, "I never said I went out with Benny the Morph. I just said I heard about him while I was in Dago."

"They say he was fruit for gyrenes, Sarge. Never heard of a *sailor* being seen with Benny."

"Oh yeah? Lissen, you goddam swabbies will go out with anything!"

"Knock it off," Bourke said. He waited until Bleeker had hunkered down in abashed silence. Then he said, "Craddock, didn't you say something about a waterhole over on the other side of that next hill?"

"Farther than that, suh!" Craddock answered. "I reckon I've purely scouted ever' inch of this rock Ruffino ain't, and the only place I know where you can draw enough water to bother with is this here jungle pool near the Jap camp. It's sort of in a low holler where the drainage fer a right smart part of the island settles. Don't know that the water's good, though. Might be salt."

"Didn't you taste it?" asked Blair.

"Didn't dare try!" Craddock shrugged. "It's only a few hundred yards from their camp, and they got it posted. Plenty of cover around the place, and you know how they like to fade into the scenery and all, but I spotted at least two Nips when one of them come to relieve the other. And I'd bet my ass there's a machine-gun nest back a ways from the water."

"Bet? Didn't you see it?" Blair frowned.

"No, suh. Don't have to *see* a machine-gun nest to know it's there. Do-Jesus! It's a *lot* safer *my* way! They got this path out from their camp, all made outta sea shells like them folks go in fer. Growth's thick in places along the edges of the pool. But there's this one flat spot where they've worked the shells into a sort of steamboat landing right by the water.

Looks to be the best spot around the pool to squat down close to the water and fill a jug, and I'd just about got the idea to mosey in there some night with a couple of canteens, when it hit me."

He shook his head and sadly sighed, "Them Japs over there is so downright thoughtful, it makes a feller purely want to puke. I mean, here's this nice white path to follow in the moonlight, and leading to exactly *one* good spot to hunker down. Well, sub, I got to thinking about that. I got to thinking how much noise a feller makes walkin' on crushed shells and how nice he's outlined at night against all them chalky li'l shells. Then I says, Do-Jesus, Craddock. Where would you be a settin' iffen you was a bitty Nambu instead of God's gift to the marines? You know what a Nambu looks like, don't you, sub?"

"That's the heavy looking job on the bipod mount?" Blair nodded. "Stock like an oversized rifle, and these thick cooling fins part way down the barrel? Looks a lot like those Buck Rogers Zap guns you sent away for?"

"That's ol' Nambu," Craddock agreed. "Best way to tell her is by that funny handle mounted on top of the action, like a telescope sight. Only it's shaped like the hand grip on a motorcycle, and they use it to carry her around like a suitcase."

"That's what you saw by the pool?"

"No, sub. That's what I was lookin' for. I found me a place where I could watch from a ways off, and I start drawin' lines in my haid from where some pore country boy would be squattin' like a big-ass bird, to where the cover looked right for settin' up a Nambu you din't exactly want folks to trip over. Time I thought about it a spell, this one clump of rocks and sticker bushes looked right logical. Later, I moseyed in a little closer, to see could I maybe work in where that gun might be from the rear. In case some Jap feller was workin' on his gun, I didn't want to disturb him too much. Anyways, soon as I found where they'd planted timber bamboo tangles to trip a body up, comin' in the back door without an invite, I *knowed* the machine gun was where I figured."

"Ruffino?" Bourke asked softly.

"Figures," the other scout nodded. "I know the place he's talking about. Our patrols overlap in there when we scout the Jap camp from both sides the way you told us to, Captain. I didn't spend as much time looking it over. Spotted the path. Knew it was Jap, and stayed the hell off of it."

He nodded professionally at Craddock and said, "Didn't look it over the way you did, ridge runner. But I know them well enough to make an educated guess on Nambu by now. Other side of the pool, back in the trees a bit, so's the smoke from the barrel won't drift out into the sunlight when they open up. Right?"

"That's the place, Ruff," Craddock grinned. He turned to the Captain and asked, "We gonna try and take that bitty Nambu away from Tojo, suh?"

"Rather take away some of that water," Bourke frowned. "You sure you can find the place in the dark, Craddock?"

"Shoot, yeah, suh! Be no trouble to blip the guards, neither, do I have a few boys with me. I staked them out for a little date with my daddy's barlow knife in the dark, but, when I told you about it, before, you said it was too big a boo."

Bourke didn't answer right away. His mouth tasted like the bottom of a bird cage and his shirt was bone dry under the armpits in spite of the heat. He squinted up at the sun. It still had a hell of a ways to rise before noon. By the time it got dark enough to infiltrate an enemy guard detail on its own ground, Bourke knew they'd all feel a lot hotter, and thirstier, than they did right now. He tried to swallow what felt like a mouthful of iodine-soaked cotton, found he couldn't swallow any more, and licked his cracked lips with a tongue as dry as flannel. Then he softly asked, "Feel up to a little walk, Maloney? We could use a guy tonight who talks their lingo. . . ."

"You think I'm *that* drunk?" the Chief snorted.

Bourke shrugged.

"You keep forgettin' I'm not one of your seagoin' bellhops, old buddy. Besides, you want to shoot the breeze with some Jap, just bring him *here!* I ain't *about* to go *there!* Old Sumiko was a hell of a swell gal, Denny. But I've heard things about some of her cousins that sort of makes me want to meet them on my own terms, you know?"

"Ok," Bourke nodded. "You were out pretty late last night, Ruffino. You don't have to push your luck more than you want to."

"May as well see what happens," Ruffino shrugged, "not too much of a USO show in camp tonight anyway, I hear."

"Ok, Craddock, I'll need you to show us the way and pinpoint their guards in the dark." He thought a moment. That Searcy fellow, if Roth couldn't make it. From what the Chief said, he was a knock-around guy. He'd knocked around enough himself to know how fast that kind of life teaches a

man to take care of himself. He sensed a maturity of judgment in Gunner Johnson, even though the Negro hadn't been trained for exactly what Bourke had in mind. A few of the others, he felt he could count on. The rest? Faceless kids.

Sure, some of them were probably tough as nails, if only you knew which ones. But men are so damned variable in combat. Battles have been won and lost on the sheer character of a single man. Like Charles Henry Lee, who froze on Washington's flank at a time the British should have been finished, and prolonged a war for years. Or Phil Sheridan, riding down the Shenandoah to his unit to find an entire Union army fleeing in blind panic after being whipped like dogs, and getting *one squad* to follow him back to face the enemy, snowballing his squad as he went, until the victorious Rebel army found itself steamrollered and the South finished a couple of hours later.

You could train them. Talk to them. Serve with them in garrison for years, and you never knew, until it was too damned late to have to be thinking about it, whether you had Phil Sheridan or Charles Henry Lee guarding your rear!

Sergeant Bleeker was looking a lot better. He was the ranking noncom, next to the Chief. He'd been through boot back in the days when the corps had taken a lot more time with knife and bayonet training than they could now. A guy who can deck the Fleet Champ had to know something about fighting . . . Still . . .

He was aware of the looks Bleeker was sending his way and knew what the poor bastard was going through. Even the kids who hadn't left the perimeter since they'd landed knew Craddock and Ruffino were the Captain's right and left hands. For all his bluster, the Sergeant hadn't convinced a human being within a hundred miles he was worth the stripes he'd worn so long.

He was still a bully, Bourke knew. Beating a bully doesn't reform him. It just teaches him to leave *you* alone. He was illiterate, with the terrible reverse snobbery of the illiterate, and the IQ mark on his service record was probably a white lie to give some long gone CO a crack at the regimental title bout.

"How're you feeling now, Sergeant?" Bourke asked. The poor slob, he thought. Bleeker pleaded with his eyes like a puppy as he said, "A lot better, sir!" in the friendliest tone he'd ever used.

He's starting to brown-nose again, thought Bourke. On the other hand, he knows where to put it, this time. And you

know what you're getting. It's not much, but you're not liable to find any snakes when you open the box. Pick out a likely-looking kid from one of these other holes on such short notice and *anything* could pop out. A hero, or a coward, or something as nutty as that flight student he'd taken off with back in '38. The one who'd waited until they were at 20,000 feet to throw his arms around Bourke and whisper, "I'm *nuts* about you, baby!"

"We'll be moving out a little after dark, Sergeant," Bourke finally nodded. "With what I've got planned for Ruffino and Craddock I sure as hell need another noncom I can count on."

"You can count on *me*, sir!" snapped Good Soldier Bleeker, coming to attention in a sitting position in a way he'd dropped long ago in a friggen corps full of jerk officers he felt no respect for. His eyes were as close to adoration as one man's eyes ought to hold for another, assuming they like girls. Maloney, watching with a cynical smile from his fox-hole, was taking in the little melodrama and for once keeping his mouth shut.

"Ok, get your gear together and have it ready for later," Bourke said, getting to his feet. "I'll be over with Keller, if you need me for anything before then."

He turned and started over the crest. Bleeker waited until he was almost out of earshot before he remembered something and shouted, "Captain?"

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"Uh, sir, I was wonderin' . . . I mean, about what *I'd* be doing."

Bourke saw that others were looking up out of their holes. The answer he gave would be important to Bleeker. Important as hell. He mentally pictured the spot he had for the big thug. Right at his side where he could watch him like a hawk the first time. What do you call a soldier you keep in your hip pocket like that? A runner? Gun-boy? Stooge? That's what Bleeker wanted to know.

"Figured it was obvious, Sergeant Bleeker," Bourke called back a little sternly. "As ranking NCO, you'll naturally serve as *squad leader!*"

Look at that jerk! thought Jim Maloney under his breath; that goddam chest expands another inch and Dennis Bourke will be mowed down from here by flying buttons!

He caught a knowing look from Ruffino, and nothing had to be said. Craddock, the only one who seemed to need something to break up the awkward silence, looked up from

his rifle bore and asked, "What's that stuff you an' ol' Sarge was jawin' about before, Chief? That Bennymore feller. Seems I heard about this purely crazy story whilst I was in Boot."

"Benny the Morph," intoned Maloney dramatically, "is a feature of World War Two that will never appear in any history books of the future." He nodded, back in his element, and fished around for a freshly opened bottle. The effort of forcing the stuff down his thirst-constricted throat was getting him down, and the Chief was in danger of finding himself nakedly sober before the world. He swallowed as stiff a jolt as he could, forced down the resultant gag with long practiced peristaltic control, and orated. "People will tell their grandchildren of Douglas MacArthur, and Bull Halsey, and yes, my children, they may even tell them of me and youse! But what, I ask you fellow Americans, will become of the legend of Benny the Morph? Who will read in their history books of the Salt Flat Red head, or the Titillating Second Looie of 101? These things are part of this war, Craddock. Part of our American Heritage. And they'll all be lost unless somebody records the facts here and now. Twenty years from now, when we're all getting fat and lying about the big war, will be too late."

"Yeah," Craddock mumbled, "jus' forget I asked, Do-Jesus!"

"A hundred guys must have seen the redhead," Maloney insisted. "Hell, she must have made love to more than that. I've heard the story a dozen times, always the same. This Greyhound stops near some camp, see. Army, navy, marines, it don't matter. It's always a Greyhound and she's always a redhead. A redhead in a mink coat. Never silver fox or a lynx jacket. *Mink*. The only guy I talked to who says he saw her said it was out at this army base on the Utah salt flats. This redhead gets around. Benning, with the paratroops, Pendleton, with our boots. Same Greyhound, same red hair, same mink jacket."

"I heard about her," Bleeker said. "Ain't she the dame who hangs around outside the fence until a whole mess of guys has gathered around? She moseys along the fence until there's maybe her an twenty or thirty guys, and her, all alone near the woods or the prairie or the parkin' lot?"

"That's her," sighed Maloney. "Only thing I can't figure, is how she gets that goddam bus to carry her all around the country like that. And where she stays in—the cold months."

"Yeah," leered Bleeker, "she's the one who ain't got noth-

in' on under the mink coat. Waits until she's all alone with a bunch of servicemen and opens up like a butterfly. Wow!"

"In twenty years, she'll be respectably married and waiting up for her daughter, and nobody... nobody in the whole friggen world will know who she was! We'll know the name of the first man across the Rhine, or who got the white horse Hirohito's always riding in them parades, but who the hell was that redhead in the mink coat, and what was her motive? Espionage? Revenge? Nymphomania? She never asked a dime. What was her motive?"

"Patriotism?" suggested Ruffino dryly.

"We'll never really know, unless someone puts her in the history books," Maloney shrugged.

"One guy ought to be in the history books, by God!" Sergeant Bleeker suddenly frowned. "That Captain Bourke, that's who! You know, I thought he was sort of stupid when we got here, but the more I know him... *This* sounds stupid, maybe. But he's the kinda officer kids join the corps to serve under, you know?"

"I know," Ruffino nodded.

"Like back when I was maybe nineteen and couldn't get no job, see? There's this picture about the corps in some friggen Chinese country, and now I know it was a lot of crap. But I sat there all afternoon watchin' these guys run around in dress blues, while dames like Thelma Todd an' Fay Wray go nuts over 'em. I went right out after the picture and joined up. Ain't that a bitch?"

"You wouldn't be the first guy who signed up for a hitch after watching Victor McLaglen in dress blues shoot an old Browning from the hip," Ruffino mused, in the tone of someone who might know.

"Yeah. Guess I was all fulla Gung-ho in them days. I was ready to follow somebody like Captain Bourke ashore on Tripoli, or any other goddam place. Only they put me to work mowin' a short-colonel's lawn. You know how it is?"

"I know how it is," Ruffino nodded.

"You get so's the ass-licking don't bother you," Bleeker sighed. "An' after a while, you're walkin' their dogs and mindin' their kids, an' even boffin' their wives if that's what they want. You go along with the system, and you suck around, and a lot of beer goes under the hatch, and then one day you're a noncom and you may as well stay in, 'cause the whole lousy mess is chicken, but what the hell else is a guy gonna do in his thirties that's any better? So pretty soon you're pushin' forty, an' there's a war on, and you look

at yourself in the mirror, an' guess what? There's Victor McLaglen, the tough marine sergeant, looking out at you. And you wonder what the hell's happened, 'cause you still don't feel like no marine. You don't feel like it was gonna feel when you joined up. You're still just that same kid, lookin' for an honest-to-God leatherneck with a couple of bars on his shoulders who'll show you how you get to them Halls of Montezuma."

Nobody said anything for a time. Then Corporal Ruffino looked thoughtfully in the direction Bourke had gone, and said, "Don't worry about it, Sarge. We just may have found him."

THIS is a very serious charge, Okuda-san," Lieutenant Kuroki was saying. It was hard to be stern with the simple fisherman. He had a most ingratiating way of smiling at you in complete agreement, and then going right ahead and doing whatever he was going to do in the first place.

The package of American cigarettes Sergeant Tamura had found in his possession lay on the writing table between them, in the cramped confines of Kuroki's hut. The Lieutenant frowned down at the lettering for a time. He knew the phonetic values of the roman system well enough, although Japan had not agreed on just how their own sounds would be written in the new letters until just before the war, with the result that there were at least four "Official" ways to spell any Japanese word in western script.

"C...H...E...S...T..." he mused, intoning, "Ke, he, ee, sa, ta." It didn't sound right. He'd picked up a little spoken English working on the paper, and he was sure there was no brand of American cigarette called Kahaesaeerafaai-radu."

"Once again, Okuda-san," he sighed, looking up. "You insist on this ridiculous story that an American soldier gave you these cigarettes for some fish?"

"Hai, Lieutenant-san," Okuda grinned, "once we *understood* one another, he was a most tanosii young fellow."

"He just walked up to you on the beach," muttered Tamura from his post in the doorway behind Okuda. "He walked up and said, 'Ohayoo gozaimasu, Ikuda-san! I just happened to be passing this way and thought I might drop over behind your lines and see if you have any fish for sale!'"

"He did not speak any Japanese," Okuda objected, "but we

managed to understand each other well enough, after a while. For the most part, I had no difficulty seeing he was hungry and thirsty. I had food and water, and he possessed cigarettes, Lieutenant-san. What did I do wrong?"

"Do?" shouted Tamura. "You didn't do *anything!* That's what you did wrong, Doobutu baku—" he began, then stopped short as he caught a warning glance from his superior.

"Your rifle, Okuda-san," he continued patiently, "didn't you have your rifle with you when you encountered this American?"

"Gomennasái, Lieutenant-san," Okuda stammered, "I know you ordered us to carry it with us at all times, but it is most difficult to carry a rifle in the water with you at the same time you catch fish."

"You mean, you *had* no rifle? This American just walked up to you and offered you a cigarette?"

From the sleeping toki in the corner, the wounded Hirano forced a game smile across his pain-wracked face as he put in, "You must have met a very different American from the one I did, Okuda-san."

"He did not offer me anything, until after I gave him some fish," Okuda began, then stopped at the looks on the faces of the others in the room.

"Situzukeru," Kuroki nodded, "we may as well hear him out on this. Perhaps there is some explanation. Something simple we're missing. . . ."

"Kitto!" snapped Tamura, pointing at Okuda with a grimace of distaste. "What happened is simple enough. They captured Okuda, broke his will with threats, or bribes, and sent him back to spy on us! Hai! What other explanation *could* there be, Lieutenant-san?"

"One afternoon is surely a short time to break a Japanese soldier's will," Kuroki mused. "Perhaps there is some western subtlety in this we do not perceive. The cigarettes contain poison. . . ."

"I have smoked over half of them, Lieutenant-san," Okuda said in a suddenly worried tone. "I feel all right, so far."

"Next time, Okuda-san and I will trade places," Hirano gritted from the mat. "They can shoot him and I will smoke myself to death."

Kuroki frowned. Hirano was normally the most cheerful member of his command. If the boy was becoming this waspish with his friend Okuda, he must be truly suffering.

More in hopes of getting out and leaving Hirano in peace than anything else, Kuroki picked up his brush and started taking notes.

"Assuming we take what you say at face value, Okuda-san. What do *you* make of it?"

"I, Lieutenant-san?"

"You are the only one of us who saw this man, Okuda-san. Was he short, tall, fat, thin? What was he armed with?"

"A rifle," Okuda beamed, grateful to be of help.

"Yoi, he met you on the beach, unarmed, and you offered him the fish to keep him from hurting you?"

"I was a little worried at first, Lieutenant-san. He jumped out at me so suddenly, and thrust his bayonet against my belly. I thought for a moment he was an *enemy*."

"Well, wasn't he?" Kuroki mused.

"I think he was sick, Lieutenant-san. He was speaking very strangely, and his face was very red. Once he used something that sounded like our word, *harakiri*, and I thought he wanted my assistance in killing himself. We fisher folk of Osaka know very little of such and I wouldn't know where to begin. Personally, I think it would be so much simpler to just swim out and drown. At any rate, I must have been mistaken, because he then started to count in his own language. They have very strange numbers, Lieutenant-san. He knows *our* word for the number five, though."

"Number five?"

"Hai, he kept shouting it at me. 'Go, go, go!' in a most agitated manner. At any rate, he seemed to feel much better after I'd given him a drink from my canteen."

"Your canteen, Okuda-san?" asked Kuroki thoughtfully. A certain pattern was beginning to emerge . . . "Didn't the American have a canteen?"

"I did not see one, Lieutenant-san," Okuda shrugged. "He gulped so much water I thought he was going to be sick. And then he pointed to my fish and said something. I assumed he said they were desirable to him, so I gave him a bonito and two of those blue things we've been eating."

"Misappropriation of Imperial supplies!" Tamura yelled.

