

THE ENEMY WITHIN

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I want to thank Doc II for her patience and honest feedback. It took a major rewrite, but it ended up a much better story. ABC owns them, but it sure is fun to play with them—better than dolls—so thanks for the loan. And thanks to all you writers out there, I'd never have tried it on my own



"Whaaaaachew!" The sneeze ripped from him suddenly and without the slightest warning.

A loud, contemptuous "*Gesundheit!*" was followed by a prolonged spray of 50 caliber machine gun bullets. The stands of dead grasses and small, evergreen bushes which had made such a great screen did absolutely nothing to shield him from the deadly fire. Cajé flattened his thin body into the ground, taking advantage of the slightest dip. Caught in the middle of a stealthy crawl, he froze for fear of getting hit. Bullets zipped microns above his helmet, clipping plants as effectively as a set of hedge shears. He felt the pieces fall on his helmet and back.

Every bone in his body ached. His face hurt, and he could feel snot pour unchecked, sliming the ground. "Just shoot me," he murmured. "Put me out of my misery." The sentiment, however, did not decrease his efforts to avoid being hit by the Krauts 30 yards away. Fortunately, they didn't know his exact location; he'd be dead already if they did. However, if they continued firing, he expected to get his spoken wish. He started to cough as phlegm accumulated in his bronchi. He tried unsuccessfully to keep from making any sound during the silences which pulled the German fire toward him. He held his breath, suppressing the noise until tears streamed, some running onto the ground. His nose itched unbearably, but he didn't dare move.

Suddenly, Cajé heard the BAR firing ferociously from the other side of the machine gun nest. It was accompanied by M-1s. After a few seconds, he was relieved to hear two grenades explode followed by more BAR as Kirby finished off any resisting survivors.

"Cajé, you okay?"

"I'm not hurt," he called, as he struggled to push himself up. He wavered slightly, his sinus headache pounding.

Doc was at his elbow. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I didn't say I was okay. I said I wasn't hurt." Cajé wiped his slimy lower face with his sleeve. "Mother of God, please have mercy on me!" He sneezed again. Painful reverberations flowed down to his toes and returned.

"Sarge!" called Kirby, "Are we going home yet?"

"Yeah," answered the squad leader. "You left one alive. We've got our prisoner. Doc, you better get over here and bandage him up."

Doc handed Cajé a couple of aspirin, swallowed a couple himself and headed on over to their hard earned prisoner. The rest of the men checked the dead, and then sat dejectedly watching their medic work.

"I think my face is going to dissolve," moaned Littlejohn. He leaned over and blew out his nose onto the ground.

"Hey, ya big lug, watch where you're aiming!" The shouted rasp was deep and angry.

Littlejohn turned a hurt face towards his buddy, Billy.

"Well, my handkerchief is soaked, what do you expect me to do?"

"I dunno, just don't splash on me."

"Sorry."

Billy threw himself back flat on the ground and rolled his head back and forth. "Oh, Jeez, I'd do anything for some of my mom's chicken soup. I'd swim home. Hell, the salt water would be good for my sinuses, wouldn't it?"

Kirby sat cross legged, cradling his face in his hands, massaging his eyes, cheekbones, and ears. He quietly moaned.

"C'mon you guys. Kwitcher bellyachin'!" snapped Saunders. "You'd think you'd never had colds before!"

Murray, the red haired replacement almost snarled, "Sarge! You only say that because you haven't caught it yet. Just you wait."

"Are you threatening me, Murray?"

"I don't have to. As close together as we're all sleepin', it's just a matter of time."

"Well, right now, we gotta saddle up and get this guy back to S-2. The sooner we get goin', the sooner you can get cleaned up and get some rest. Hey!" Saunders dodged as Cajé exploded with another very wet sneeze right next to him.

"Sorry, Sarge."

"Yeah, I bet you are."

"No, honest, I wouldn't wish this on anyone."

"God bless you, Cajé," responded Doc automatically, then, "You almost got yourself killed back there, sneezin' like that."

"Don't I know it! I almost wish I had. I haven't felt this miserable since... I don't know when."

"Okay, let's go. Murray, take the point, Kirby, the rear. Cajé, you keep an eye on the prisoner. Sneeze on him, if you have to."

