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Kat reacted instantly. Smashing her right arm backwards, she caught her assailant with a vicious elbow blow to the stomach. This forced them to release their grip on her neck and withdraw their hand from her mouth. In one smooth movement Kat spun round and punched them full on the chin. They let out a groan of pain and went crashing down backwards onto the forest floor. Afternoons spent fighting with her best friend Phillip and his mates, had prepared her well for this fight. There'd also been some hand-to-hand combat at the weekend and that had come in handy too.

As her attacker lay writhing in pain she made a dive for the torch and jumped on their chest, pinning their arms to the ground and hissing in French. "Who are you?"

The boy, for it clearly was a boy, winced in agony and managed to reply between gulps of breath. "I'm Jean-Paul. I come from the village up the road. I thought you were a German!"

Kat's eyes narrowed suspiciously. His accent was flawless. He was a bit younger than her with a thin nose, a dirty face and a curtain of hair drooping down over his forehead. He looked genuinely scared

"Prove that you're not a Nazi!" she snarled.

## A Bridge on Fire

"Look in my top jacket pocket," he croaked. "My identity card is in there."

Initially reluctant to do this as she feared he might be trying to play a trick on her, after a few moments she released his right arm with her left arm and quickly dipped into the pocket he mentioned. She withdrew a rectangle of card and shone her torch on it. It had a photo of the boy, his name (Jean-Paul Tarin), his age (12) and his place of residence (Chantibe). Nationality – French.

He was clearly telling the truth, but what was he doing in the woods at this hour. She posed this question to him without releasing him.

"I come here to search for food," he said, his breathing becoming more regular. "I sometimes find rabbits and the occasional boar. Food is getting scarcer. The German soldiers are taking loads of it for themselves. We French are beginning to starve. I have a younger sister and parents. We have to eat. You'd do the same if you were me."

Kat thought about the food shortages back home and immediately identified with him. War was bad on so many levels but it didn't half hit your stomach.

"I understand," nodded Kat, slowly standing up and helping him to his feet. His gums were bleeding due to the force of her hit and in the torch beam she saw she'd knocked one of his teeth out.

"Sorry about the violence," she said, "you don't know who you can trust nowadays."

"Too true," he nodded, "The Nazis are turning the world upside down. They're destroying our country. If we can't stop their advance they'll run wild all over Europe and the swastika will fly in every capital city. We have to defeat them."

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Very," he replied.

## A Bridge on Fire

Kat reached into her rucksack and pulled out a couple of crackers. "Here, take these," she motioned.

Jean-Paul took the offering and bit into them as if he hadn't eaten for days.

"So what are you doing out here?" he asked when he'd polished off the crackers and accepted a drink of water from the canteen inside her rucksack.

"I was separated from my parents a couple of weeks ago and I'm trying to track them down." Telling the truth was obviously a non-starter.

"Where do you come from?"

"Toulouse," she replied, naming the first French town she could think of.

Jean-Paul whistled through his teeth. "That must have been some journey," he said, "Do you have any idea where your parents are?"

"All I know is they headed north," replied Kat. "I was collecting water from a stream when the Germans came looking for them. My father's in the French Resistance. When I got home they had fled. They didn't have time to get me. I'm just praying that they managed to get away in time. We all know what the Nazis do to resistance fighters."

Jean-Paul looked down at the ground grimly. He'd clearly heard plenty of stories too. "Why don't you come back with me to my family," he offered. "You can stay the night with us and continue your search in the morning."

"Thanks," said Kat, "but I do a lot of walking by night. You know, keep out of the way of the Germans."

"Of course," nodded Jean-Paul. "I understand."

They stood there awkwardly for a few seconds and then both said "Good luck!" at exactly the same second.

## A Bridge on Fire

"I hope you find your parents," said Jean-Paul starting to walk away. "It was nice to meet you."

"You too!" said Kat, watching as he followed a line of trees. A second later he disappeared from sight.