"Enough, Tamura-san!" Kuroki laughed, picturing the difficulties of preparing courtmartial proceedings beginning with the charge, "Stole, sold, or gave away, one bonito and two blue things, species unknown." Besides, Okuda had caught them, hadn't he? It wasn't as if the oddly behaving enemy had taken military property.

"There is little to eat and nothing to drink over on their

side of the island . . ." Kuroki frowned. "Still, there would be more supplies than that. If they had cigarettes to give away, could they have starved themselves into delirium in these few days?"

Americans ate like pigs, Kuroki knew. He'd met a few, before the war, and seen them in the restaurants along the Ginza. Even allowing for the fact that a lot of them were *big bastards*, they still put it away like a sumo wrestler in training. Perhaps they metabolized faster, and required more food? That would explain how they ate so much without bloating up like balloons, but surely they couldn't have been driven mad with *hunger* this early.

"There are no waterholes over there, are there, Tamura-san?" he asked.

Tamura thought a moment and shook his head. "I know of none, Lieutenant-san," he agreed.

"A thirsty man, half out of his mind by dehydration, and wandering aimlessly in the hot sun . . ." he mused aloud. "It could explain a lot."

"Ah so?" Tamura objected, "then why did he spare Okuda *after* he'd been given a drink? If he was in condition to haggle for fish, he certainly could have pulled a trigger, Lieutenant-san!"

"Perhaps he felt mercy? Okuda was unarmed. We both know him to be a genial and nearly harmless person, Tamura-san. Perhaps some of this was conveyed to the American in spite of everything. He may have been in a very bad way when Okuda gave him water. It may have come as quite a shock to our young *American* to find himself in the debt of a simple Japanese fisherman. Perhaps the answer is as simple as that."

"I find it hard to credit, Lieutenant-san," Tamura frowned. "Have you forgotten how they butchered the last survivors of the Guadalcanal disaster?"

"Hardly," Kuroki answered a trifle grimly, "since my brother was one of those left on the north beach with the Old Regiment."

"I forgot, Lieutenant-san. Gomennasai!"

"No apologies are in order, Sergeant. Had I not been assigned to this outpost a few weeks before that final onslaught by the American combined forces, I would have stood there in the water at his side."

"I too, missed the end by a fluke," Tamura nodded, both of them nearly forgetting Okuda as old ghosts rose to scream silently of passed-by opportunities and laughter that would never be heard again.

Kuroki shook his head free of the dismal train of thought and insisted, "Sóo! At least, my last theory makes some sense. It gives us something to go on. Assuming what Okuda says is true, Sergeant, and that he has correctly interpreted the American's actions, what does it tell us?"

"That they are all crazy," Tamura shrugged. "We knew that already. They'd have never started this war if they had not been utterly mad."

Privately, Lieutenant Kuroki had a few reservations on who'd been the craziest to get into the war, but aloud he merely nodded and said, "Since they were unable to contact that American destroyer, we know they have no radio in working condition, Tamura-san. They couldn't have too many supplies with them, since they were not planning more than a few hours of travel when they were forced down here. That side of the island has been very thoroughly ransacked for food, by us and the men who were here before us."

He smiled thinly at Tamura and said, "That means, aside from an occasional coconut we may have missed, and such water as they had aboard the plane, they can't have anything to drink!"

"Yoi!" Tamura grunted. "I hope the bastards all die of thirst before the rainy season."

"I doubt very much that they intend to, Tamura-san," Kuroki frowned. "I've had several glimpses of their commander, and he does not appear to be the type who sits in a corner and waits to die."

"I know the one you mean," Tamura nodded, "that big one. He stands a full head taller than the others." He frowned and added, "None of them are exactly midgets, either! How could anyone grow so big on the koyasi they eat?"

"You knew he was the leader, too, Tamura-san? None of their officers seem to be wearing any rank badges, and I thought the first time it was just because he was so gigantic. Hai! I actually had him in my sights the first day, and told myself not to be a fool. I was bitter because one of them had just shot poor Sato-san, remember? This big one came alone across the trail as we were falling back, and I thought, 'Here is where I avenge Sato-san by destroying the leader of the men who killed him.' And then I thought to myself I had no real way of knowing my feelings about that big man were correct. For all I knew, he was a simple private, sent ahead to skirmish, or to draw our fire." He gazed almost fondly at Tamura and Okuda as he shook his head and said, "If only

life were as simple for me, as the two of you find it, in your separate ways. You would not have hesitated, as I did, Tamura-san, wondering if I should shoot now, or wait for a better target, until it was too late and I was cursing myself for missing what I now feel sure was their leader!" He nodded at Okuda and went on, "While *you*, my fisherman tomodatai, would have found the problem equally simple. You would have seen only that he was a magnificent physical specimen, moving like a great cat through the jungle, and enjoyed the simple beauty of the scene. If he'd been near enough, I suppose you would have offered him a drink of water, or a fish."

"Not *that* American," Tamura snapped, "I too have watched that one. He's the leader, all right. And a soldier. Hai, the others do not seem to fear him, from what I have been able to observe as I watched their positions on patrol, but there is power in that one, Lieutenant-san. And death. I have seen death in many guises, since first I touched my brow to an Arisaka. I know death when I see it, and it walks beside that tall American all the time!"

"Hai, see that you remember what the Sergeant is saying, Okuda!" Kuroki warned, handing the cigarettes back to the simple fisherman. "You may not be so fortunate the next time. That will be all for now, Okuda-san. You are dismissed for now, but be careful."

"And watch out for that east lagoon," Tamura added. "I spotted a shark in there the other day half as long as our boat."

"The gods of the sea are my friends," shrugged Okuda, backing out the doorway respectfully. "I have been to the fisherman's shrine of Izumo, and Okuninushi-no-Mikoto has ever been a friend to my family."

Kuroki waited until he'd left and then he closed his notebook and looked up. "Which one do you think, Sergeant," he sighed, "the camp or the waterhole?"

"They'd be crazy to hit us here," Tamura said. "I think they'll attempt to wrest control of the water supply from us."

"The boat is here," Kuroki mused, "they must have spotted her by now, and she's a tempting prize. But they can't have more than thirty or forty men, and it would seem a lot easier to them to go for the water."

"Seem, yes," grinned Tamura wolfishly, "but they will find our price for a drink higher than they expected, eh, Lieutenant-san?"

"We'd better strengthen our positions there, just the same,

Sergeant. That tall leader of theirs handles his troops well in the jungle. See that our best marksmen are posted around the area well before sunset. You'd better see to it at once, Sergeant. It's getting late."

Tamura bowed and stepped out, to eagerly gather men and weapons for his private vendetta with the United States. Kuroki smiled a crooked smile, and turned to the wounded man.

"How is it this afternoon, Hirano-san?" he asked.

"Worse," the boy grunted. "I wish you'd loan me your pistol for a few moments, sir. They could carry me outside and I wouldn't get your toki wet."

"Don't talk that way," Kuroki snapped. "You're going to be all right!"

"Is that an order, sir?" Hirano managed to grin through his pain. "I am not going to get better. Can't you smell it? I am dead, Lieutenant-san. I have been dead since that vivid purple line started moving up my leg ahead of the grey-green mess I've turned into below the knee. No, don't try to comfort me with meaningless hopes, Lieutenant-san. I am a soldier of His Majesty, not a whining girl-child who needs her obaāsan to tell her a story. My honored grandmother is dead, Lieutenant-san, and you look nothing like her. Why don't you just leave me that pistol and go for a walk?"

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself, soldier," Kuroki snapped. "I tell you you will *not* die."

"Ah sóo? And will the Lieutenant-san tell me why not? That leg has to come off, sir. Who's going to do it? You?"

"If I have to," Kuroki said stiffly. "Now, lie back down and get some rest. I must see to my other duties."

He bowed and got up and went out into the scorching rays of the sun, wondering, as he did, how in the hell you cut a man's leg off without anesthetic, surgical tools, or the slightest knowledge of surgery.

WE almost there, Captain?" Searcy was whispering. "I thought that friggen Craddock said it wasn't far, now."

"Pipe down, Searcy," Bourke whispered, "and I'm not going to tell you again." He waited a moment, straining his ears in the dark, and then he motioned to the others and started through the trees after Craddock's lead. Once the scout, invisible up ahead in the darkness, sent a barely audi-

ble cricket's chirp back and Bourke swung further to the left, rapping twice against his tommy-gun stock to acknowledge the signal. The men were silent, plodding through the jungle with rifles ready. The outfit was shaping up, Bourke thought. You can't beat on-the-job training for teaching men how to soldier, even though it hurts like hell to flunk the course.

Behind him, Searcy started to whisper something and Sergeant Bleeker cuffed him across the mouth and silenced him with a low hiss. Bourke nodded to himself approvingly. For a knock-around guy, Searcy was turning out a dud, and Bourke seriously doubted he was Nick the Greek, or any other man who'd lived away from home before the war. On the other hand, Bleeker was shaping up better than the Captain had expected. Even a Headquarters John hears a lot of war stories if he hangs around the day room long enough, and Bleeker kept surprising Bourke by seeming to know what to do, even before he was ordered to. You just never knew, he thought, until you'd been with a guy where both of you could get killed.

There was another signal from Craddock, and Bourke halted his men and had them take cover. The night was dark. He'd chosen a time before moonrise, to give them darkness going in, and enough light to make life difficult for the Japs if they counterattacked later on.

For the longest time, the tall Captain and his men knelt in the darkness and sweated Craddock out. There was nothing to see, they didn't dare tell jokes at a time like this, and it wasn't exactly the time and place for forty winks. Each man faced the unknown the best way he knew how. Each one alone. Some concentrated on the girl back home, blotting out what might happen in the next hour or so. Some faced it with fear, or calmness, or, if they were stupid enough, expectation. Behind him, although he didn't know it, and none of them would have admitted it to their best buddies, at least three of Bourke's men were praying.

Why was it that Lorie always came to him in the dark? Bourke wondered. He could blot her out of his mind for days at a time, if he stayed where there was noise and light. Lots of light. The guys in the BOQ had given up asking why Captain Bourke always kept a light on in his room at night. Dames sometimes complained about making love to the half-crooked flyboy they'd met that night with a 75-watt bulb burning over the bed. But he was a good-looking guy and that redhead in Brisbane had been the only one who'd ever actually walked out on him once he'd gotten her undressed.

It had been dark the night it happened, he thought. Maybe that had something to do with it. And then he gulped a deep breath of night air and pushed the train of thought back into his subconscious with a shudder. The trick was not to *start* thinking about Lorie. Not even think about thinking about her. Otherwise, when it was dark like this, you'd see her face. The way it had looked when she smiled at him, the way it had looked the night he'd told her he loved her on the terrace of the Officers' Club overlooking Manila Bay, and the way it had looked at the last, with half the flesh torn away.

"Jesus!" Bourke muttered.

"You say something, sir?" Sergeant Bleeker asked, crawling closer.

"Nothing, Sergeant. Just hurt my hand. Listen, someone's coming back through the brush!"

"Jell-O again," Bleeker snapped, training his gun on the sound.

"Lollypops are yellow," Craddock answered.

"Advance and be recognized, lollypops are yellow," Bleeker snapped. Bourke shot him a look of surprise. They'd changed the password and countersign on every patrol, and they both knew the ridge-runner's voice. Bleeker was starting to sound like a British sergeant major who'd spent a hitch on the North Frontier. Not that Bourke objected. He could have used a couple of British sergeant majors about then. Their Punjabi rifles would have been welcome, too.

Craddock crawled back to where Bourke and the others crouched and said, "We'uns is almost there, Captain. Scouted her nigh down to the water's edge and it's ok from here to the edge of that path."

"Anybody liable to get in the way?" Bourke asked.

"Not lately, suh. There *was* this bitty Jap all dressed up in pandanus leaves like he thought he was a goddam bush. Damn near pissed on him, he looked so nacheral. Only I figured my daddy's barlow knife wouldn't make so much noise."

"You move him off the trail?"

"Wasn't on the trail, suh. Staked out a little further than they usually is. I sniffed around a bit, in case that might have meant them Tojos was expectin' company. But he was the only one between here and the pool I could find."

"We'll move up then," Bourke said. "Craddock, stick closer to me. Bleeker, you move back and take command of the rear. Follow me until we reach the pool and then swing the line around to my right, so we cover the pool on a line of

skirmish. Nobody fires or moves from cover except on my **command.** I want the men spread out, but in close enough **contact** to relay commands up and down in a fire-fight. You got that, Sergeant?"

"Yessir, you can count on me," Bleeker said. And somehow, Bourke knew that he could. He nodded at Craddock and said, "Let's go, Craddock."

They took possibly three minutes, counting the moment Bourke took to lift the paybook from the map Craddock had killed, to get to the pool. Bourke selected a palm log lying near the shell trail to rest his tommy gun across, and glanced at the luminous face of his watch. He'd timed it perfectly. Bleeker and the others had worked around and gotten in position with five minutes to spare. And then, after what seemed to many of them a million years, the moon rose above the edge of the clearing and the pool was flooded with light.

"What are we waiting for, dammit?" Slicker Searcy whispered. "Ain't we gonna *get* us drink?"

"Not tonight, Searcy. Keep quiet and watch those trees over there."

There was a mutter among some of the nearby men and Searcy took a moment before what Bourke had said sank in. Then he nearly shouted aloud as he asked, "What do you mean, not *tonight*, Captain? Jesus Christ! Look at it! It's *water!* Enough water to drown in, for chrissake! You tellin' me we come all this way just to look at it with our tongues hangin' out?"

Bourke ignored him. The pool did look appealing as hell as it lay rippling in moonlight. But Bourke was intent on the other side. On the inky blackness under the moon-silvered palm fronds. He nudged Craddock and said, "See anything, Corporal?"

"Don't like that one tree over there, suh," the scout muttered. "Looks a might plump at the top. Like there's maybe a mess of coconuts we missed, or sumpin' else, in among them big leaves."

"Hoxie," Bourke whispered to a tall, well-bred-looking boy at his side, "pass the order to fire on my word. They're to make a real shivaree for one magazine. Then break off and fall back on the double. We'll re-form a hundred yards back and then move out."

"Yessir," Hoxie frowned. "Did you say move *out*? I mean, sir, aren't we going to attack? We thought you brought us over here to take this waterhole."

"It's too big a boo," Bourke said, "but let's hope the Japs think we're after their water, too. Now, let's go, Hoxie. We haven't time for tactical lectures."

He waited until he was sure the message had been passed down as far as Sergeant Bleeker and acknowledged by that end, before he smiled thinly at Craddock and said, "'Bout time to send the balloon up. You've got our next route mapped in your head, Arkansas?"

"Yes, sub. Most of it's along a dry ravine goin' our way. Been over ever' inch of her without findin' none of them split-toed feet prints of theirs. Don't look like them Jap boys ever use her for a path. Might not even know about it."

"Just one helmetful, Captain!" Searcy pleaded. "I could make it in three good jumps and scoop up a whole big helmetful of water before anybody came unglued, even if there *are* any Japs around."

"They're around," Dennis said. "And it's a hell of a lot further than it looks from here, Slicker. Just do as you're told and we'll all be drinking Australian beer on Bougainville."

He peered across at the darkness, wishing Maloney were here right now, and shouted, "Screw Tojo!"

There was no answer.

"You heard me, you squint-eyed sonsabitches! Screw Tojo and screw his wife while you're at it!"

Nothing.

"There ain't nobody home!" Searcy laughed. "That Jap Craddock nailed was the only guy on guard! Come on, what are we waiting for?"

"Keep your head down," Bourke ordered. "There's always a hothead who speaks a little English."

In a louder tone, he called, "You afraid, Doobutu Nihon-no? You gottom belly-alla-time-walk-about for a fight? Hey, Jap-boy, you gottom nice sister two dollah? Come on and fight, you buck-toothed yellow Koyasi-heads!"

"Like I said," laughed Searcy, getting to his feet, "there's nobody home!" Before anybody could stop him, Slicker Searcy had taken off his helmet and stepped out into the moonlight.

"Searcy, no!" Bourke shouted. But the Slicker had dog-trotted across the short cleared area and dropped to one knee in the shells along the edge of the water. He scooped up a brimming helmetful of water and raised it to his lips. For a long time, the only sound was the animal slurping the thirst-maddened marine made as his dehydrated system drank in

the life-giving liquid. Then Hoxie started to rise and Bourke shouted, "I'll shoot the next man who steps from cover. Get back here, Searcy. On the double."

"What are you guys afraid of?" Searcy answered. "I tol' you there wasn't nobody here." He bent down and scooped up another helmetful of water and started back across the shell path.

There was a winking orange glow in the darkness across the pool and a line of little white geysers tap-danced across the water before the Nambu gunner over there zeroed in and stitched the Slicker from ankle to left ear with hot lead.

Bourke opened up on the Nambu's muzzle-glare even as Searcy's lifeless body crumpled to the ground. Beside him, Craddock yelled, "That tree!" and poured a burst into the suspiciously fat palm while Bleeker yelled "Fire!" and the American skirmish line came to life.

A dark bundle of some kind plummeted from the palm top and splashed whitely in the moonlight across the pool. It didn't surface. Bourke heard a marine named Waller scream something he didn't catch in the uproar as the trees across the pool seemed to echo with the crackle of cellophane, while little orange fireflies flicked off and on. A thing that sounded like a big wingless bee whizzed through the place Dennis Bourke's head had been as he bent to clear a jam in his tommy gun. He fired the last four rounds in his clip at one particular firefly who seemed to be winking off and on more than he should have from one spot. And then his gun was empty.

"Reload at will and hold your fire!" he shouted and heard a booming echo of his command coming back up the line from Sergeant Bleeker. The rattle of guns faded in the night, and across the pool the fireflies went out, one by one. In a moment, there was dead silence.

And then, from across the pool, they heard the mocking jeer of a man named Fujimoto, who'd wracked his brains through the entire skirmish to dredge up what little knowledge he could remember of the Americans he'd known before the war.

"Screw Babe Ruth," he shouted, his words echoing eerily in the night.

Bourke gazed steadily at the body lying by the pool for a moment. Slicker's face was buried in the water, as if even in death he couldn't resist the temptation it had offered. A Japanese bullet had torn away the breast pocket of Searcy's blouse and scattered fifty-two rectangular white objects across the ground. You couldn't read the cards from here in the

moonlight, but it didn't matter. They all read ace of spades for the Slicker.

"Fall back," he said, easing away from the log. He waited until his men had moved to a safe distance through the trees and re-formed into a line ready to fight off a counterattack before he took stock.

Private Hoxie had collected a Purple Heart as a result of exposing his position just before the fun and games began, but it was only a flesh wound near the shoulder joint. Hoxie was on his feet and still ready to kill somebody, if he had to.

Private Waller had screamed, not because he'd been hit, but because he thought some bastard had snatched his helmet away from him, just when he needed it most. The helmet had a couple of holes in it now, but he'd found it on the way back, and was gratified to find there were no barracks thieves in the outfit.

"You ready to move, Craddock?" Bourke nodded, as soon as he'd taken stock. Craddock nodded and pointed the direction he was going to go. As he slipped away, Bourke said, "Sergeant Bleeker, you're bringing up the rear. Watch for stragglers and, if we get separated, take the men with you back to the hill."

"Yessir," Bleeker wondered, "ain't that where we're headed?"

