

"I heard a car," said Clou, who had the sharpened hearing of a hunted hedgehog. He hurried over to a patch of wall which had been stripped of its plaster, removed a loose brick and looked through a makeshift peephole. "The Hegemons are here!" he said breathlessly. "We have to leave now. Quick - follow me! We can hide in the copse at the back." He slung his rifle over his shoulder and darted out of the door.

Snippetette stuffed Clou's drawings in her bag and ran out after him, collecting her bike as she went. Clambering onto the saddle, she bumped her way across the lawn to the copse where Clou had already hidden himself. As she reached the trees, the farmhouse gate creaked behind her. She flung her bicycle to the ground and dropped behind a bush alongside Clou. Seconds later, a group of Hegemon soldiers stormed into the courtyard, followed by their officer.



"Feldwebel," called out the officer, "*suchen Sie ihn im Hause. Wir bleiben im Garten.*" Several of the soldiers disappeared into the house but the others remained, sniffing around the courtyard.

Snippetette eyed the officer. She knew that voice - "Dornig!" she exclaimed in a whisper. "If he sees me here it's all over!"

Clou glanced at her with a wry smile: "It's a shame I can't just shoot him but I suppose then you'd have no one to take you to the ball."

Dornig was starting to walk towards them, flanked by two hedgehogs with machine guns. Snippetette remembered how thorough he had been at his blackberry picking and feared it was only a matter of time before he discovered them.

"You'd better go before it's too late," whispered Clou. "I'll cover you. Whatever you do, don't look round - and, don't worry, I won't hurt him."

Snippetette looked at Clou. Every fibre of her being rebelled against the idea of leaving him behind. He could not hold out for more than a few minutes when he was so greatly outnumbered - the Hegemons would win paws down. To leave Clou would be shabby and unheroic. Yet Snippetette knew that she must: the lives of thousands of hedgehogs depended upon her surviving to fight another day. She put a paw on his shoulder but could not find the words to express what she felt.

"Don't feel bad," said Clou, with a wistful smile. "I've always known it might come to this. It's the right thing to do." He aimed his rifle in the direction of the farmhouse and squeezed the trigger gently with his paw. "Ready?"

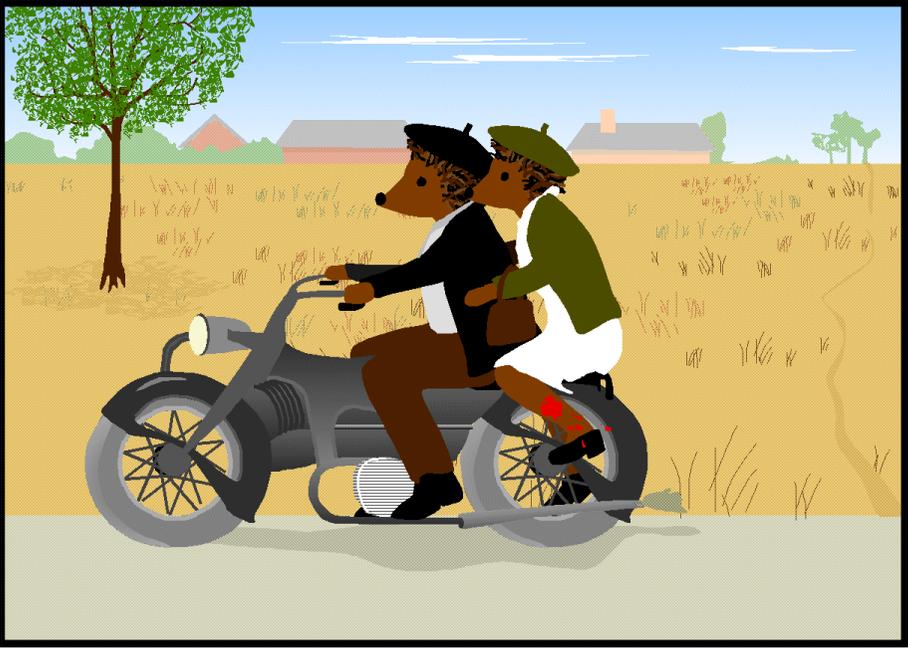
Snippetette nodded.

"Go!"

Clou opened fire. Snippetette jumped up onto her bicycle and rode away from the battle as fast as she could. Several bullets hit the ground to the right and left of her but she took no notice until a sudden sharp pain made her look down: blood was streaming down her leg where a bullet had gone clean through it. Gasping with agony she rode on, and gradually the noise of the gunfire retreated. Eventually she reached a road. She hesitated, wondering whether to take it - it would be far quicker but there would also be a much greater risk of meeting Hegemon troops along the way. Before she could decide, a motorcycle had appeared around the corner. She made a move towards the bushes but it was too late. The motorcycle screeched to a halt beside her.

"You'd better get on," said the rider. It was the hedgehog from the local Resistance.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Snippetette hid her bicycle among some bushes and climbed onto the back of the motorcycle. A few minutes later, they were safe at his home in a neighbouring village.



"What happened to Clou?" asked her rescuer, when he had finished bandaging her leg.

Snippetette steeled herself to tell the truth. "I had to leave him. I couldn't afford to be caught. It's my mission - it's just too important."

He looked at her accusingly but said nothing. He knew perfectly well that sacrifices had to be made but Clou was his friend and his abandonment by Snippetette was hard to stomach. He had no idea what this mission of hers was. Was it really so vital? Or did she just have an over-inflated ego?

"You'd better stay here for a few days while your leg mends," he said. "You can use my phone - tell the restaurant that you're ill."

"Thank you, I'll stay here tomorrow but after that I have to go."

"If you go out with that leg of yours, you're a fool. Even if you wear trousers to cover up the wound, that limp will still give you away before you've walked two paces... Whatever this precious mission of yours is, Clou's sacrifice will have been for nothing," he said pointedly.

Snippetette swallowed hard and looked away. She had conquered her fear but nothing had prepared her for this. Why had she accepted this accursed mission? The Allies needed hedgehogs like Clou if they were to win the war. Yet his life had been practically thrown away and it

was her fault. Of course, the answer was simple enough: the invasion had to be stopped. If Bristlin fell, the war would be lost and thousands more lives destroyed.

Snippetta looked her accuser in the eye.

"I won't limp," she said emphatically.