The squad moved off through the woods and back towards the village they currently called home.



"Lieutenant, you have to give my men a few days of rest."

"I don't have to do anything." Lt. Hanley stood as tall as his six foot plus would permit, and slowly blinked his deep green eyes.

"It's gotten really bad. Everyone's sick."

"Everyone?" Now he was slightly amused, his deep voice carefully expressing disbelief.

"Well, everyone except me, and it's only a matter of time before I come down with it," said the sergeant with resignation. "The guys are miserable."

"We're all miserable."

"Not like this...sir. Cajé was almost killed. He sneezed while trying to flank a machine gun. All the men are constantly sniffing, coughing and moaning. It's not safe for them to be out."

Hanley looked hard at his sergeant. "It's not like you to exaggerate."

"I'm not. Come and see for yourself."

"What does Doc say?"

"Well, he's stoic, and doesn't complain."

Saunders saw the look on Hanley's face. "He says they've got a bad cold. No one has much of a fever or appears to have an infection. Or even any" He stopped to remember the exact terminology, "serious upper respiratory complications. But, Lieutenant, Cajé really did give away his position. Billy sounds like Louis Armstrong when he talks. He and Littlejohn almost had an argument—they're that miserable. Murray got mad and yelled at me."

"The new guy? That quiet, young kid?"

"Yeah, that quiet, new kid. To top it off, Kirby feels so bad that he doesn't complain at all. He just sits and moans."

"Kirby isn't griping about anything?"

"No, sir. Not a word."

Hanley considered this startling change in the laws of the cosmos. Then he thought of the universal laws of war. "Sergeant, if I could give you time off, I would. As it is, everyone in the company has got some kind of bug." He looked intently at Saunders. "Except you." Then he sneezed. "Tell your men to get some sleep. At 2000 hours, your squad goes out on another patrol."



A little while later, the noncom surveyed his men sacked out elbow to elbow in the cellar of a small house much the worse for wear and tear from both armies. He stood there listening to the cacophony of sniffing (everyone), coughing (most), moaning (Kirby), and wheezing (Murray). Littlejohn's snore was much louder and more variable than usual. Nudging him onto his side didn't end the noise as it usually did.

Cajé sat up, "Littlejohn! I can't stand it anymore! I can't sleep with all this racket. It's got to stop. It's got to stop now!" The long speech prompted an equally long coughing spell. "*Oh, St. Bernadine, je*



vous en prie, aidez-moi, je voudrais mourir vite, pas si lentement!" (Oh, St. Bernadine, I beg you, help me, I want to die quickly not so slowly) He lay down and curled up on his side, burying his face in his arm.

Saunders went over and pinched Littlejohn's nose. The sleeping man opened his mouth. The snoring was replaced with a hoarse wheezing. He then moved to Doc and squatted next to him.

"Doc, when should we take someone to the aid station?"

"They're overwhelmed right now. Besides, it's just a cold, Sarge."

"Okay, when is it more?"

Doc rolled over onto his back, trying to get comfortable. Every bone hurt. Changing positions simply altered which ones hurt more. With his eyes closed, he recited, "High fever, trouble breathing, breathless after normal activity, conditions lasting more than a week..." His voice trailed off. He shook himself, opened his eyes and looked up at his sergeant. "Basically, if they can't function at all, they should see the doctor. Anything less, we soldier on through it." He shifted to his side and muttered, "When do we go out again?"

"2000 hours. Get some sleep, Doc." Saunders looked at his charges. *Just colds*, he thought. He worked his way over to his sleeping space in the corner and lay down.

An incoherent dream of indescribable sweetness was shattered by a moaning cry, "Ma? Ma? Ma? I'm sick. I can't go to school."

Saunders hauled himself up, stretched, working the kinks out of his back. He listened for a reprise, not really sure which of his men had awakened him.

It was Billy. Saunders hunkered down and felt the boy's forehead. It felt a little warm—not enough to matter. "How're ya feeling, Billy?"

"Awful, Sarge, my throat hurts."

"You don't have much of a fever, if any. Go back to sleep. We go out again in a few hours."

The young man started to protest, but he read Saunders' implacable expression and closed his mouth. The sergeant wearily shook his head and walked around, checking his men once more. Nothing had changed. He lay back down.