Poor Bleeker. Before he'd had a chance to see what he could do as a marine, Bourke hadn't taken him into his confidence very much, had he? Bourke smiled and answered, "We're going home, Sergeant, but there's a few stops I'd like to make first. You see, while we were letting the Japs think they'd suckered us into the trap I knew they'd set for us, I've had Ruffino checking the approaches to their camp. If Ruff's waiting on the beach for us with news that we really managed to draw most of them over here to the spring, we won't need their goddam seep water."

"You're gonna take their *camp*, sir?" Bleeker grinned.

"Better than that. I'm going to take their boat!"

THE moon was high now. It had lost the yellowness it holds near the horizon and taken on the ice blue sheen it prefers in the later portions of its journey across the zodiac. It seemed too cool a moon to be part of this muggy world near the equator, although the glaring tropical stars spattered carelessly across the sky made up for it. "They look

like the eyes of dragons," Private Tokumaru murmured, looking up from the end of the wharf. "Great angry dragons glaring hungrily down on our little world."

Beside him, Private Arikawa leaned his rifle barrel against the rail and observed, "No one should know more about dragons than a man of your family name, Tokumaru-san."

The small joke would make little sense to one who didn't know that Tokumaru freely translates into Dragon's Lair, but both men smiled at Arikawa's mild jest. Tokumaru was used to puns on his name. It was a little odd for a man who'd spent most of his adult life as a yellow-robed bóozu at the great Temple of Kyoto. Once, he knew, a man of his family had held a mountain valley in tribute. No produce passing in or out except at the will of the master of the foreboding castle guarding the only pass. Twenty ronin had served the Lord of the Dragon's Lair, and twice a year the tribute money from the valley was sent down the Takaido Road for shipments of the special tea that grew only in the south near the sea. And so feared was this ancestor of a modern-day, fourth-class rifleman, that not one of the brigand chiefs who infested the Imperial Highway in those days had ever been tempted by his messenger's gold.

"What the devil are you two bird-brains looking at?" belled a voice from the shoreward end of the dock.

Tokumaru turned and said, "We did not hear you, Sergeant Tamura."

"That is no news to me!" the burly veteran snorted, stomping out onto the roughhewn planking. "You're supposed to be guarding the boat, not holding hands in the moonlight!"

Tamura was in a truly foul mood. After all his preparations that afternoon, the Lieutenant had made him stay in camp that night to guard the blasted boat he and Ando were so in love with. He glanced with contempt at the clumsy-looking vessel tied up alongside and grunted, "See anything?"

"Thought I saw a shark a few moments ago, Sergeant," Arikawa said. "I was going to take a shot at it, but then I remembered how low our ammunition was and thought I'd better not."

"Uh," nodded Tamura, as close to expressing approval as he thought the young idiot deserved. Tokumaru was bad enough, with his knowing smile and superior ways. At least he knew how to soldier, if you kept an eye on him. But Arikawa was impossible. Too much of a weakling to be of

any use for coolie labor, and not enough sense to put behind a desk where he belonged.

Tamura stomped past, on to the very end of the wharf, and stared out to sea. He didn't expect to see much, and the view didn't do anything to prove him wrong. There was nothing to smoke, and his hands kept fidgeting to *do* something. Anything. Tamura was born of sturdy peasant stock, and he needed work, hard work, to keep his restless chunky body feeling right.

Why am I hanging around here? he wondered to himself. A sergeant doesn't stand guard with a couple of privates. They will think I find their company desirable.

But, there simply wasn't any place else to go. He'd prowled the perimeter of the camp, like a tiger locked in its cage, and each time around everything had looked the same. He knew something was going on, over by the pool, but he'd been ordered to stay here and keep watch, and there wasn't anything to watch.

"We heard firing before, Tamura-san," Tokumaru observed. "Do you think the others have gotten into trouble?"

"It's the Americans who've gotten into trouble," he said grudgingly. In a more expansive mood he added, "The Lieutenant set a neat trap for them tonight, by Kámi! Did you hear the firing? A short, hot skirmish, by the sound of it."

"I hope none of our comrades were hurt!" Arikawa exclaimed.

"Let us hope no one of good will was hurt," amended the sometime priest.

"You amaze me," Tamura marveled, unaware that he'd allowed himself to be drawn into the conversation he thought he was avoiding. "Those are our boys out there, Tokumaru. It sounds like the Baka-no Americans blundered right into it, but one of your own comrades could be lying dead in the jungle this very minute. Do you honestly tell me you can feel charity for an enemy at a time like this? Don't you know they hate us? Don't you know how much all the real men of Japan hate *them*?"

"Hai," Tokumaru sighed, "this is a time of sadness for all men of good will, but I hope to see a better day. I hope to see the day when our people and the Americans are friends."

"Never!" jeered Arikawa, attempting to get in with his Sergeant the best way he knew how. "Even after we win the war, we can never be friends with such disgusting barbarians. Have you heard about the filthy thing they do with cattle?"

His voice took on the tone of a man telling a dirty joke as he went on, "They wait until one of their cows is nursing a calf, see? And then they actually put their hands on her private parts and draw the milk from her tits! Not only *that*, they *drink* it, like Mongols and Tibetan hill men." He grimaced and said, "Ghaa! Not even a Chinese or Korean would do such a filthy thing. But listen, they go even farther than the wild Mongols!"

"How could they?" Tamura frowned. "A cow's too big to make love to, even for one of those hulking doobutu-no!"

"They don't just drink and eat that stuff they make out of it they call *butturu*," Arikawa insisted, "they like it even better after it's *rotten*! They allow some of the mother cow's milk to lie around until it spoils and turns into a mess that looks just like a baby's vomit. They keep packing it together and letting it rot and rot until it finally turns into what looks something like soap. After that, it won't rot any more. That's when they take it home and actually feed it to their children."

"I saw some of that stuff one time," shrugged Tamura. "There was a store in Shanghai that specialized in food for the Europeans there. Some of the damndest-looking stuff you ever saw. Half of it didn't even look like food, and the other half looked like it wasn't worth eating if it was. The Chinese proprietor told us a lot of jokes about the Europeans. It must be hell to have a Caucasian wife cooking your meals for you. They do everything wrong. The Chinese told us they used to come down to the market to be sure the fish they ordered were fresh, see? And then they'd take home the best fillets of red snapper in the market and *cook* them! Ghaa!"

"They never eat any raw sea food, except oysters," Tokumaru observed, calmly, "but some of their food is not as bad as it sounds. I used to have dinner, occasionally, with a priest of the bokusi-no mission in Kyoto. One of those black-robed fellows with the funny white collars. Anyway, he'd taught his houseboy to cook in the American manner, and some of it was quite good, in a heavy sort of way. I've even tasted that fermented milk-paste Arikawa-san mentioned. It's not as awful as it sounds. Kasu, I think they called it. My English is very poor. Kasu? Kisu? No matter. It has a very odd texture for food. More like wax. And it tasted something like a hard-boiled egg would, if it had been pickled like a daikon."

"Sounds disgusting," Tamura shrugged. He started to walk away, aware that shooting the breeze like this with privates was not good for morale, and then he thought of an official

excuse to ask a military question the Lieutenant might inquire about someday.

"You say you speak English, Tokumaru?"

"Only a little," the priest protested. "I have not the patience to really master such a complicated language. The vowel sounds are not too hard, and you can substitute an R in most words for that one funny sound they make, but the grammar is completely bewildering."

"Never mind all that. What I want to know is this: If you speak English, why are you not an officer, or at least a corporal? You have an education, you are an accredited priest of our Empire's second largest faith, and now you tell me you speak English well enough to carry on a dinner table conversation. Why are you a mere private, Tokumaru?"

The bóozu smiled philosophically and answered, simply, "I said things I shouldn't have, perhaps. They were true, but these are not times for the truth, to some men."

"The Thought Police?" Tamura frowned.

"Hai, Tamura-san, they came right into the sanctuary and took me down to Sugamo Prison in my saffron kimono. It was very embarrassing."

"You got out of Sugamo?" Arikawa marveled.

"After a time. First they beat me with their hands, and then they beat me with male bamboo sticks, and then they beat me some more with their hands. Being a guard in Sugamo Prison must be a very tedious occupation. I know it was tedious for me. But, all things in this world must pass, and they let me go after a time. An important man I'd known in my youth chanced to see me on my way to prison and interceded in my behalf. He finally managed to convince an official of the War Ministry that I would be of more use to the Empire as a soldier than as a corpse. The Official agreed. He had a highly developed sense of humor."

He laughed softly and added, "At least, in the army, I have been free of the Thought Police."

"The Thought Police," growled Tamura. "You'll not find *those* lads in the War Zone. The zzu-zzu bastards would rather spend their time in the Yashiwara, trying to catch a whore complaining about the price of her cosmetics, so they can sleep with her for nothing."

Tamura genuinely disliked the Thought Police. Had ever since the night they'd dragged him back to his post under guard for making a perfectly innocent remark, of dubious propriety, perhaps, but certainly innocent of treasonous intent, about the well-known custom of a certain politician

who demanded society women, rather than money, as consideration for a juicy War Contract. Hell, the story had been all over town. When he got out of the guard house, later, he'd gone back and taught that damned maiko-girl not to run to the damned Thought Police with every little thing a man might say in his saki!

"I hear something!" Arikawa suddenly said. "Sounded like a splash."

"That shark," Tamura shrugged, mellowed by finding a common enemy with this strange *bóozu* who'd puzzled him. "When it's light, we'll have to see if we can kill it. They don't usually come in close to shore, but it may have washed over the reef. I'd like to see it dead on the beach before Okuda loses one of his toes."

"It may have been after a fish," Arikawa said. He didn't sound convinced. He walked across the pier and looked down at the black water. You couldn't see a shark down there if you tried. He shrugged and started back across the planks.

"My God!" he shouted, pointing over the shoulders of the other two as they lounged against the rail. "The boat! Look at the boat!"

Tamura swung around, his eyes widening in disbelief. The boat they'd labored on all those days in the hot sun, the boat they'd counted on to get them off this accursed rock, the boat they'd mockingly christened the *Oyomesan*, although she was like a bride to many of them, the boat they loved, the boat their hopes were wrapped up in, was slowly pulling away from the pier with her sail set!

"She . . . she's slipped her moorings!" Tamura gaped, not willing to *think* what *might* have happened under his very nose while he stood gossiping like a woman.

"No!" Arikawa shouted, even as the *Oyomesan* caught a puff of the land breeze in her sail and heeled away from the pier on a course veering oblique to the rail.

And then, as Tókumaru and Tamura stood in muddled confusion, the slender boy raced across the planks at a forty-five degree angle and vaulted the rail in a running jump.

"He's not going to make it!" Tamura groaned.

The boat was a good six or eight feet off the pier. Further at the bow, but her stern was much lower than the level of the pier and Arikawa was desperate. He sailed wildly through the yawning space above black water, dropping his rifle as he did so. And then his rubber-shod feet hit the gun'l. His momentum vaulted him on up and over into the cockpit, so that he was traveling nearly headfirst when a large dark form rose

up out of the *Oyomesan's* misappropriated hull to block his path. In a reflex action, Arikawa wrapped his arms around it and hung on. A loud voice screamed "Get him!" in English. But Arikawa wasn't listening, even had he understood. His momentum had carried Arikawa and what he dimly realized was one of the Americans trying to steal his beloved *Oyomesan*, across the cockpit until the American's hips were hard against the lee gun'l. Both their upper bodies leaned out over the water as Arikawa grimly hung on and wondered what to do next. The American he'd grabbed was bigger than he. Bigger and stronger. Something cold and terribly long slithered in Arikawa's side below the ribs and radiated pure pain from a spot somewhere in the middle of his being. His grip was weakening and the stronger man was going to force him over backwards in a moment. He grunted with the effort and shoved his shoulder against the other's chin with all his strength as that serpent of steel slithered into his side once more. And then his groping right foot found purchase on the deck stanchion he'd built and installed the week before and Arikawa, with the last of his ebbing strength, pushed.

There was a terrific splash as the boat sailed beyond all hope of immediate rescue, and Tamura, with odd splitting of minds that men fall into under stress, worried about that shark he'd seen even as he fired into the blackness of the *Oyomesan's* cockpit.

There was a flash of orange and Tamura moved aside as something thunked into the pier at his feet.

"Back!" he shouted. "There's no cover out here on the pier. Back to shore and behind those crates. Quickly, before they're out of range!"

There was another wink of fire from the boat, and then the Sergeant and Private Tokumaru had run back to the shelter of the piled supplies at the shoreward end of the pier.

"Fire!" he shouted at Tokumaru, "why don't you fire?"

"They are too far," shrugged the bóozu. "Isn't that Arikawa out there in the water?"

Tamura gave up his useless attempt on invisible targets to look where Tokumaru pointed. A man's head and shoulders projected just above the inky surface, outlined by moonlight reflecting from behind. He was about to yell something about helping Arikawa, he was bent over strangely and might be wounded. Then Tamura realized two things simultaneously: The water wasn't that shallow there, if that was Arikawa. That man was bigger than the puny little clerk. And, if it was the

American who'd fallen overboard, as he was sure, now, it was, why was he in that position? Tamura pictured the arms attached to those powerful bare shoulders as they projected down and out of sight to converge on something in the water.

"Bastard!" he shouted, raising his rifle, "he's drowning Arikawa!"

The American's head snapped back, outlining itself in a halo of moonlit spray as the bullet reached him. Tamura fired again, like a man hitting a tree with an ax once more before it falls, and then the big American slid silently under the waves.

"Kuru!" Tamura shouted. "Arikawa's out there."

Without looking back, the Sergeant ran down to the water's edge and dropped his weapon. He waded in boldly, that same small part of his mind aware of how very large that shark had looked, and groped about below the surface when he reached the spot the man he'd shot had been. A questing hand encountered human hair, and Tamura pulled until Arikawa's head broke the surface. Tamura got another arm around the boy's waist, lifting him easily as he turned shoreward, and vaguely realized how warm that part of the boy's water-logged uniform felt on that side. Arikawa coughed and tried to say something as they moved shoreward.

"Never mind, boy!" Tamura said, "you did a great thing! Hai, I was proud of you, Arikawa-san! You acted like a real soldier and the Lieutenant shall know of it! By Kámi, I'm going to write to your family about this night! I'm going to tell them what a man they have given the Emperor, Arikawa-san! Just you wait!"

He was ashore now, and gently lowered the frail body to the sand. "You'll be all right in a moment, boy!" he said jovially. "I got that big doobutu who was trying to drown you. I fed the bastard to Okuda's pet shark. What's the matter, boy? Swallow too much water?"

He placed a hand on either side of Arikawa's lower chest, the way he'd learned in first aid, and then he stopped and raised his left hand to peer at it in the moonlight.

"Arikawa-san!" he cried. "Wait! I didn't mean all those things I said to you, son! I never thought you were a salve-seller boy! Never! Listen, Arikawa-san, there's this place I know of in Yokohama, see? The Mamma-san's a friend of mine and I can have anything I want. I'll take you with me on our first leave, Arikawa-san. You can have any girl in the place and I won't care if it's the one I wanted. Please, Arikawa-san? Please wait just a minute?"

"He's dead," Tokumaru said softly. "I have been called many times to a place of death, and I know death when I meet him."

"Did he hear me? Do you think he heard anything I said, bóozu?"

"Let us hope so," Tokumaru murmured. He made a sign over Arikawa and intoned, "Ansin, my son."

Tamura slowly got to his feet. A long dark form was lying on the sand next to Arikawa's body and he realized it was the body of the man he'd killed. It was one of those black men they had in some regiments. He dimly remembered having read about them, but he'd never seen a Negro before. At the moment, he wasn't really interested.

"How'd *he* get here?" he asked. "The tide's going out."

"I brought him ashore. There was a chance he still lived."

"I might have known!" Tamura sneered, his momentary comradeship with the bóozu vanishing. "What did you do when you found he was dead? Hold his hand and pray over him? That's all you're good for, Tokumaru. You're only good for praying."

"Some men," Tokumaru answered, "have need of prayer."

"Not me, bóozu! You'll never catch *me* praying!"

"Perhaps not, Tamura-san. But then, there are many ways a man may pray. Even though he may not know it."

IT'S no use, Captain," Sergeant Bleeker was saying. "The damned thing won't move a stinking inch."

He and Bourke strained at the stern transom in the shoulder-deep water, trying to force some movement into the stationary hulk.

By the rottenest kind of luck, after slipping away from the Jap camp in the *Oyomesan*, they'd grounded in shallow water that had no right to be where it was. Now, soaked to the skin and nearly exhausted, they were rapidly running out of time.

"Sun's up, Captain," Craddock drawled for the tenth time, up on the deck.

"I know," Bourke gritted, throwing his weight into a heave that should have lifted a cast-iron safe. "Just keep a sharp lookout, Craddock. Let's go, Bleeker, together now!"

The two of them strained with all their might, and then Bleeker gasped for air and sobbed, "Maybe if we was to get all the men out here at once and heave, sir."

"No good, Sergeant," Bourke gasped, taking time to get his breath. "We've only got seven of our boarding party left. The four I sent ashore will have a rough enough time covering us from all sides as it is. If the two of us can't rock her off before the Japs find us, we're just out of luck."

"If only the Lieutenant would come looking for us!" sighed Bleeker. "I hope that damned Ruffino gets through to him and the guys you sent back to the hill. Jesus, it's getting lighter every minute!"

Bourke glanced shoreward. In the darkness, they'd unknowingly run aground on a point of land jutting out into the lagoon. The boat was in the shallows almost under the tops of the palms jutting out to sea and they shouldn't be visible from too far down the shore the way they'd come. But they were closer to the Japanese camp than they were to their own, and that damned sun was getting higher.

"Maybe if we lightened her, sir? By throwing everything over the side?"

Bourke thought about that. The bodies of two good men lay in the bow of the grounded boat. A blond viking named Swenholm had manned the tiller the way he'd said he could, even after the Japs had put a bullet in him. The big Swede had waited until they were safely out of range from shore before asking someone to take his place. He'd died less than ten minutes later.

Private Hoxie had picked up another Purple Heart to go with the one he'd picked up the night before. Only Hoxie's mother would put it beside his picture on the mantel at home. He'd never wear either of them on his chest.

Bourke hadn't wanted to take Hoxie. It didn't make sense to take a wounded man on a raid. But the kid had told Bourke about how many times he'd sailed out of Newport on his father's twelve-meter sloop, and it would have made even less sense to send him back to camp. There was no use feeling guilty about Hoxie. He'd done a hell of a job getting that sail up that fast, and the chance shot from the shore as they pulled away could have hit any one of them. Hoxie's other wound had nothing to do with that goddam Jap's lucky hit.

Of course, the fact that he'd volunteered for a mission while wounded would look good on the kid's records, Bourke thought. If they ever got off this stinking rock alive, he'd have to see the corps remembered it. A Navy Cross lying on the mantel with the other medals wouldn't put a dime in his

folks' bank account, but it might take some of the sting out of their tears.

"Once again, Sergeant. *Heave!*" he grunted, throwing the last ounce of strength into the effort. It was no use. Throwing the two dead boys over the side wouldn't lighten the hull enough to matter. And, without the cargo of coconuts in her hold, there wasn't much point in bothering.

"We'll just have to wait and hope the tide rises again before anybody spots us," Bourke said.

"Maybe they won't even try, sir," the Sergeant observed. "They got no way of knowing we're aground, you know."

"They'll be looking, Sergeant, if only for a chance to pick off one of our outposts. They built this boat for themselves, to get off this stinking scab in the ocean. Our stealing it out from under their noses is going to drive them nuts."

"Yeah," Bleeker grinned, "my heart bleeds for them."

"May as well get back aboard and stay in the shade of the sail as long as we're not going anywhere," Bourke said. "I could use another shot of that coconut water, anyhow."

With one lithe movement, the big American pulled himself up and over the rail, where he was soon joined by Bleeker.

The two of them were working on their respective coconuts when Craddock muttered something.

"See something, Craddock?" Bourke asked.

"Cain't say, suh," the scout drawled. "Thought I saw some leaves movin' more than they ought to, the way the wind's died down. But it might have been a jay-bird tryin' to make me think it's a Jap."

"Or a Jap trying to make you think it's a *jay-bird*," Bourke warned. "Keep both eyes peeled, Arkansas."

"Ain't no bitty Jap boy ever born that could sneak up on me without I seen him first, Cap'n," Craddock answered.

This was not exactly true.

Craddock was good. Damned good. But there was never a horse that couldn't be rode, and never a rider that couldn't be throwed. Lieutenant Kuroki knew a few things about jungle fighting, too. Corporal Craddock didn't know it, but a Japanese combat patrol, burning with anger, was moving in on him at that moment!

It was Leading Private Ando who blew it. Bourke's shore party had made the usual mistake of bunching up for mutual protection, and it had been childishly simple to slip past them, once Sergeant Tamura had overcome his temptation to mow down all four of them with his machine pistol. Tamura

had allowed his military judgment to overrule his blazing anger and Kuroki was about to get his boat back.

But Leading Private Ando was made of drier tinder. He'd put more than the others into the *Oyomesan*. He'd planned her, talked the Lieutenant into letting him start her, and built most of her from the keel up. Day after day, while others rested in the heat of noon, Ando had poured his life as a carpenter into her until he'd even learned to love the feel of the stubborn coconut lumber. He'd watched *Oyomesan* grow from a roughly squared keel-timber lying on the beach to a craft that was, to Private Ando, a thing of beauty. A culmination of all the learning and skill he'd struggled so long to master. He'd never build anything as beautiful as *Oyomesan*.

The *Oyomesan* lay just offshore a few yards down the beach. From the overhanging bank down there, a man could almost leap aboard her from the island. His carpenter's eye told Ando she was off plum, lying slightly to one side in the shallow water. Her rudder was bent back like a long beaver tail just breaking the surface and Ando noted his wooden cotter pins had worked the way they were supposed to. Her sail hung limply out to sea, and the mast seemed to have taken the shock of grounding without unseating itself. She was still seaworthy, in spite of the bungling mishandling of her abductors.

He could see two of them. One seated in the cockpit, motioning with his hand from time to time to someone else hidden by her thatched deckhouse, and another one standing on the stern thwart with one of his great ugly feet up on the edge of her transom. He cradled a rifle in his arms and from time to time seemed to be looking right at Ando. But he didn't seem to see the stocky carpenter.

"Just you wait, you blue-eyed rapist! Just you wait until the others catch up! Hai! You will be sorry! I hope we take you alive! I will make you scour *Oyomesan's* woodwork with sand and sea water until she is free of your *zainiñ-no* stench!"

The man on the stern yawned lazily and stretched. He sat down and hung his legs over the transom, facing Ando's unseen anger. He put the rifle down across his knees and reached in his pocket for something. He looked like he was bored.

"You will have something to entertain you before too long, my long-nosed gorilla," Ando whispered feverishly. Where in the devil were the others? Were they going to take all day getting around in position to attack? The tide was coming in.

Didn't they know the tide was coming in? Leading Private Ando stood there, fidgeting like a man with the itch and fighting an urge to call out to the other men of his patrol.

But Ando was a good soldier. He would have been able to make it.

And then Corporal Craddock did a terrible thing.

Idly drumming his heels on the transom as he sat watch on the stern, Craddock started whittling on the coaming along the top of it. He did it with neither malice nor purpose. To an Ozark man, spitting and whittling are second nature. He never took his eyes from the jungle as he did it, but the keen barlow knife his daddy had given him started slicing away long slivers of the coaming Ando had laboriously smoothed with dried sharkskin for many a weary hour in a hot sun.

"Bastard!" Ando shouted. "Hairy animal with a long nose! You not only rape *Oyomesan*, but now you mutilate her!"

Ando had never actually thought about killing until that moment, but now, as he ran out from between the trees, his mind was filled with a blind red rage against that surprised-looking barbarian pulling his legs back over the transom.

"Die, you sodomist!" Ando shouted, firing a shot that might have done him more good if he'd bothered to aim it. "I'll kill the whole lot of you!" Ando growled, fumbling with the bolt of his Arisaka to reload the chamber. "I'll rip your belly open with my bayonet and dance in your guts!"

He was ankle deep in the water now, moving toward the grounded boat with a terrible purpose. He saw the world through a red haze and there was a great rushing of wings in his being. The forgotten genes of some remote Malay sea rover had surged up out of the carpenter's hidden depths and taken possession of him. Ando didn't know it, but he'd gone amok.

He not only didn't know it, he wouldn't have given a damn if he had. Leading Private Ando was three hundred feet tall. There was fire coursing through his veins and his body was made of steel. There was nothing on the face of the earth that could stop him from the things he was going to do to that barbarian with the knife. Not now. He was taller than a pagoda and stronger than a shipyard crane. A sound was coming from somewhere far away and Ando felt something tap him respectfully on the chest. A bullet? What was a mere bullet to a man with skin of red-hot steel! If only he could remember how this damned bolt worked, but no matter. He would be there in a moment. The water was around his hips, as tall as he now was. In a moment he'd simply reach out

and pluck that American shooting at him from the stern of his bride and squeeze the life out of him like a grape. Another bullet pressed lightly against Ando, this time just above the belly button. He laughed. A terrible dragon's laugh. Leading Private Ando strode on and his teeth were sharp and his thoughts were dragon thoughts. His cowering victims were almost within the reach of his flaming breath and nothing could stop him. Nothing!

He was wrong.

The next bullet did not tap him lightly on the chest, or press respectfully at his guts. The next bullet took him right between the eyes and he didn't feel *anything*. He would never feel anything again. Craddock's aim had been deadly, and there are limits. Even for dragons.

Kuroki and the others had opened up from the jungle, even before Ando's head sank beneath the surface, but his rash attack had given the men aboard time to take cover behind her stout bulwarks and alerted the Americans on shore. The odds were still with Kuroki, and he still might have recovered the boat, had not another thing he hadn't foreseen developed.

Just as Bourke and the men with him had about given up hope, there was a deep-throated roar of machine-gun fire ashore in the jungle. The heavy-handed, no-nonsense, plodding drumming that nothing but an American Thompson makes. Bourke had the only tommy gun among his detail aboard the boat.

"It's Blair!" he shouted. "Ruffino got through and Blair's come through!"

"Give it to him, Lieutenant!" Craddock yelled, as more and more American guns joined Blair's in a rising chorus of triumph. A mustard-yellow figure moved back along the trees and Craddock took a shot at it. "They's falling back!" he exulted. "The mothers is outnumbered an' they's had enough!"

It was true. Giving the impression of overwhelming strength by spreading men dangerously thin and burning up more ammunition than he could spare, young Blair was putting on a damned fine impersonation of the Seventh cavalry rounding up Apaches as he moved his men along the coast. His flank hung open on the landward side, he hadn't taken time to scout the terrain, and, if he'd been headed into more than a platoon of Japanese infantry, he'd have been dead.

But Kuroki didn't know that. He didn't know the Ameri-

can force was no bigger than his own. He didn't know their flank was wide open, but he *did* know that *his* was. In another minute, that longer line of enemy would be sweeping around to take him from enfilade. If his men allowed themselves to be turned, they'd wind up with their backs to the sea, and three provenly deadly marksmen would be sniping at them from the rear.

Heartsick, and in spite of Tamura's desire to fight to the last man, Kuroki gave the order to fall back in good order.

"They'll have the boat, Lieutenant-san!" Tamura groaned. "All this effort, and so many men killed, and they'll have the boat."

"No they won't," sobbed Kuroki, unashamed tears streaking his powder blackened cheeks. "If we can't get her back, I can see that Ando's death was not something for them to laugh about as they sail over the horizon."

Then he took his lighter from his pocket.

Aboard the *Oyomesan*, Bourke and the others were screaming themselves hoarse with encouragement as the sound of firing told them they'd soon see themselves off this sand bar. With their shoreward flank defended, and a few more men to help lift her off, the boat would be afloat *before* the turning of the tide.

And then, as Bleeker looked up from reloading his rifle, he saw a man wearing mustard yellow less than ten feet away, in the tall grass where the land nearly came out to reach them. He was carrying a flaming torch of palm fronds and threw it even as Bleeker raised the rifle and snapped an unaimed shot at him. Then he ducked his head as the torch flew over him to hit the straw thatch of the deck house.

They tried. Bourke and the other two fought the blaze with all they had as it spread like a hungry cancerous growth up the great dry grass sail and along the tarred seams of her deck at the speed of a crawling snake. "Over the side!" Bourke shouted. "Splash water on her with your helmets."

They tried that, too. Standing in the shallows, cursing and sobbing as they heaved helmet after helmetful of sea water up into the roaring flames.

Men ashore dropped out of the fire-fight to join the greater battle against a greater enemy.

But this enemy won.

Within an hour, the *Oyomesan* had burned to the water-line. All they had to show for the night's efforts were a few badly charred coconuts.

IT might have gone on like that forever. Or until both sides discovered the war had been won someplace else. Guerrilla warfare seldom comes to a final decision. Sniping and skulking, night raids on each other's camps, and counter-raids by the other side. It can drag on for a hell of a long time, if both sides play it cool, and the leaders know what they're doing. In the normal course of events, it would have been a long, bitter, nasty little war in a forgotten corner of the bigger one, had not something happened to change it.

The coconuts had helped. They hadn't lasted very long, but the Americans had recovered much of their fighting strength, and knew a hell of a lot more about fighting, now, than they had when they'd landed on the island. A fortunate rain squall a few days after the burning of the boat had lasted long enough to fill the canteens and a few of the jerrycans with water that tasted of the bitter guano-spattered leaves it had dripped from. But there was no telling when it would rain again, and that pool would be guarded closer than ever, now.

Dennis Bourke was scouting along the coast, alone. He'd never personally seen this section of the island with his own eyes and there might be something the others had missed. An abandoned taro patch, maybe, or even a little sinkhole in the coral crust where some of that rain water still remained.

He'd moved to a point midway between the Japanese camp and his own, and was beginning to move a little more carefully than he had been, when he stopped suddenly and raised his rifle.

Offshore, in belly-deep water, stood a Jap!

He hadn't seen the American, and Bourke had all the time in the world to draw a bead on him from where he crouched in the shadows of a shore boulder. The guy looked like he was spear fishing, and Bourke could see he was unarmed, except for the spear. He'd made it out of bayonet and bamboo, and Bourke wondered if he could be the same one who'd made the one his men had found.

"Well, here's where you catch more than you figured," he murmured, raising the muzzle until the front sight rested on the brown chest of the man out there. He held it, unwavering, on the man's heart.

"What's the matter with you?" he mumbled. "What are you waiting for? You've killed Japs before this!"

He'd killed a lot of them. He'd killed as many as he could. But he'd never shot an unarmed man before.

"Lorie was unarmed," he told himself. "She was wearing an evening gown and that sandalwood perfume I bought her in the bazaar. She was lovely and good, and everything a guy's been dreaming about for a long time if he ever finds it. And she didn't have a gun."

He shuddered and pushed the thoughts away. The man in the sea was a blur as his eyes misted, and he said, "Stop being a baby, Bourke. Stop trying to pretend the only really important thing that happened in your whole life never happened, and face it. Face it like a man. You've seen war, Bourke. You've seen a lot of it. Stop trying not to look the one and only place you're afraid to look. Stop trying to say it's washing out, or not wanting people to bug you, or that you never had a little red wagon like the other little boys in the depression. Face it, soldier!"

For quite a long time, as Private Okuda quietly stalked the fish of the lagoon, he was blissfully unaware of the fact that an American rifle was trained on his heart. The tremor in Bourke's arms had stopped, once he'd made up his mind, and the sights never wavered as they slowly followed the fisherman's movements along the lagoon. No matter how Okuda might pause, or decide to reverse his steps, the cold, blue steel of the rifle pointed at him, its unwinking muzzle staring hungrily at his heart.

But the deadly marksman aiming the rifle wasn't really seeing Okuda. He wasn't even looking at him. Dennis Bourke didn't give a damn about the little brown man out there in the water.

Dennis Bourke was looking the war in the eye.

They'd taken the blanket off her. He'd told himself she was all right, after the All Clear sounded. He'd rummaged through the ruins of the Officers' Club like a madman, cursing himself for taking his eyes off her for even a second. He'd taken his eyes from her for only a moment. He never took his eyes off Lorie, if he could help it. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, and he'd had trouble believing she could really go for a mutt like him. But you can't be there every second, no matter how much you love someone. He'd gone somewhere. . . . Was it to get them another drink? Yeah, that was it. He'd stepped off the terrace and there'd been no warning. No warning at all. The first bombs had hit and all the lights went out and there'd been nothing but noise and confusion for millions and millions of years. Finally, he'd

fought his way out there, but Lorie was gone. Bombs fell around in big orange blossoms of flame and the air was filled with the stench of cordite and the screams of the dying, and he couldn't find Lorie.

Once, there'd been a momentary flash the same color as the dress she was wearing, and he'd thought that was her, down at the other end of the garden. But a bomb had landed a few feet from the woman in Lorie's dress and he'd told himself it couldn't have been Lorie. Lorie wouldn't cartwheel through the air like that, dress half torn away and nyloned legs flashing like propeller blades against the red sky. It had been someone else. Someone in a dress like Lorie's.

Later, when the All Clear sounded, he'd looked all over Manila for her. She hadn't been at the apartment, or any of the places they usually met. The streets were crowded with soldiers and ambulances and it had been hard as hell to get around, but he'd looked. He'd looked all that night.

It had only been at dawn that he'd gone down to the school. They were using the gym of this high school in the neighborhood as a temporary morgue, and he'd known she wouldn't be there. But, just to clear his mind once and for all of the possibility, he'd told himself, he'd gone down there.

The lights were on, even in the daytime, and the bodies lay under blankets in long ragged lines on the varnished basketball court. Relatives were moving along the line looking for something they might recognize as belonging to their missing. The Red Cross people had covered the faces, and most of the rest, but they'd been careful about leaving something out: A clenched hand with a charm bracelet on its wrist; a pair of feet in loud argyle socks; or maybe a purse or hat they'd picked up with what lay under the blanket—the thing nobody wanted to look at, unless they had to.

He'd passed the shoes twice before he stopped. Lorie'd had a pair of silver dancing pumps just like that, and he'd wondered if the bomb victim lying under that blanket had bought hers in the same place. He was just standing there, thinking about whether he ought to tell Lorie, when he found her, that some Filipino girl had been wearing shoes just like hers when she died. And then this Red Cross girl had come up to him and started to ask something. Only she'd seen the look in his eyes and gone to get someone else.

He'd told those doctors he'd just come down to see if there was anything he could do, but one of them had shot something in his arm and another one had said something about wanting to get things straightened out as soon as possible, and

so he'd told them he'd look at the Filipino under the blanket, if they really wanted him to that much.

Then they'd pulled the blanket away from what a bomb had left of some blonde girl in a dress like Lorie's. The bomb had shredded and torn the dress, and the smooth white skin underneath it was blackened and scorched all along one side. The girl's body was a crushed and broken thing, and half the face had been torn away, so that a blue eye stared up at him from the red ruin of its death's-head socket. He'd felt terribly sorry for the girl, but she hadn't been Lorie. Oh, sure, her hair was the same, and Lorie'd had a mole on her shoulder, like the one that fool doctor kept asking him about, but it hadn't *really* been Lorie. The sandalwood smell rising around his spinning head could have been from any one of the corpses lying on either side. It was just a coincidence, half the women in Manila wore sandalwood perfume.

When the effects of that shot the sawbones had given him wore off, he'd been walking along a dirt road with a rifle. He'd never figured out where he'd gotten the rifle, but he hadn't argued about it. The lines were only a little way up the Bataan peninsula, now, and the infantrymen he'd joined on the line hadn't argued about *that*, either.

Later, they'd given him a medal and talked a lot of crap about what he'd done. But he hadn't tried to do anything but forget.

He'd done a pretty good job. From Brisbane to Honolulu, he'd drowned Manila in bottles and bimbos and barroom brawls. And he never saw Lorie's face any more, these days, except in the dark.

"Ok, she's dead. She's dead and you blamed yourself for what happened. Sure, she might not have been killed if she hadn't run down to that end of the garden, but where would you have taken her? They could have hit one place as well as any other. And maybe you could have been at her side when she needed you, if she really needed you. What were you going to do, big man? Catch the bomb in your arms and set it down gently?"

He felt tears running down his cheek and he let them run all the little bastards wanted to. There was nobody here but him and that Jap, and the Jap wasn't looking.

The world was a tear-blurred haze of shifting light patterns now and he let the patterns shift and flow as they wanted until a face he'd known when the world was younger seemed to be smiling through at him from wherever it was, now.

"Hi, Lorie," he whispered. "First time I ever saw you like this in the daylight."

And somehow, as the smiling face he remembered faded away slowly, Dennis Bourke knew he'd never be haunted by it in the dark any more.

His eyes were clearing, now. The front sight was still trained dead on the Japanese fisherman. That was something to think about.

He hadn't killed Lorie. That out there in the water, *that's* what had killed the woman he loved. His finger tightened on the trigger as he wryly thought of the Chief. Maloney, Bourke knew, would say he was trying to transfer his guilt, or some other weird nonsense about compensation, or frustration, or complexes. The Chief was full of crap like that. Read too much for a man who drank.

All right, that *wasn't* the Jap who'd killed Lorie. But he was still a Jap, and there was a war on. What the hell was he fritzen' around for? Shoot the bastard or forget about it, for Chrissake! "Hell with it," Bourke shrugged, lowering the muzzle. "Can't shoot a man on my birthday, and this is my birthday, sorta."

And then he saw the shark.

Okuda didn't. The big white-tipped fin of an old and ravenous tiger shark who'd been trying to find its way out to sea for days knifed through the water behind the spear fisherman. Okuda's brown legs were unfamiliar fare to the monstrous swimming appetite, but the tiger hadn't grown so big by being picky about its menu. With a lazy swish of its powerful tail, the shark glided toward its intended victim with gaping jaws, the rubbery tip of its snout curling the surface in a little bow wave ahead of its fin.

Without thinking, the American jumped to his feet and ran down toward the water. "Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, you fella-boy, big fish gonna kai-kai you chop-chop!"

Okuda, no more familiar with pidgin English than he was with any other kind, stared in amazement as another of those crazy Americans started yelling meaningless nonsense at him. Not knowing what else to do, he smiled shoreward and bowed.

"Damn!" Bourke swore. He threw the rifle up on his shoulder and fired at the bow wave in front of the fin. Even if he didn't hit it, he might turn the damned thing before it closed the gap.

Unfortunately, Okuda, whose simple trust in human nature

did have *some* limitations, after all, thought Bourke was shooting at *him*!

With an unhappy cry, the fisherman turned away and headed out to sea, directly into the tiger shark's path.

Bourke fired again, even as Okuda saw his error and tried to move back to the beach. There was a spout of water near the bow wave and Bourke thought he might have hit the damned snout. And then Okuda's dreadful scream knifed across the water.

"Wa tasukeru!" he called as the teeth closed down like clashing baskets of broken glass, and he wasn't sure, at the time, whether he meant the Shinto gods of the deep, or anyone who by some miracle might be within earshot. He'd forgotten the tall American with the rifle; forgotten the friendship Okuninushi-no-Mikoto may have owed him for all those offerings. At the moment, nothing existed in the blood-billowing world of Okuda but pain!

He was strong. So strong that he made it quite close to shore before the shark had swallowed the sizable amount of Okuda's flesh it had sheared off in its first strike, and decided in its dim brain that it wanted more. Bourke was ankle-deep in the water when he saw the evil white-tipped fin circle back for another strike. "Come on!" he shouted at Okuda, wading deeper. There were six shots left in his magazine and Bourke was deeper in the water than any but a brave man would care to chance. Okuda, grasping his intentions, swerved sideways as the big marine aimed the gun. Bourke was aware of another figure fighting to run through the thigh-deep water at his side, but didn't take time to look as he zeroed in on the oncoming snout. The shark's nozzle was lighter than the water, below its tip. Bourke fired twice and the second round hit the water hard enough to discourage the brute's vaguely conscious following of the blood spoor in the water. With the instinct for self-preservation overriding the instinct to eat, the shark rolled sluggishly on its side to veer away from the hammer blows in the water. There was a split second when its turn brought its dead-looking underside almost to the surface. Bourke emptied the rest of the M1 into the shark's guts and had the satisfaction of watching it trailing brownish blood from at least three holes in its sandpaper hide. It wouldn't die right away, Bourke knew. A shark with a bullet in its heart will swim a few hours, and even feed, before it finally gets the message that it's dead and runs down.

The Japanese fisherman was in the shallower water, now,

and Bourke could see what a god-awful mess he was below the waist. He moved to help him, and, at the same time, so did the other man who'd run out from shore. Together, they dragged the terribly injured man ashore and laid him on the beach. It was only then, as they were working to get a tourniquet around the bleeding ruin of his thigh, that Bourke stopped to look at the other.

The guy was a Japanese officer.

Bourke glanced at his empty rifle, lying useless in the sand at his side, and then he relaxed slightly and said, "You speak English."

"A little," the other said, with a slight accent.

Bourke said, "You'd better get some of your medics to look at this guy, mister. He's in bad shape."

"And where will you be, all this time, American? Setting up another ambush for us?"

"We don't ambush medics," Bourke grunted. "Look, I'll clear out and we'll forget the whole thing for now, huh? I'll give you my word as an officer that I'll give you time to get this man back to your lines. After that, you're on your own."

"You are officer? I thought as much, on the few occasions I glimpsed you. I am Lieutenant Kuroki, Imperial Japanese army."

"Captain Dennis Bourke. United States marines. Look, are we going to sit here, swapping family pictures, or what? We're at war, mister, and I'm only taking time out for a reason you'd never understand if I told you, because I'm not sure I understand myself. But you've got two hours to do whatever you want about this man of yours. After that, it's business as usual."

He stood up, dusting the sand off his knees with his free hand, and said, "Sayonara, you sonovabitch."

"Captain," Kuroki said, coming to a sudden decision that would have sent Sergeant Tamura into a running fit, "may I ask you a question?"

"Anything but my name, rank and serial number, mac. They're well-kept military secrets."

"You said something about a medic. Did you mean a medical orderly? Is it possible you have such a person in your own command?"

"Maybe," Bourke answered, "what if I did?"

"This man will die if he does not receive proper attention. I have another in camp with gangrene. I find a medical orderly very much desired at the moment."

"Yeah, well, don't call us, we'll call you. Unless you have

some sort of deal in mind? What do *we* get out of putting a couple of Jap infantrymen back on the line? Aside from a bullet in the head, I mean."

"This island is far from the war, and all of us are stranded here indefinitely, Captain. You may kill a few more of my men, or I may pick off a few of yours, but we are stalemated, Captain. You are enough of a soldier to know this."

"Ok, so that's still no reason to make life any easier for your side. I got problems of my own."

"I suggest a truce, Captain. This island offers few comforts at best, and the typhoon season is almost upon us. We worked together, just now, to face the common enemy of all men, death. Why should we not work to face hunger and thirst and all the other forms of death this fleck of dust on the ocean threatens us with?"

"Yeah, but I have no authority to declare a truce."

"Nor I, but your men and mine are not the real enemies here."

"No? Well, you've sure been giving it the good old college try!"

"Wait until the typhoons sweep down on us. There is only one water hole on this island. It must be sandbagged well ahead of time if it is not to be contaminated by salt as the waves roll high into the trees. We cannot do it, with your men sniping at us from the jungle."

"Yeah? Well, my heart bleeds for them. My men can't even get at the friggen' water!"

"That could be arranged, Captain. Your men would be free to have as much water as they want, in return for my men being allowed to work unmolested to conserve it. You have a medical man and supplies. I have not. On the other hand, I have food, in limited quantities, and could grow more, if my gardeners were left alone. And you have no food up there on your hill."

"The hell you say!" Bourke snorted. "I've got enough to hold out as long as you'd like to try me, if you want to lay siege to my positions."

"Who are we trying to fool, Captain? You can't have more than a few rations left, even if your plane was loaded dangerously with supplies. You have no food. No water. Soon, your ammunition will run low, as mine will. And what then? Shall we fight in the jungle with teeth and claw, like animals? Are we not men?"

"Cold steel might last longer than ammunition," Bourke mused.

"Hail! And you and your men are big. But mine are strong, and they know this island. It will be a long and dirty business at best."

"That's about what war is, mister. A dirty business at best, but keep talking. I'd like to see a little more of the picture."

"My proposition is simple. We agree to a truce, until such time as one side or the other is relieved. As professionals, and I know you must be a professional, Captain, we both know that whoever is *not* relieved first is finished when the other's forces arrive against our feeble defenses. Therefore, it is useless to make ourselves needlessly miserable. We will simply stop killing one another until such time as there's a sane reason to, and cooperate in those efforts where mutual cooperation will make things better for your men and mine. Does this not make sense?"

"If some of the guys who run this world made as *much* sense, Lieutenant," Bourke smiled, "you and me wouldn't be here."

He thought a moment, looking down at the smaller man kneeling over his injured comrade. Then he said, "How do I know I can trust you? Sure, you're friendly as hell right now, when I've got the gun. But I've heard some stories about your side . . ."

"And I yours, Captain. But I know you can be trusted, because I saw you save a Japanese from death, in a moment when man's greater patriotism, to his own species, overcame your sense of duty in this momentary unpleasantness between our peoples."

"Yeah, but I don't . . ."

And then Kuroki drew the pistol Bourke hadn't seen and added, "And you now know you can trust *me*, because that gun is empty, and I could have killed you any time I wanted while we talked."

For a long time Dennis Bourke didn't answer. And then he grinned and said, "Lieutenant Kuroki, you just made a deal."

AND so, peace came to the island. Not all at once, of course. Their officers might make all the gentlemen's agreements they cared to, but too many guys had died, on both sides, for everybody to get together for a wienie roast.

Getting Maloney to make the first move didn't turn out as tough as Dennis had thought it might be, from the Petty

Officer's previous remarks. Unarmed, and accompanied most of the way by Corporal Craddock, who knew that part of the island pretty well by now, the Chief was met a mile from the Japanese camp by a surly Sergeant Tamura and two other noncommittal types who told Craddock to wait right where he was, for now.

"Don't wait up for me if I'm late," the Chief had cracked, and then Craddock was alone on the trail, wondering if he'd ever see the crazy Irishman, or his medical kit, again.

Of course, there was always the chance the Nips were playing it on the level, the way the Captain seemed to figure, and Craddock did have orders not to rock the boat, but still... It was tempting as hell to just sort of mosey on down thataways and see could he find out what the Japs was up to....

"You heard the Cap'n, country boy!" he muttered to himself, easing down on a palm log. "He was sore enough about me not bringin' in that bitty Jap fisherboy, 'stead of swappin' him for fish. I reckon we better jest set us here and wait until somebody *else* fouls up the truce."

As he lay his rifle across his knees and leaned back against an upright trunk to settle down for what he knew might be one hell of a long afternoon, a Japanese soldier named Goro let out his breath and smiled in relief as he relaxed his grip on the firing mechanism of a Nambu machine gun, to settle down for *his* long dull afternoon's vigil.

A wary Sergeant Bleeker, leaving his M1, and those of his work detail, as far back from the pool as agreed upon, died a little inside with each step as he walked across that ominously crunching shell path to the pool's edge. Slicker Searcy's body had been picked up and apparently buried by the Japs, but there was a patch of stuff near the spot the Slicker had gone down that nobody really thought was dried chocolate. The American work party filled their canteens and jerrycans quickly and quietly, without the usual joshing around they'd been getting away with, ever since old Bleeker'd decided he was a Gung-ho marine. They'd seen a couple of over yakka-tive types die rather suddenly since landing on this island, and they all knew there were Japanese guns trained on them from the trees across the pool.

Just at the end, when they were ready to go, a Japanese in rumpled, mustard-yellow cotton came around the far end of the pool, along the path. He stopped a respectful distance, put both hands together in what Bleeker took to be an

attitude of prayer, noticing what looked like rosary beads in the man's hands, and bowed.

He waited to see what the Americans would do about that, noted that they only seemed to be going to stare at him in the noncommittal way you'll see a plainclothesman stare at a junkie who says he's kicked the habit, and smiled nervously.

"Officer, sir," he said in accented, but understandable English to Bleeker, "would it be desirable to you to speak of a religious matter?"

"Must be a chaplain," Waller muttered.

Chaplains are saluted, and the Geneva convention said a US marine salutes all officers and colors of foreign powers, *including* enemy officers during a truce or while a prisoner of war. Sure it did.

Sergeant Bleeker was a thirty-year man who'd decided to soldier for now, but there's such a thing as stretching your Gung Ho. He nodded brusquely and said, "What's on your mind, mac?"

"If you please, honorable sir, name is Tokumaru. Would like to know matter concerning worship of black people in your country."

"Well, now, maybe we don't treat 'em as rough as we used to, but nobody I know's started *worshipping* any of them yet."

"Excuse, please. Mean temple black people go to. Is cross like on temple of Kirisutokokyooto-no, Starfish of Yudaya-koo-no temple, or do the black people find some other crest pleasing to their gods?"

"He's talkin' about Johnson!" one of the gyrenes growled. "The squint-eyed bastard's tryin' to rub it in about them gettin' Johnson!"

"At ease," Bleeker growled. "Private Johnson, our colored man, was a . . . *what* the hell you say that was? Anyhow, he went to a church with a cross on it. What's it to you?"

"Ah sóo?" Tokumaru hissed. "Was most fortunate guess, and now I sleep easier for know spirit of unfortunate black man rests under proper sacred sign to his family shrines." He bowed three times in quick succession and started back the way he'd come. Then he stopped and turned to ask, "Officer, sir?"

"Yeah?"

"The war, Officer, sir? We have been so long without hearing. . . . Would you find it pleasing to speak on how it is with our two most unfortunate Empires?"

Bleeker really tried. It's right in the articles of war that

you *never* give the enemy information on *anything* he doesn't know for himself. But Bleeker was only human, and it wasn't as if he was handing out classified information, now, was it?

"We ain't no *Empire*, mac," Bleeker growled. "And I don't know how much I oughta tell you about how *my* country's making out, but *yours* is doing *lousy*! Bull Halsey's sunk your friggen navy, MacArthur's about ready to slaughter you creeps on the north end of Bougainville the way we just done at Guadal, and they say our new fighter planes have been knocking the shit out of your goddam Zero-san." He looked at the other marines with the belligerent pride of a man who's belatedly discovered he's proud of his country, and snapped, "Let's get in gear and get this water back to the hill. I ain't got time to run a friggen news bulletin for that goddam Tojo over there."

"Please!" Tokumaru hissed politely, drawing his breath in between his teeth, and stung by a low blow Bleeker never knew he'd thrown, "Is name Tokumaru. No relation to honorable Prime Minister of my country." Under his breath, he murmured, "Prime Minister by assassination: Not by will of all those mothers whose sons' ashes I prayed over before the K. T. took me away. Hai, not by the will of our poor Hirohito-san, locked in his palace like a puppet in its glass case. Not even by will of Admiral Yamamoto, if what they printed before that paper was suppressed was true. Six months, he gave us. Six months of uninterrupted victories, as our army and navy ran wild before the American giant had time to realize their 'little brown brothers' built planes and ships, as well as wind-up toys. Six months to smash the peacetime colonial outposts of the major powers, and seize complete control of every island and land mass, and the waters between them, from Hawaii to the Ganges Delta. If we could do that in six months, Yamamoto wrote in that paper, it might prove possible that London and Washington would negotiate a settlement, as Tojo planned, with Japan returning Australia and Hawaii, perhaps even Singapore, in return for their Southeast Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and a free hand in China. But, alas, we took longer than six months, and Yamamoto-san has been sent to sea to keep his mouth stopped up. Poor Japan. . . . What will become of you, my mother and greatest love?"

The Americans were leaving now, loaded down with the water his Lieutenant had offered in a spirit of charity rare among the younger officers these days. Would Japan have to burn off the whole generation, as one cauterizes a disease,

before the country even Tojo loved, in his own misguided way, could once more stand as a trusted and honorable man stands among his friends? It was coming, the bóozu felt, sick at heart. The giant even a simple saffron-robed man of faith had heard of in his ordered world of contemplation, had shaken itself angrily, armed itself in the cold fury of a two-sword samurai, and struck back.

"Six months," Tokumaru mumbled numbly, as he headed back to where he'd been working on inscriptions for the graves of the dead Americans the Lieutenant had ordered properly buried. "Nearly six months to the day, after our newspapers had reported nothing but victory since Pearl Harbor, and the American marines stormed ashore on Guadalcanal and wrested away the airstrip we were building. Hai! Arrogantly landing bombers before the far side of the airfield had been cleared, and named it after that American hero with the oddly Japanese sounding name of Honderusan. Perhaps a Japanese-American from Hawaii?"

He shook his head and ducked out of sight between the trees, with one last ghostly remark floating in his wake for anyone who might have been listening. "Six months to pin the British and Americans to the sumo mat, the Admiral said, and, after that, make up your minds to accepting the best terms they offer, or resolve to die. The British will hold, somewhere in Burma, and the Americans will come back as surely and steadily as the spring tides. Once they arm, it's surrender or die to the last man."

Japanese soldiers didn't surrender. Tokumaru knew. They had learned from the American broadcasts, before their radio went out, that not even American propaganda claimed more than a handful of fourteen or so Japanese prisoners in all the fighting on Guadalcanal. The Kiska garrison had killed themselves to the last man with their grenades. Kámi! If Tojo's cabinet refused to make peace, what would they do? Even Tokumaru, a simple bóozu who felt only hatred for war and other forms of violence, knew he'd *never* be able to surrender. The thought of the contempt on the faces of the men he'd begged his life back from, the thought of the wrenching pain in his father's heart to learn his son had allowed himself to take the way of a *Hóryo*. . . . Gah! Better to steal from the shrine and spend the yen on a drunken weekend with a Yashiwara girl! *That* his family might live down!

Meanwhile, it was a pleasant breezy day, and one could contemplate the thousand unknown names of God as both

sides took a respite from killing on this one small part of the world. For Tokumaru's part, he would keep the truce to the end of the war and beyond, if only it was the will of God and the others.

Meanwhile, at the very worst, his exhausted, overwrought comrades would enjoy a few hours of relaxation. He prided himself on his priestly calm under any and all circumstances. (He had contemplated the unworthy past existence of the prison cockroaches all the time the K. T. were beating him. Buddhism offers some compensation in telling you the man who murders you will probably spend *his* next life as a flea on some dog, who merely took a few bribes in *his* human existence.) Nevertheless, Tokumaru had suddenly become aware of how good . . . how really good it feels to walk in broad daylight without inwardly bracing for that sniper's bullet you *know* you'll never hear, but can't help listening for. The Americans felt the same way, he could tell. That officer with the stripes on his sleeve had managed to control himself, as one would expect, of his class. But you could see the tense, taut lines in the young faces of the others. You could see the glaze of too much fear, held too long, in their eyes. The other young one who'd spoken, the one with bullet holes in his helmet, had been on the knife's edge of hysteria, and Tokumaru knew he'd looked at death staring out of a clean-cut young American's eyes when there had been a moment of confusion, back there.

"If it pleases you, Great Kámi of a thousand countenances," Tokumaru prayed, "grant those young men from the east of the sunrise your greatest gift of Ansin. Let them go about their daily tasks with serenity and peace of mind for as long as your present manifestation makes itself known. And if, Lord of All the Universe, you once more see fit to allow war to return to this one microscopic speck on a small and insignificant star in your infinite universe, grant me, at least as consideration for the years I've devoted to your shrine, if nothing in my soul should please your eyes, that my fears for my animal flesh will not betray me, even for a moment. Grant me that, if I must die in this war I find meaningless, I die without betraying my trusts, either as a priest, a soldier, or a loving son of Mother Japan."

BY the time Maloney got back, the truce was beginning to look like it wasn't. B'air had been pestering Bourke

for over an hour about forming a rescue party and tear-assing in like the Light Brigade at Balaklava, without saying how they were going to live through it, as he overcame his dislike for the Chief in his even greater dislike for the "Dirty Jap bastards."

Bourke, not knowing what else he could do, could only sweat the Chief out.

It took one hell of a time.

And then, long after Bourke had given up worrying, and was wondering how the devil a Board of Inquiry was going to view this whole stupid mess (a commanding officer generally does not send one of his men to be tortured to death unless he absolutely has to), Bourke spotted Maloney's dirty white navy cap coming up the hill in the gathering dusk.

He had company.

Craddock was with him, of course, and a work detail of six Japanese privates under the command of a bandy-legged noncom who looked as happy about the whole deal as a kid taking a dose of castor oil. A big one. On poles between them, the Japanese carried baskets.

"What's that crap?" Blair muttered, as the work detail put it down just outside the barrier and stepped back.

"Taro and satumaimo, junior," Maloney snickered. "You must know what taro is by now, as fresh-water as you still are. It's what they make that friggen poi they're alla time singin' about in them Hawaiian songs. Bet none of the tin-pan alley jerks ever *tasted* poi, or they wouldn't keep screaming to get some more." He made a disgusted face and added, "Tastes like library paste, only not as nice. The way the Japs cook it is to fry it like potatoes, it swings better *that* way. These things look like dog turds are satumaimo; Japanese sweet potatoes. Grow a hell of a lot bigger in their home islands, but this soil out here, and all the friggen rain we been gettin . . ."

"Never mind that," Bourke cut in. "What's with the Japs bearing gifts?"

"Greeks, you stupid basser! It was *Greeks* bearin' gifts. Do these guys look like a bunch of Greeks to *you*? Anyway, these Japs bearin' gifts are Kuroki's payment for what I done over there today. He seems to think I deserve some goddam medal, and I told him, since they ain't got no *booze*, I'd take it out in produce."

He pointed at the noncom and gleefully cackled, "You wanna see one angry Jap, guys? That guy trying to be Ming the Merciless is Sergeant Tamura. I asked could he come

along so's I wouldn't get *et* by wolves on the way home, and *he* hates me worse than *Blair* does! Been staring at me all day like he was thinking of playing she loves me, she loves me not, with my arms and legs. Some of the others over there seem pretty reasonable, but this guy, *he* thinks he's the Yellow Peril, all by hisself."

"You get squared-away over there, Chief?"

"Sure. They had that guy you pulled away from the shark and this kid, Hirano's his name, with a lovely dose of tropical ulcers working their way into a staph infection, septic poisoning, and a whiff of gangrene just rearing its stinky little head. No problem with either one of them. Japs are good patients."

He suddenly turned to glare at one of the men and say, "Remember that, next time you spit out them atabrine pills I give you, Shorty!"

"That must have taken some doing, Chief," Blair said, steering the conversation back in obvious friendliness. Maloney blinked, but he'd met guys like that before. They divided situations like this one into guys in white hats and guys in black hats. Right now, the Chief knew he and all the others, even Bourke, were wearing white hats in the Lieutenant's book, because they were all Americans and everybody knew that America had the highest mountains, the tallest trees, the biggest chocolate malt for 15¢, and the best popsicles.

These other guys, now. These baggy-pants Japs on the other end of their island, well . . . *those* bastards ate fishheads and rice and worked their asses off for less than a white man could live on. *They* wore *black* hats!

Maloney became suddenly aware, as he glanced over that way, that Sergeant Tamura was standing rigidly in a brace that would have gotten him through West Point, and obviously not enjoying it.

He knew better than to give *Tamura* a military command, so, in a voice much politer than he usually used in English, Maloney said,

"Arigatoo gozaimasu, Tamura-san."

The burly Sergeant didn't bother to answer. His orders were to convey the bastard and three baskets of produce to the American lines. Nobody had said anything about being *nice* about it.

The barbarians seemed to be making no move to remove the tubers, he noticed. Too smart to let him get an idea of how a man wove through that Chinese brush barrier. The

Lieutenant hadn't said anything about leaving the *baskets* with the long-nosed devils, had he? Tamura looked thoughtfully at one of the sharpened bamboo stakes. There'd been a few American irregulars in China, but it was probably something they'd learned in the Philippines. Tagalog Barrios sometimes had a hedge like that. He frowned back as the Chief bowed slightly, with a crooked leer, and repeated his thanks. Was this dismissal? The man's Japanese was terrible. Kept using inanimate verbs with animate objects, and runping his consonants together like a drunk. . . . If that was Tagalog work, it might mean they had some of those damned Philippine scouts with them! He hadn't thought any of these fishbelly-faced zzu-zzus could have cut the hawser of the boat right under him like that. Either Philippine scouts, or old hands from the American Colonial army Sergeant Tamura had fought in the Philippines. He'd seen what had happened to the American PW's after Bataan fell. The Lieutenant was *mad* if he thought any of *those* bastards would keep their word to a Japanese officer after the way General Homa kept *his* word to Wainwright after the Americans surrendered. Tamura was a Japanese Regular, and hardly bothered by a little thing like bayoneting a woman, if she was in the way. But Homa had broken his word, and many of Tamura's buddies had been just as shocked as the Death March wended its bloodstained way up the peninsula, not because American soldiers lay dead in the ditches every few yards along the way, or because they really thought the American wounded *deserved* to ride in the vehicles Homa had promised the American general, but because a Japanese gentleman had broken his *word!*

The Lieutenant should know about this! he thought, quickly abandoning his half-formed plan to insist on returning with the empty baskets to annoy this ever so smart Maronusan. He turned to the men who'd accompanied him and, without calling them to attention, said, "Zyoozú na! Koogan suru!" and turned to walk stiffly down the hill without looking back to see if his men were coming. As the last of them picked up his pole and scurried after what was by no stretch of the imagination a march, Maloney shook his head after him and warned, "Watch that one, Dennis. That's one real Nikui-no Jap! I didn't have enough on my goddam mind today, what with tryin' to remember what Sumiko taught me and that goddam Tamura has to follow me around, sniffin', like I'm some goddam kinda spy!"

"That's one of the main reasons I sent you in there, Chief." Bourke smiled. Indicating the food, he asked Ser-

geant Bleeker to have it brought inside the compound, and led the Chief up the hill. He waited until Maloney had wrapped himself around some of the rapidly dwindling bourbon and gotten himself seated comfortably on the edge of his borough. And then he insisted, "Give, Maloney! What did you find out while you spent the day with our buddies?"

"Nothing," shrugged Maloney.

"Come on, Chief, this is a pretty funny time to pull the Hippocratic oath on me, for a guy who's busted every other one on the books!"

"Crap, Denny, I *saw* lots of things, but I just don't *know* too much. This Kuroki plays it closer to the vest than any Jap I ever knew, and one of Sumiko's brothers was pretty goddam sneaky. Anyhow, they led me in through a defense perimeter they didn't give me too much of a chance to see, while this friggen Tamura's got a náihu Jim Bowie would have been proud to own at my back. Acted like he was just waiting for me to ask a classified question about the weather as an excuse to karosu the crap out of me! Anyhow, they led me inside and walked me straight and narrow down this little path between a mess of pandanus huts. Sort of like that one Tagalog slum around the poor mission across the bay from us in Manila, remember? Anyhow, I counted maybe eight or ten huts, but that's not saying they had more in a dispersion pattern I couldn't get the hang of. One thing, they must be pretty crowded. Had this one wounded boy on the CO's own silk toki from home, and in his private hut. Spotted some papers on this low teeboru, but I can't read them Chinese characters the high-class Japs use, an' I didn't think it was a good idea to try an' swipe any, with Tamura sitting in my hip pocket. Oh, yeah, they had a mess of boxes sitting right where I'd be sure and notice.

"One of them had DANYAKU KYUUHOO stenciled on it in roman letters, which didn't worry me half as much as they wanted it to, on account I know that if they had a couple of cases of mortar ammo down there, we wouldn't be sitting up *here* all this time, while they tried to pick us off with small arms fire. They had six, seven boxes somebody'd hand-lettered SYURYUUDAN all over, in case I couldn't figure them for ammo cases by myself, but . . . I dunno, they got grenades, all right, but why plop 'em down right where they're taking me through."

"The old poker bluff," Bourke shrugged, "unless it's a *double* bluff, and I kind of think this Kuroki's capable of playing chess."

"They call it syoogi, and they play it good, Dennis. Anyhow, I've been tryin' to stay sober as hell on this one subject, on account we're all dead if I make a bum estimate that suckers you into a wrong move."

"You're ok, that way, Chief," Bourke said quietly. "You're a goddam drunken beachcomber every other way, but you're a good man with the advice, if a man really needs some."

"Yeah," the Chief began, and then his watery eyes focused on Bourke curiously, and he took his time before he asked, "Does that include Lorie?"

"Yeah, Chief. That takes in Lorie. Maybe I couldn't get screwed, blewed, and tattooed on this rock, but I looked what happened in the eye, and I still feel like hell about it, but at least I'm not hitting people about it, anymore."

"Not even Japs, Dennis? That was a Jap bomb, you know."

"And I'll drop one on Tokyo, if they ask me to, Chief. But I've stopped climbing walls about it. I don't know how in Christ's name I came through those first days on the line back at Bataan, with my one-man charges up San Juan Hill, but I did. Lots of other guys on both sides thought they were Teddy Roosevelt in those days and I was bigger than most of them; lasted long enough to know I couldn't win the war all by my lonesome . . . And, lately, I've figured that killing every man, woman, and child in Japan won't bring back Lorie, or even make me feel one stinking bit better about losing her. All I can do from here on in is finish the goddam thing and get it over with, without leaving any more Japs feeling about *their* Lories, than I do about mine."

Neither man spoke for a time, as the darkness gathered about them on the hill. Maloney had been vaccinated with a phonograph needle at an early age, and, drunk or sober, hadn't stopped talking very often since. But there are times when even a chatterbox knows enough to shut his mouth and let a strong man stare away long enough not to look like a damned fool with those watery eyes.

Bleeker had ordered a kitchen detail to see about doing something with the Japanese vegetables. Maloney watched three of the men starting the fire, now safe to build up here in the open, until he felt safe to venture, "Lieutenant Kuroki's sending us some dried katuo, tomorrow, he says. That's them fish they catch out here that're like bonito. This Okuda character caught and dried a mess of them before he decided to play tag with sharks."

"That the one I hauled out, Chief? How's he coming?"

"Hell, you can't kill a Jap fisherman! Ever see the goddam

boats they go out in? Bled all to hell, of course, and me with no plasma, but I gave him a shot of Four Roses I just happened to have with me, and pasted him back together. Old shark had done a real job on Okuda, but it looked a lot worse than it was. One of his buddies had enough sense to tie up his severed artery and they'd loosened the tourniquet often enough before I got there. The leg hadn't atrophied. All I hadda do was sew up the worst gashes with some of his own fishline one of them unraveled for me, smear some coconut oil over the bits and pieces of hamburger I couldn't seem to get stuffed inside what skin he still had, and tell him to sleep on his belly for a long, long time. He was a good boy. Never called me some of the things I've been called giving a typhus shot."

"Didn't you have *any* surgical thread or anesthetic, Chief? Seems to me you must have some of that sulfa ointment in your kit, too."

"Sure, Denny, only I jus' had a little, see? Okuda was a tough-as-nails fisherman who's been running hooks through his fingers since he was three. He didn't *like* what I hadda do to his ass-end, unnerstand, but he could *take* it. The kid with the bad leg was young and in a lot worse shape by the time I got there. Running a temperature of 104 when I bent over him. Gave him all that was left of my aspirin, maybe half a small bottle, and worked on Okuda while I waited to see if Hirano was gonna cool down enough to touch him. That's the only reason I worked on the fisherman first. Hirano was in a bad way, an' I knew I'd need all the stuff I had, along with a couple of staff nurses from the Mayo Clinic. I put Okuda through hell so that the kid might not have to go through all the crap I was about to pull on him, and then die of a pulled suture, or a stinking little post-operative infection. As it was, this Hirano kid had no bed of roses before I was through. Lots of hair on that kid's chest, though. A guy'd be proud to have a son like him, the way he acted. Christ, I seen rear admirals raise more fuss over having their piles treated, and this little bastard grins up at me and asks if this makes him eligible for our Purple Heart! We hadda hold him down until the leg was off, even with four of his buddies holding him across the Looie's writing table. He was stewed to the gills on the last of my bottle and some saki that goddam Tamura surprised us with. Said he'd been saving it for an occasion and this sure as hell was one, so we heated the saki and poured it down on top of the booze. You ever even *smell* warm saki fumes, Dennis? The little bastard must have been drunker than I've been in my life when we started. I

was sober enough, on account of being so goddam noble with my booze, to remember a little Gray's Anatomy, so I knew what I hadda do and tried to get it over before he came to. That's a laugh! If booze won't mend the broken heart, like the old song says, it does even worse to make a guy forget his leg coming off. . . ."

Maloney stopped suddenly and swallowed a drink. He stared morosely at the nearby fire for a while before he said, "Shit, nobody wants to hear about the scene where the alcoholic medical man overcomes his life of degradation and shame to save the day. Remember that picture we saw in Moresby that time? Where they pour coffee down the front of the guy's shirt and in his hair and he keeps sayin' I can't do it, I can't do it, as if *any* drunk ever thought he couldn't do *anything*. It wasn't like that, Dennis. I was sober enough to know what I was doin' when I started, an' I just done what I hadda."

He lapsed back into a melancholy silence while Bourke called Ruffino over from a nearby foxhole. How the hell can you tell a guy some things, he wondered, without sounding like a goddam jerk? How do you explain parting the cartilage of a boy's knee with a hastily cauterized bayonet blade because your own rusty scalpel won't cut that deep, and you're sweating like a pig and swearing in English at the officer for not holding the goddam lamp steady, and the dull blade slips and grates on raw bone, and all the time you're grinning like the Cheshire cat and hissing, "Hotondo, musuko. Sumanai, musuko!" Like he's maybe that goddam kid you an' Sumiko woulda had if she hadn't caught that bug, and all this time the kid's got his teeth gritted tight like a lockjaw victim, only somebody's inside his throat growling, "Tomeru! Hai, TARU, Eiseihei-san, *Temeru!*" And then Sergeant Tamura's got that damned shiv against your kidney again and hissing, "You're doing that on purpose, American *musi!* You have not the courage to *face* one of us with steel in his hand, not even a boy. You are *trying* to hurt Hirano-san!" Yeah, how do you tell it to the others? How do you tell Dennis about how quiet it gets, with even the Lieutenant looking at you very damned thoughtful by the time you've gotten through most of the fibular connection. Or how, no matter how you try an' make it quick an' neat an' over with, you keep having to stop to suture every time you get through telling the kid, "Hotondo! Hotondo!" Until even Hirano's sick of hearing it as he growls, "You are the household god of liars, American! You have *been* saying you're nearly over

for a million years!" And then, how do you tell about that knife going into your back and you wondering whether that friggen hothead, Tamura, put it deep enough to worry about while you're right in the middle of parting the tibular connection the way they tell you to without a bone saw. You sound pretty corny, tryin' to tell about standing there in the shadowed interior with a lamp in your face, sweat running down your chin, and that warm, wet feeling running down to your belt from where that psycho Tamura's holding the knife, and you go on parting the stubborn connective tissues with a scalpel you couldn't whittle one of Craddock's dohicky sticks with, and wondering if maybe you shouldn't mention to the Lieutenant that his top kick's making you nervous. . . . Only you remember the things you've heard about discipline being kind of whimsical in the Jap army, and you just go on like a file clerk waiting for five o'clock back home until the kid lets out a louder moan and Tamura says, "Musi! Filthy little body louse of a leprous whore! I *told* you what I would do if you hurt that boy again!" And then, how do tell about the Looie's sudden hard look at Tamura as he spotted you bleeding for the first time, or how Hirano saved the day by forcing a grin across his foam-flecked lips and cracking, "Tamura-san, this red-faced teki is making up for every American we killed getting this far, but, for the sake of ears grown weary of the musical tone of your voice, you old bastard, would you either step up and take his place or shut up?"

Dennis would understand, maybe, but the others wouldn't, and, even with a buddy like Denny, there were things a guy just keeps in there among the teddy bears and nursing bottles. A guy would sound like some kinda goddam fag, getting all dewy-eyed about a goddam Jap full of Yankee lead makin' him feel proud of a son he never had. Besides, even if he did fill in Bourke's missing copies of the *Medical Journal* for him, Maloney felt like a bigger ass than usual over what had happened after they buried the stump, and even a buddy-boy from before the war couldn't be trusted with knowin' a guy broke the articles of war!

"They were too cagey to let the Chief walk around, Ruff," he heard Dennis saying from somewhere far off. "But he got a look at a few ammo crates that might mean anything. I've been hoping, if only the two of you, between what you've seen at different times . . ."

"Less than a battalion over there, sir," Ruffino ventured, "no matter *how* many crates they piled up for the Chief, here. Don't care if he saw an eight-inch howitzer sitting over there,

Captain. If they had anything like battalion strength, they'd be up here munching these sweet potatoes tonight, instead of us."

"I figured they were padding their part, Ruff. Just like we've been padding *ours*. Those two quaker mortars Craddock whittled out of palm logs and dug in on our flanks where they can spot them, truce or no truce, is par for the course in fixed-position fighting. The trouble is, I can't tell how *much* he's bluffing."

"Maybe a company or two, sir. No more," Ruff insisted.

"You're both seeing boogymen," Maloney suddenly brightened. "Ain't none of you seagoing bellhops, besides Blair, ever taken a look in the *Order of Battle* book?"

"Don't getcha, Chief," Ruffino shrugged. *Order of Battle* books rarely got into the hands of anyone below the rank of Company COs, if the brass could help it.

"Name, rank, an' serial number of jus' about every friggen Jap military unit our guys know about. Tells you what Tojo's favorite brand of saki is, how often Yamamoto brushes his teeth every day, and stuff like—which field grade officers is a little on the crooked, or stupid, or maybe swishy side."

"What the hell's that got to do with us, Chief? Who cares if these Japs got a ten-foot robot, or a Benny the Morph for their CO? It's *them* we gotta worry about!"

"You're wrong, Ruff," Bourke mused. "Lee would have won at Gettysburg, had he known this new Union General, Meade, wasn't as big a jerk as the ones he'd chased all the way up into Penn State. Custer might have died in bed, if he hadn't taken this new War Shaman of the Sioux Nations as just another dirty old gourd rattler. It helps a lot, Ruff, to know who's over there on the other side of the board when you're playing chess, or even syoogi!" He glanced sideways and said, "Right, Chief? Hey, what's wrong with you, Maloney? You look like you've been seeing ghosts in that bottle!"

"A few," Maloney said, bitterly sober for a man who'd been putting it away like that. "Benedict Arnold, maybe, or, better yet, ol' Simon Girty. You remember ol' Simon, Denny? The cat that ran off and joined the injuns while they scalped his own people?" He shook his head in self-disgust and added, "Never understood ol' Simon. They make him out to be some sort of werewolf. Ten feet tall and ate children just to hear 'em holler. But you know, I think Simon jus' stopped by some goddam long house for a drink an' one goddam thing led to another!"

He suddenly looked at the bottle, said, "Sonovabitch!" and threw it as hard as he could into the hedgerow.

"You holding back anything I ought to *know*, Chief?" Bourke asked in a gently reflective tone, as Ruffino's eyes narrowed without comment.

"What's to tell, dammit? You ain't got no *Order of Battle* book, but I've thumbed through her a lot. Dull as hell, even when you *do* dig enough Jap to know that Shinryu Hohei-no tacked into a unit's numbers means it's a friggen Divine Infantry Dragon an' you better watch out."

"Spill it, Chief."

"Spill my ass, Captain. What's to spill? You wanna run-down on the Japanese Order of Battle? Nothing to it. Only, first I gotta tell you guys about Oka. That's a bad word to find in that book, guys. Means cherry blossom, see? They got cherry blossom divisions, and cherry blossom regiments, and ships, an' air squadrons and all sorts of things. Only they ain't cherry blossoms 'cause they're sissies, see? Cherry blossoms mean super-duper *bravery* in *their* neck of the woods, and if you ever meet any of those cats, run not walk to the nearest exit."

Bourke said, "You're stalling, Maloney. If all things were equal, and I was any other officer in the corps, you'd be in big trouble about now."

"Aw, shit, I'm in big trouble already, Denny!" Maloney moaned. "I mean, it ain't like I was one of these kids who never heard of things like OB books. Matter of fact, I'd been *thinking* about just that when I first got there. Figured Kuroki a little young and underrated for much more than a platoon. He's only a lousy Tyúui, you know. Rates as 1st looie in their paybook, but they still got ensigns like we used to, and the bums don't have any responsibility while they learn how to soldier. So Kuroki's classmates is expected to handle what our 2nd looies do. That Kuroki don't rank any higher than the Blair punk, far as real rank goes!"

Before Ruffino could cut in, the Chief held up a hand and said, "Jesus Christ, Ruffino! Don't you *never* give another guy the chance to get a word in edgeways? I'm tryin' to *tell* you how I *figured* the guy's command can't outnumber us more than two to one. That's not saying much, 'cause we ain't got but a handful of jerk kids, a Looie that oughta be spanked and put to bed, and four or five guys who know their ass from their elbow!

"Anyhow, even before I start slicing wounded Japs up like braunschweiger, I've doped out that there ain't no higher rankin' brass over there, see? An' *him* only a lousy Tyúui! Of

course, their old man might have been knocked off; from the way Tamura acts, he ain't been takin' orders from that boy long. . . . So, I keep the old eyeballs peeled, looking for a set of battleship plans they may have left out of a desk drawer, but there ain't much. Those guys don't go in for decorations. Give the clown a service ribbon now and then, or even a medal, if he gets killed, and save the brass for shell cases. You know how bare they keep their quarters? Makes it a bitch to swipe anything. I grabbed up a collar tab somebody'd been sewing on, with what might be a unit designation. And I pumped like a windmill, every chance I got."

His voice sank to a hollow note of despair as he said, "You know what? They pumped *me!* Put that goddam hand down off that pistol butt, Dennis, you know how it was with Sumiko an' me. If we'd ever *had* the little basser, he'd have been a squint-eyed gyrene! They got me sozzled, Denny. You know me well enough to know it couldn't happen no other way. That goddam Kuroki's a likeable cuss, and we hadda have a couple of drinks after tucking Hirano away, see? It was all sort of *sociable*, Denny."

"Yeah, yeah, that baby-faced Kuroki got you to take care of his sick book for him, and then he found some more saki. I'da done the same thing. What I'm interested in, sailor, and right now, is how much you told him!"

"That's just it!" Maloney frowned, holding his head in both hands, "I—I don't *know* all I said! You know how it is with me when I'm on the sauce, Dennis."

"Captain Bourke! sailor, until you give me some answers."

Maloney closed his eyes, "We was talkin' about you. . . . Yeah, I remember him sayin' somethin' about havin' you in his sights one day and not shootin' and me tellin' him he was fulla crap, because you never *let* yourself get in anybody's line of fire. . . . And he seemed interested as hell in you, Dennis."

"I'm interested as hell in *him*," Bourke muttered.

Ruffinø smiled crookedly and injected, "Maybe we can get one of Kuroki's guys to come over some night for dinner and see what he tells us about *his* CO."

"Look, what's to tell? I told him you were old an' rough an' dirty an' tough, Dennis. I told him you'd been in the marines since Decatur was shining your shoes, an. . . Well, maybe I told him about the other things. He said somethin' about seein' you was a man who'd known much suffering and I guess I didn't see any harm in him knowing about Lorie, Dennis. It was a good thing you two kids had going for you back in Manila, if things had been different. . . ."

Ruffino, who, up to now, had never *heard* of any broad named Lorie, snapped, "You goddam drunken slob! You mean to tell us you sat around all afternoon gossiping about your own CO's personal life?"

"Never mind all that!" snapped Bourke, and later Maloney would look back and realize that many ghosts had been laid to rest. He pointed a finger at the Chief and asked, in a non-sense tone, "Anything else, Maloney? Did you mention Keller working on that busted radio in his dugout?"

"Nope, didn't even talk about Keller an' that goddam tinker-toy of his. Lessee, we talked about how the war's goin', only they seem to think it's all propaganda and that *we're* the guys in trouble. We talked about dames. . . . No, not me an' the Tyúui, I remember. He went out an' I said something about now that we had a truce we ought to get some broads on this goddam rock, an' there was a lot of talk about this store in Yokohama where sailors buy life-sized rubber dollies to sleep with, an' how the Jap army oughta issue things like that if they expect guys to spend years at a time out in the goddam islands. We were just getting to the technical aspects of these rubberized Yashiwara girls, as I recall, when the Tyúui came back in and made that funny mouth they make when they smell something rotten under the sink. The other guys shut up an' then he steered it back on *you*, Dennis. He must be hot for you."

"He's a damned good man." Bourke mused. "Even during a truce, he's not forgetting his homework. He knows as well as I that the moment the balance shifts either way, all bets are off, and it's Banzai time again. Meanwhile, he's covering all bets."

"If we got a truce, Captain," Ruffino frowned, "how come we gotta keep watchin' one another all the time like this? Don't the first side breaking the truce wind up looking kinda shitty?"

"Yes, Ruff, they do. But they also will have *won*. And, since the other side will all be dead or in PW cages by t'at time, it won't bother the winners nearly as much as it will the losers."

"I see what you mean," Ruff grunted. "So why're we even bothering, Captain? We were picking them off at a fairly good rate."

"Yeah, and they were returning the favor. There's nothing in this whole business that should give anybody the idea that the war's over, or that we've suddenly buddied up to the Japs. Matter of fact, if some American cruiser hove to some night and *did* find us all down on the beach roasting marshmallows,

we'd wind up in the brig. At least you men would. I'd wind up in front of a firing squad for giving aid and comfort to the enemy in time of war."

He smiled slightly at the look of confusion on the other's face and explained, "I have a right to seek terms under one condition, and one condition *only*. A field commander who finds himself in a hell of a mess can make any deal with the enemy commander that he manages to squeeze out of him. Provided, and *only* provided, that every move he makes of his own will is for the ultimate benefit of his own side. Right now, Kuroki's got a stranglehold on food and water. We hold high ground and seem to have an edge in ammo. So it suits both of us to call off the ball game, as of tonight!"

"You mean, if anything was to change, sir, if we found a waterhole, say, or they all got sick over there, we'd just tear up the truce and start whappin' them again?"

"No paper," Bourke corrected; "I'm only a lousy Captain, and he's not even that. Neither of us has the right to sign a treaty or armistice either of our countries would be bound to. The first ship over that horizon with a skipper who outranks me puts the whole thing up for grabs. So, let's just hope it's an American ship that breaks the deadlock."

"Amen," said Ruffino grimly.

"That means no fraternization, Chief," Bourke warned sternly. "You don't seem to have killed us with your big mouth *this* time, but there's no telling what little shred of hope Kuroki might need to set him off. He's to know *nothing* about our numbers, weapons, or plans for any time in the future. Not even about that bar you've been threatening to open if you last long enough to retire. A good intelligence officer can put a hell of a complete picture together out of innocent bits and pieces of the jigsaw. So we have to play this very, very standoffish. You both understand?"

They both nodded as Maloney groped around in his pocket. Bourke said, "I'll have to see Bleeker about posting some sort of shore patrol. I know that sounds chicken as hell, but we can't have our guys swapping snapshots from home for very damned long before the enemy will know exactly how many of us there *are!*" He paused and said, "What's that thing you're fiddling with, Chief?"

"Patch I was telling you about, Denny. Lifted it from their camp before. Damned if I can make out more than the number."

Ruffino held out a hand and asked to see it. He studied it in the dim light for less than three seconds and handed it back.

"Mean anything, Ruff?"

"Had some of that outfit on Guadal, sir. Infiltrated our lines one night and damn near made it to Henderson before old Lou Diamond's mortar fire broke off the attack. They had some special name for themselves. . . . Lemme see, now. Kicky something or another."

"Kikka?" Maloney asked in sudden interest.

"Yeah, that was it, the Kikka-no Regiment, I think they called it. Bunch of nuts."

Bourke caught the look on Maloney's face and asked, "More of this cherry blossom stuff, Chief?"

"Cherry blossoms are out-and-out Banzai boys," Maloney explained. "When an Oka Regiment goes into combat, they've already said their prayers and nobody ever expects to see them again, see?"

"Yeah, met some on Bataan. What's with these Kikka-no types?"

"Crack troops, Kikka means mandarin orange blossom, see? And don't let's get us into Japanese flowers, for Chris-sake. Take my word they all mean something."

"Yeah, I got that. So, what's a mandarin orange blossom outfit supposed to do, Chief?"

"Well, they don't have their funerals before they leave home, for one thing. And people expect to see them again, maybe, after they've won."

"What if they don't win?"

"Same deal, Dennis. Kikka-no infantry never lose. They die a lot, but they don't lose. It's against the rules. Guy comes home after the war from a PW cage and nobody'll ever talk to him again. Not even his brothers and sisters, or his wife."

"Crap!" Ruffino laughed. "That's all propaganda! I'll bet you that if some Jap guy quit cold right now and checked into the nearest US post, he'd go home after the war as if nothing had happened and nobody would ever say beans."

"You know that, and I know that," Maloney shrugged, "but do *they* know that, eh?"

Dennis Bourke thought about that, fingering the patch as he stared down into the darkening jungle.

It was a good question.

IT might simply have gone on like that from the first day. Like the suspicious hissing of two strange cats in opposite

corners of the same room. All that had been agreed on, for the time, was that they'd stop shooting. This hadn't brought back any of the buddies who lay rotting in their shallow graves, nor had it put a dime in anyone's pocket. It simply meant, that until some hothead blew it, your chances of getting from point A to point B on that island had gone up a bit.

Some diehards seemed to prefer the older, bloodier days, when war had smiled her painted smile so many men mistake for something it is not. Sergeant Tamura strode forth, fully armed and ready for anything, even on his way to the head. He should have been a comic figure, and some of the marines started making up jokes right off. The Sergeant was every propaganda mill's dream of a Japanese war lord, with his bandy-legged walk and the grim stiffness of his bearded bullet-head on its thick wrestler's neck. Tamura was almost a caricature, they thought, of what they'd come out here to pick a fight with.

In broad daylight, with the sun making little beads of sweat stand out on his forehead, and his budding waistline problem straining his cotton uniform at the seams, Tamura was a joke.

But, sometimes, when a man had been out looking for the elusive coconuts still lurking in secret crannies, there would come a time when a young marine would round a bend in the trail and there, find himself face to face with Sergeant Tamura on the jungle trail. For a long moment of truth, two men would stare at each other across a gulf of language and culture and age. The burly Sergeant had the ability to stare down almost any man who lived, and those marines who had the experience never again thought Sergeant Tamura was a funny little Jap. Not after they'd stood there for a very long time, staring back at the cold raw dislike in Tamura's rather feline eyes. It was always the marine who lost these little games of "Face" with Tamura-san. Possessing the advantage of not having the slightest doubt he could stand there all night and all the next, if he had to, Tamura would block the trail, making no obvious moves that might possibly disobey his officer's command to leave the *musi Beikoku-no* alone, and wait. After a million years, while the most hotheaded Americans weighed the choices of either turning aside, or killing a full grown man in battle kit and carrying a loaded rifle against their own commander's orders, they would finally decide to edge past the best way they could.

At such times, Tamura showed vestiges he seemed to possess, of what might have been humor. The humor, perhaps,

of a lazy cat who lets that particular mouse live because it's such a hot day. He would wait until the marine *had* stepped aside, and then shrug, "Toóru," in the flat insulting tone of a tavern bully letting it pass, for now.

And, although not more than two of them knew a dozen words in Japanese, every one of them got the message.

On the other hand, Maloney had quickly become a welcome sight to most of the men at Kuroki's camp. Having lost their old medics in the last mad days of Guadalcanal, they quickly adopted him with the earthy good humor of the Japanese peasant. Perhaps jokes of a rude nature were made about Eiseihei-san from time to time, but nobody really had it in for him but Tamura; while young Hirano looked upon his benefactor with an admiration that once or twice led to outrageous conjectures regarding the sex life of Eiseihei-san.

For their part, the Americans had young Blair to balance off against Tamura's sheer cussedness. Blair was turning out, as Bourke got to know him, to be one of those strangely wrong-minded men confined, by some law of society, to careers in the military, or the pulpits of certain social churches. Clean-cut and every inch the soldier, Blair had a positive knack for being out of joint with the rest of the corps. It wasn't that Blair was an evil person. *He* thought, in fact, that he was rather a good guy. He just had this mental quirk that made him fly in the face of whatever everybody else was doing. And so, now that Bourke had worked out a truce, Blair scowled out at passing Japanese from ambush, or pestered Bourke with evidences of "Dirty Nip Treachery," no matter how often he was told that, since they were on the other side, they couldn't *betray anybody*. Most times, he wore that same helmet and carried side arms, tommy gun, and would have packed a bazooka, if they'd had one. He was a lot funnier than Sergeant Tamura.

"You watch, Dennis," Maloney said on one occasion. "If ever we decide to wipe the goddam Japs out, he'll fight you tooth and nail to save them!" Of course, meanwhile, they had to keep him from killing someone. But, otherwise, most of the men on either side held to a coldly correct aloofness. The inscrutable east facing the inscrutable west in a world where American tourists had never brought back those bamboo butterflies from Kyoto, and Japanese studied English from the works of Kipling and Richard Harding Davis, struggling with the letter L and smarting under patronizing references to "little brown brother" and "the white man's burden."

They didn't know each other. It was as simple as that. Too many of their friends lay rotting just under the forest litter, and the massacres of Bataan, and Guadalcanal's blood-slicked North Beach, were too fresh in the minds, even of men who'd only read the newspapers. Americans and Japanese are both friendly people, when they're not out to kill you. So there had to be nods, bows, and even smiles. But it was only a lull in the war, and all of them knew it. The war had marched on to the northwest, where there were more men and ships and planes to play with. War is a bloodthirsty old whore, and, like most whores, she's never satisfied with the agreed-on price. Once she's got you up there alone, son, you watch how fast she tries to jack the price up on a man!

There's always another sucker. Always another generation to listen to war's promises of glory, fame, or any of the other perversions an aging and no longer so attractive whore has to offer the Johns. She's old, she's dirty, and diseased. Yet, another John's always going up there, getting diddled in a way he never had in mind.

But there weren't too many Johns on this island, and a whore has to keep moving, once she's walking the streets. Something big as hell was brewing up on the Papau coast again. Men were hunting heads with flamethrowers these days, rather than the hardwood throwing sticks of "savages."

So like a furtive, timid little tramp who's asked the chief of police's permission to bunk down in jail on a rainy night, a sort of peace settled down for a time on the makatai.

It couldn't last, of course, even without the constant bickerings and unfounded suspicions that seemed to flare up like lingering blazes after a forest fire's swept an area.

The situation had already started to deteriorate by the time the first typhoon of the season hit. But that, while trying to destroy all men on the island with its hundred-mile-an-hour winds and coast-smashing waves, kept war away for another time.

The inscrutable oriental is not so different from the inscrutable occidental when it comes to a typhoon. They both die with equal ease, and are killed with the same effort, no matter how they cook their fish. A human throat strangling in sea water feels just as lousy, no matter what language it's used to uttering. And whether a man calls the force tearing him from the only landfall in a hundred miles the "wind" or the "Kaze," it's still going to kill him, unless he fights it.

Lieutenant Kuroki, as before, made the first overture in his strange, paradoxical career as ruthless samurai and humanist

scholar. Knowing the South Pacific as well as the Japanese, the tall American had spotted the oddly greenish cast above those clouds moving in from the east. But it was Kuroki who correctly foresaw the results of what a typhoon on that particular course would mean to their future, as well as present survival.

And so, as Bourke's men grumbled and cursed leaving the high ground where the Captain had intended to wait out the storm, they met in the hollow where the pool lay to begin the long and back-breaking task of water conservation, the way the job was done before power shovels had been invented.

The men were organized quickly into work gangs. Sergeant Bleeker in charge of the marines, while Tamura, sullen as ever but obedient to the only man on earth he now obeyed, bossed the Japanese details in what he quickly decided was a contest against the American marine corps, as well as that Taihúu his commander said was coming. Bleeker, no stranger to interservice rivalry, quickly got into the spirit of the thing, and, as Tamura's bellowing "Hayai! Hayai!" echoed above the growing song of the onshore winds, Bleeker grabbed an ax in unworkworn hands and shouted, "Gung-ho, you lazy bastards! You wanna tell your friggen grandchildren you was beaten at *anything* by a bunch of Buddha-heads?"

With a howl of rage, the United States marines met the challenge. Men who'd have quit a job, in civilian life, had the boss asked them to move a desk, found themselves prying huge boulders out of their beds and levering them this way and that through the waving jungle growth. Not because they thought that goddam Bleeker knew what he was *doing*, understand, but because they'd just seen a skinny-looking Jap do the same thing!

Officers, most of the time in a war, don't do much. This is not as unfair as it seems to the average enlisted man at the time, however. *Somebody* has to stand back and make overall decisions if any order is to be brought out of the chaos war seems to throw things into, on her way down the block. An officer who leads every charge, runs every patrol, and works beside his men digging in, is not only a damned fool, but a bad officer. You can't plan your next move while cooking waffles for the swell fellows in your command, and that's why officers leave as much as possible to men with the right spec-numbers, relying on the sergeants to supervise anything they can reasonably hope for them to, while they concern themselves with the next move in the complicated and

highly dangerous combination of chess and Russian roulette the human race has chosen for its planetary sport.

From his vantage point on a jagged block of lunar-looking rock above the pool, Dennis Bourke could watch the whole project, and spot trouble among his men and Kuroki's before it got out of hand. Of course, since it was the best spot, Kuroki chose it, too.

There was room enough at the top for two men to sit comfortably dangling their legs over the edge, as their men toiled on below. The project involved a very simple, but dangerous problem. As the typhoon winds piled waves ahead of its sweep towards North Australia there would come a time when the ever-climbing surf at one end of the valley the pool occupied would top a low rise in that direction. Since water runs down hill, this sea water would fill the pool to overflowing and then some. Since human kidneys cannot filter a pint of saline water from the system without a pint and a half of fresh water to flush themselves with, every man on the island would be dead within a very few days if they allowed the only fresh water supply to be ruined.

Most of them knew this, though some, perhaps, hadn't put as much thought into it as they might. Tamura, after getting off to a good start at the run-off canal he'd been told to supervise, soon bogged down in a bitter fight with one of the Americans clearing brush for a projected seawall of earth and palm logs. Just what the American, Waller, had done wrong, was a complete mystery to that same Private Waller, on the day he died. Tamura, after screaming at him in Japanese, Korean, and some very filthy words he'd picked up in the China Incident, grabbed the marine's ax and went to work on his own, while Waller, now that the commotion was over, found something just as useful to do.

With Tamura's section free to work at their own pace (and the common sense pace of the Japanese peasant can be pretty fast), the work on the bulwarks progressed smoothly. Here and there, Americans and Japanese found themselves grabbing opposite ends of the same log to throw up against the sea's threat. Since they were men, instead of ants, and since they all knew what the hell they were trying to build there, it didn't take a crash course in either language to get the log in place.

The wind was getting nasty, now. Not the buffeting, tearing dragon winds of the tornado, but the steady elephant-against-a-house push of a big typhoon that is proud of its muscles and has all night. Up on their vantage point, neither officer

had said much more than the conventionals. But, as the wind roared higher in a sudden snarl of rage that toppled a dozen palms at one sweep, Kuroki suggested a safer vantage point.

Actually, it was more a shelter than a vantage point, down between the rocks, but work had progressed beyond the supervisory stage, anyway. An order shouted in this wind was torn away and taken to Australia in the instant it was spoken. The men worked on, wet to the skin, dogged, and knowing this was it. What else was there to say?

"Your men work well, Lieutenant," Bourke said, stiffly breaking the ice, as he spotted Blair beating a tree with an ax while Tamura screamed at him about it. He wondered what the hell *that* was about, but didn't go out into that wind to ask, and never found out.

"I, too, admire industry shown by *your* people, Captain Bourke," smiled Kuroki, a faintly derisive hint at the corners of his mouth as he added, "Although, to be quite honest with you . . . I did expect quite a few more at this time."

"I noticed you didn't bring as many men as I'd been led to believe *you* had available, either, Lieutenant Kuroki," Bourke smiled, and both men knew they liked each other.

It wasn't the sickly sentimental nonsense of Plato, or even the gee-whiz buddymanship of schoolboys. It may not even have been friendship, when you get right down to it. But a real man meets so few other men in his short span that when they recognize something of their own ideals in another man, with the *courage* of those same ideals, they're going to like him, even though he may be the guy who's coming in the morning to hang them.

It was like that now between those two very different, and oddly similar men, as they crouched in the lee of the rock and watched the sky try and tear the land apart.

A tropical typhoon's not the place for philosophy. There'd be lulls in the wind's ferocity, and then the tortured air would rip and tear until neither could have heard a gun going off nearby. A couple of times, that night, it looked like they'd had it. Like the whole world was going to dissolve into a great breaker of wind and sea and land and go on and on around the earth forever.

Between times, Bourke had two short glimpses into a man he never got to know as well as he might have liked to.

Once, when the surf had mounted higher than anyone would have thought possible, and was breaking in green water over the seawall in spots, Bourke brought up the subject of high ground and Kuroki said something he was later to regret

in a way that only a man who's found himself center stage in a real life Greek Tragedy can regret anything.

"There is very high area over that way," he said, pointing to a seldom visited section of the island. "It was my original intent to build my camp there, Captain. It has very good military possibilities, if only there was food and water."

Bourke, not thinking at the moment of that old whore he'd last seen headed for Bougainville, absently asked, "What if you took supplies? At least you'd have your men above these waves."

"No need to go so far to get above waves," Kuroki had smiled, in the boyish good spirits of the moment. "Really, Captain, I have been over the terrain, and it is just no good for anything but fighting. Hai, even *there* it is no good for a full scale action. With rifles, only, a few men could hold that area until their water was gone. With big guns, it's no good, Captain. Hard rock under dirt up there. No place to dig, no Kakusu from big guns. Truly, after I had thought, I know it a bad place for any but an Oka-no stand."

"Oka-no? You mean, Banzai?"

Kuroki's face clouded, then he shrugged and said, "You may call it so, if it pleases you, Captain. Any sane man who found himself in such a trap would not feel pleasure in joyful shouts of Banzai."

There had been silence after that, at least on the part of the two young men. The storm howled and pried its wet fingers at every projecting object on the island for perhaps another hour, and then, during a lull in the storm, Bourke had quietly said, "It doesn't always have to end that way, you know, Lieutenant. Cornwallis went on to become governor of India, after he'd been captured by our American General Washington."

"I do not understand, Captain. You wish to make me governor of India?"

"I'm not trying anything, Kuroki..."

"Ah, sóo? Then see that you *don't!*" the young officer flared in an anger Bourke knew to be partly self-induced. He was an expert on that sort of thing, having induced himself into a couple of lovely barroom brawls in his time, rather than face a dark hotel room.

"Suit yourself, Lieutenant," he shrugged. "Hell, for all we know, the next ship over the horizon may be one of *yours!*"

The Japanese didn't answer for a time. Then, with a faint touch of bitterness, he asked, "Are we playing at syoogi or *Black Jack*, Captain?"

"I don't understand, Lieutenant."

"This game started as syoogi, a long time ago. But lately, I fear the carefully planned moves on an old chessboard will suffice my men and I no longer. The events of this war have changed it to the sort of wild game you western men prefer. I have a platoon of riflemen and a little ammunition, you say? To a man who plays black jack, the answer is not so complicated as it looks on a chessboard. Hit me again! he shouts. It may be an American aircraft carrier when I turn this next card over. Or a landing party of US marines from Guadalcanal."

"Or a Japanese landing party," corrected Bourke.

"Not any longer in *this* part of the ocean, Captain," Kuroki smiled.

"I am like the gambler in your stories, who, how you say, is doomed to always play against the house? This part of the Pacific, Captain, is *your* house."

"One other way out," Bourke said gently. "A guy knows he's about to tap out, he can always cash in his chips and still have carfare home."

"A way out for you, perhaps. Not for a Japanese officer."

"I understand all that, Kuroki..." Bourke began, and then Kuroki turned on him to shout, "You do *not* understand, Captain Bourke from America! No one but a Japanese, of my class, and perhaps my generation, can hope to understand. And, Captain Bourke, I still am not certain I understand!"

After that, the subject was dropped, along with the storm winds. The relationships between the two garrisons gradually became more cordial. Some of the men, in fact, became quite friendly with one another.

But there were others who kept one little compartment of their mind closed. Not the ones like Tamura, who hated easily, but men like Ruffino and the deceptively gentle Craddock. Men who prowled the island like tigers in a cage, trying not to show their nervousness, as they waited with mixed emotions, for the orders they knew would come.

Orders to kill.

And then, on a day when the two garrisons had actually gotten together for their first friendly game of baseball—the one sport they all agreed on as tops, and while Kuroki and the tall Captain sat side by side watching this latest experiment in cooperation between their men...

War came back to the island.

You see, the war had come back to the island while they

sat there. Maybe to watch the game, or maybe just because war, like any other whore, can't leave men alone, once they've lost interest in her.

She crept onto the island in an unlikely guise. War came back to this little corner of the Pacific in the person of Aircrewman Keller.

Keller, with the patience shown only by stamp collectors, crackpot inventors, and mental cases suffering from a condition known as monomania, had been tinkering with that same damned radio for all these months. The wires had turned green in the salt air. A fuzzy vomit-colored mold had grown over the composition-board case, and the chassis was coated with a black corrosion that came back as fast as Keller cleaned it off. And still the radioman tinkered on.

It had become a stock joke; Keller and that radio. Bleeker claimed the kid was only using the corpse of his transmitting set as an excuse to get out of work, while Chief Maloney, in an endeavor to reduce everything to his own view of the bewildering world he'd found himself in, insisted Keller's problem was sublimated necrophilia.

Bourke hadn't been sure which one was right. But it hadn't hurt to let Keller try. Even *he* had forgotten the whole thing by the time Keller reached for his screw driver and, for the nine hundredth time, turned a certain improvised connection a tiny fraction of an inch.

The Japanese were up again, and the score was tied in the ninth, when, up on the hill, Keller heard a crackle of static and a faraway tinny voice saying, "Obo One, this is Obo Leader, you are high and falling back, Obo One; Over."

Keller sat there for a long time holding his breath, and when he let it out and carefully, like a man touching the fuse of what might be a bomb, he flipped the switch to transmitting. An hour and a half later, after moving that damned connection back a couple of times, Aircrewman Keller had contacted Henderson Field and, like the good boy he was, knew enough not to tell the runner he sent to get Captain Bourke *just* what he *wanted* him for.

And the old whore lifted her skirt and laughed like hell.

THE relief ship came in under cover of a moonless night. Landing reinforcements and ammo on the beach below the Americans' hilltop camp. The fresh marines had blackened faces and wore the businesslike look of combat soldiers.

The officer in charge, whose name Bourke never bothered to remember, offered to take the job off his hands.

"It's my mess, mister," he said. "I'll clean it up."

He'd done the best he could. In the past months, he'd made more than one overture to the young Japanese officer about a possible surrender if it turned out this way. As a last resort, he'd explained the position to base, and asked permission to extend one more offer. The reply had been negative. Warning an enemy commander that he's in a mess might make you a hell of a swell fellow, but it can also make you a hell of a *dead* one!

Bourke waited until Ruffino came back, to report the Japanese had pulled out of their old camp, before he turned to the others and said, "Everybody got the plan in his head?"

"We move in on them through the jungle under cover of darkness, sir," Bleeker said. "An' hit 'em at dawn to pin 'em down. Meanwhile, the ship's followed the action, and as soon as we've got 'em bunched in one spot? She opens up with her big guns."

"That's near enough," Bourke nodded.

"Lissen, Dennis," Maloney protested, "you can't just butcher them like that. I didn't spend all that time working on Hirano just so you could kill him."

Bourke ignored him. His voice had taken on a cold hard tone in the past hour, like the voice you might hear from a robot, or a dead man who'd been injected with something that made him walk and talk, but still left him dead. "Ruffino," he said, "you'll scout for the Lieutenant, here. Craddock will be point for me. We know they're not at the spring, so that leaves one *other* place. That high ground over on the far side. There's cliffs along the shore and cleared ground on the lower slopes for a field of fire from up in those palms at the top. That's where Kuroki will make his stand."

"There's no food or water down at that end, Captain," Blair protested. "He'd be a fool to back into a blind alley like that."

"Strongest defense position on the island, for a short fight. And you don't need much food and water, if you don't aim to live very long."

Blair gulped and said, "He's a civilized man, Captain. Why... I *know* Kuroki!"

"So do I," Bourke said in that emotion-drained voice. "You ready to move out, Craddock?"

"Yes, suh," said Craddock. His voice had started sounding

funny, too, thought Blair. Bourke looked at his watch, took a breath, and said, "Let's go."

It took them a long time.

The sky was glowing in the east when the American lines had made the ragged edges of a space where some long-forgotten disaster had swept the lower slopes of a hillside bare of timber.

Above them, squatting atop the hill like a flattened fuzzy spider, ten or twelve acres of virgin jungle hid whatever, or *whoever*, was up there. Bourke stood in the shadows of a low palm crown and studied the hill with the calmness of a well-oiled guillotine.

The men were fanning out to either side and taking their positions. Some of them didn't like what they were doing one bit, and they'd had a long tiresome walk to bitch about it. Blair, who'd heard talk that could have gotten a man a general court martial, if anyone had wanted to be sticky, stood beside Bourke, telling him about it.

"Some of these men have *friends* up there, Captain," he said. "You can't let men play ball and go swimming together all this time and then ask them to *kill* each other. A couple of them were actually crying, Captain. Crying real tears. They just won't be able to *do* it. You can't *make* them!"

"They'll do it, mister," Bourke snapped. It must feel good to be able to cry at a time like this. Probably why women lived longer. But Captains don't cry. Not in front of their men. Aloud he said, "They'll do what they have to, mister, because they're marines."

"You make me sick!" Blair snapped. "This crap about the corps, and honor and an officer's duty... What the hell will it matter, ten or twenty years from now, about your friggen duty? You and Kuroki aren't *enemies*, dammit! Why, I think... No, by God, I *don't* think, I *know*. You *like* the guy, Captain. You really *like* him."

"That's not a thing the Navy Department's losing any sleep over, mister," Bourke muttered. He looked at the other officer who'd come in from the ship. The one with the slackened face and nightfighter's soft cap. "How's it look?" he asked.

"Only place they can be," shrugged the other. "Want me to see if we can work any closer in the deep grass?"

"No... Not any reason to lose a man if we don't have to. We've got him bottled up and he knows it. The ship'll be getting in range soon, and that ought to make up his mind for

him. If I know that Tamura, he's already lathered up and talking him into it."

"Tamura?" Blair frowned. "What's *that* big ape got to do with it?"

And then he caught on.

"Come on, Captain," he laughed. "You can't be serious! We've been working side by side with these men for months. Eating with them. Getting to know them. They're not a bunch of hopped up fanatics. Tamura, maybe, but not ~~the~~ others. Not Kuroki, and not Tokumaru, the Buddhist priest! Hell, Captain, it makes no *sense*."

"Not to you, maybe. But if your orders are to die rather than surrender, they don't leave you much choice. Better get down behind a good log and get set, Lieutenant. It's liable to be kinda hectic around here in a bit."

Ruffino came over to where they stood and looked up thoughtfully at the ominously quiet hilltop.

"Banzai, sir?" he asked.

"You see her any other way, Ruff?"

Ruffino looked up the hill again and shook his head. "I figure after about the third or fourth shell, sir," he said. "Usually takes a couple of casualties, or plenty of saki, and I know they ain't *got* no saki."

"Cold-blooded bastards!" Blair stammered. This was something about war he'd never been told about in OCS and he was afraid he was going to throw up. He swallowed hard and pointed at Ruffino, "You *like* this, don't you, Ruffino? You really and truly *enjoy* this sort of thing."

"None of us enjoy it, sir," Ruffino said, "but we don't cry about it, neither."

There was a flutter of white up on the hill and for a moment Bourke dared to hope Blair was right when he shouted, "It's the white flag! They're surrendering!"

And then the first rays of the sun caught the tattered banner waving defiantly from the hilltop. A blood-red disc in the center of it flashed sneeringly down on lesser men as Bourke said, "Not all white, mister. They never show them *all* white."

He glanced up and down his lines. The men were set. They knew what to do. A lot of them wouldn't want to do it, but that was their problem. Bourke's job was to move them into position.

"There's the ship," Ruffino said.

The long, grey hulk hung offshore in the sunrise, its long guns swung around to open fire the moment a signal from

shore confirmed the engagement was working according to plan.

"Tell Keller to signal that the target's occupied," he told his runner. Turning to the others, he said, "Get set. It's usually the first couple of shells that set it off."

He was wrong.

The desperate, doomed men on the hilltop had seen the ship, too. They didn't wait for eight-inch HE rounds to scream down on them. Instead, there was a tinny blast on a bugle and Ruffino, who'd been around in this war, said, very softly—

"Here they come."

Nobody shouted Banzai. Not once. They shouted lots of other things. Threats and curses and prayers and the meaningless things a man shouts when he's been hit in the groin with a fifty caliber machine-gun slug.

It took time for the Americans to come unstuck. It took time to pull that first trigger when the man you had in your sights was a guy you'd helped dig taro, or played softball with.

But they did it. Some of them were going to have bad dreams about it in the years ahead, and some of them would never get over a lousy taste in their mouths, but they did it.

The Japanese came down the slope in a long, ragged line of mustard yellow, and they got quite a ways before many of the Americans really put their backs into it.

The fact that Sergeant Tamura was the first to go down explained a lot to men who'd later relive those terrible ten minutes for a full twenty years. Tamura had been the one least understood by the Americans. The one who most lived up to their preconceived notions of what a Jap should look and act like.

Tamura died easy. A dozen bullets in his chest before he'd made it half way down the slope in his freshly laundered battledress.

It was only later, after the return fire had drawn blood here and there along the American line, that someone got around to putting a last merciful bullet in the head of Hira-no, as the crippled boy hobbled down the hill with a crutch in one hand, and a grenade in the other. A chance stray slug had caught him in the middle early in the charge, and he'd been feeling it before the time he died.

After that, it was all over but the shooting.

The whole fight lasted less than a full ten minutes from the

time that flag first waved from the hilltop. The ship never had to use her guns. Once the Japanese broke cover, they never had a chance.

"Cease fire!" Bourke called down the line. The sporadic bursts faded away as he stepped out, looking up the slope. It was covered with rag dolls in mustard yellow cotton. None of them looked like they'd ever play again. Lots of them had had their stuffing spilled.

Just down the line, some men were bending over a still form.

Bourke walked over, caught Ruffino's eye and asked, "Bad?"

"Sergeant Bleeker, sir," Ruff answered.

Bleeker lay on his back, staring at the sun. His lips were parted and his face looked quite peaceful for a man with a bullet hole in his forehead.

"What happened?" Bourke asked.

"Stood up to relay an order sir," one of the men volunteered.

"A couple of the guys wasn't firing and the Sarge yelled, but they didn't hear him. He got up from behind his log to yell at them and that's when he bought the farm."

Bourke didn't say anything for a time. Then he shrugged and muttered, "There are worse ways to go."

"If you can go by way of 'The Halls of Montezuma,'" Ruffino appended, and somehow, everyone there knew what he meant.

Men were getting up now, glad to be alive, and a little sick at what they'd done. Not as sick as one of them would be later on, maybe, but feeling green around the gills.

"Fall back," Bourke shouted. In a softer voice, he added, "There's nothing here for us, now."

And just then, somebody said, "One of them Japs is moving, sir."

Bourke didn't know *how* he knew who it was, but he did. He did even before he turned around. A broken rag doll up there on the hill was trying to raise itself up on one elbow, and the man nearest Bourke raised his rifle.

"Hold your fire," Bourke snapped.

He turned and walked up the slope. Behind him, he could hear Ruffino saying, "As you were, guys. Let him play it the way he wants to."

Tokumaru lay furthest down the slope. He lay on his back with his eyes closed as if in sleep and a faintly ironic smile

on his dead lips. His hands were crossed on his chest. In one, he still held the Buddhist rosary he'd fingered down the hill in lieu of a rifle.

Bourke stepped over his legs and plodded up through the thick grass. He didn't look down at the bodies lying around his feet. He caught enough out of the corners of his eyes to add to his collection of gruesome memories.

All he was interested in was that one figure up the slope who struggled to sit up. Bourke was watching for it, so it came as no surprise when he saw the muzzle of the pistol trying to focus on his tall form.

"Give it up, Kuroki!" he called. "We'll take you *with* us, guy! What the hell are you trying to prove, Kuroki? You and me know the score, man. You and me know she's only a lousy two-dollar whore!"

The muzzle of the gun rose higher and shuddered.

"A year, Kuroki! I swear to God it won't last more than another stinking year! Two at the most! Home alive in 'forty-five, kid! Don't be a chump!"

He stopped, swept an arm out and shouted, "Nobody will care, Kuroki! Nobody on this friggen scab of coral will give a good goddam! You'll be out of the hospital just in time to go home, kid. You won't even have to spend time in a PW cage."

Kuroki stared at him dully and willed every ounce of his ebbing strength into lifting the muzzle another fraction of an inch.

"Don't make me kill you, Kuroki!" Bourke pleaded, raising his rifle. "Jesus Christ, kid, I'm so goddam sick of killing! Don't make me do it!"

For a long time, as the old whore who'd diddled them both laughed her fool head off, the two men stared silently at each other over the muzzles of their guns. Then Bourke said, "Kuroki?"

The Japanese fired.

A lit cigarette buried itself in Bourke's shoulder and spun him half around on his feet.

"OK!" he sobbed, swinging back to aim at the man on the ground.

"You wanna play it that way, it's ok with *me!*"

And then he just stood there, sobbing, while he watched the muzzle of Kuroki's pistol slowly sink back into his lap.

"Captain..." Kuroki began, but Bourke was never to know what it was he'd intended to say. The young Lieuten-

ant's head rolled back and he slumped down in the grass with a little sigh. Like a tired child lying fretfully down for a nap it didn't really want to take.

Bourke stood there, silently, until a hand touched his sleeve and a voice said, "You all right, sir."

It was Ruffino.

Bourke nodded and said, "See about getting this mess over with, will you? Get the men to get their gear together and be ready to go aboard ship. I . . . I'll be down by the beach if you need me."

"Yes sir," Ruffino answered. "Burial detail, sir?"

"Just Bleeker. And there's no time for burying *him* before the ship ups-anchor. Have him taken aboard and I'll see about a sea-burial when I talk to her captain."

"I'll see to it, sir." Ruffino nodded. Then he nodded up the slope and asked, "What about . . . them?"

It was a good question.

Those things turning bad in the sun up there had been *men*, a little while ago. Some of them had been good men. Now they were just so many unhandy bundles of meat, unfit for human consumption. A dead man, no matter what he was to you when he was alive, is of no use at all to you dead. He's just something you have to get rid of like garbage.

"Leave them," Bourke said. Nobody would be on this island in just a little while, and there was no use digging in this hot sun to spare the olfactory nerves of people who would not be here.

Ruffino wrinkled his nose. He'd been on Guadal those last couple of days, before they finally borrowed some bulldozers from the Seabees to bury those piles of dead Japs on the north beach. He was very glad that he would not be on *this* island a couple of days from now.

He said, "You'd better do something for that wound, sir." And Bourke was aware that, unless he stopped him, Ruffino had every intention of helping him back to the ship.

"Move out, Ruff," he growled. "I'm not going to need the smelling salts. Get the men together and let's get the hell off this friggen rock!"

"Yessir," Ruffino grinned. He looked up the slope and asked, "One thing more, Captain. That Jap flag up there. You want I should run up there and get it for you?"

Dennis Bourke turned and looked the way Ruffino was pointing.

The Rising Sun banner still fluttered from its pole at the :

crest of the hill. He allowed his gaze to settle slowly down the slope, across the sprawled figures in mustard yellow.

Then he said, "Leave it where it is, Corporal. It's their island, *now*."

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