All too soon, it was time to get up and get his men moving. It took more prodding than usual. The sick men moved painfully and slowly. Billy mumbled complaints to himself. Caje did the same in French, his breath whistling noisily. None spoke to Saunders, but there were coughs, sniffs and wheezes with every move. The only one who was quiet was Kirby. Doc paused between coughs to peer at the normally loquacious man.

"Kirby, are ya all right?"

"No, I'm not. Leave me alone."

Doc reached out and touched his head. Kirby twisted sideways.

"Lay off, Doc. Lemme be." The wiry BAR man cupped his right ear as he shrugged off the medic. Doc sighed and decided to pursue it later. He grabbed his bag and quickly checked the contents.

"Sarge? I need to get more aspirin."

"Can you get it within five minutes?"

"Ten."

"Okay, but not a second more."



The man assembled outside the CP. Saunders emerged, folding up a map, and put it in his jacket. They were to patrol a wide circle to the east through the woods. Their mission was to locate the German outposts while engaging the enemy as little as possible. The only thing more risky would have been hunting for another prisoner for information. Saunders did not look forward to requiring stealth when his men were so unavoidably noisy. Even his normally silent scout sounded like an old man. He shook his head.

"Okay, we're going out to find where the German outposts are. We want to avoid contact with the enemy."

There was a collective sigh. Saunders surveyed his men. Cajé's mouth was twisted with angry disbelief. Doc regarded him with mournful resignation. Littlejohn, Nelson and Murray merely stared open mouthed. Kirby's reproachful look elicited an explanation.

"I know, I know, but we're actually the healthiest squad. So, it's fallen to us. Let's get going." He got out the map and showed it to the men. "We're going to head out along this ridge here, check out the village and work our way back along this creek. Other squads are probing elsewhere." He looked at them, hoping to raise their spirits. "Hanley says that they don't think there is much of a build up in this area. They just want verification. Good chance that we won't see anybody tonight."

Six pairs of baleful eyes stared wearily at him. Helmets on heads, weapons at the ready, and the squad headed out. Cajé was on point, Kirby at the rear. The rest spread out in a rough line. Their eyes moved constantly. They stepped carefully. They prayed desperately that it would be a dull, unnecessary mission. They all knew, however, that often intelligence was wrong.

Travel was slow. There was a waxing crescent moon low in the eastern sky. The stars disappeared towards the west. *Something is moving in*, thought Saunders. The faint light revealed the path that led through the trees. They followed the line of the ridge, stepping carefully and watching for strange shadows. They listened for noises and/or silences that didn't fit in an early winter night. They made it without incident to the road that led into the village. They walked along both sides, scanning in all directions.

It was in the center of town that they encountered the enemy patrol. Five German soldiers were working their way along a street. The two groups spotted each other simultaneously and began firing immediately. Littlejohn managed to work his way around in the dark and used a grenade to kill three of them. The rest were killed by rifle fire. The dogfaces checked out the rest of the town and saw nothing alive except a rat or two. The men, sounding like escapees from a TB sanitarium, worked together automatically.

It was 0100 hours when they began to head back after finding the creek. By this time, there weren't even stars visible. Clouds had moved in. The air felt damp, and the wind picked up. Littlejohn lifted his head like a horse smelling for water.

"Sarge," he said *sotto voce*, "I think there's a storm brewing."

"Yeah, I noticed. It feels like rain."

"Or snow. In Nebraska, you can get savage blizzards blowing in weather like this."

"It happens in Illinois, too. Let's keep an eye on it."

There was a slight click. Each man hit the dirt. A machine gun up ahead erupted. Four M-1s began to fire. The men could see flakes here and there in the muzzle flashes. Cajé sighed and worked his way over towards Saunders. He sneezed a couple of times on his way.

"Sarge, shall I outflank 'em?"

"You stay put. Billy," he called in a stage whisper.

"Yo." was an equally quiet response.

It took the young man several minutes to get to his NCO. His hoarse breathing preceded his arrival. "Yes, Sarge?"

"I want you and Littlejohn to go around to the right. When you're close enough, toss a couple of grenades. We'll keep a steady fire from here. We'll give you about five minutes."

"Okay, Sarge." Billy turned and wriggled his way over to Littlejohn. He knew exactly from where his buddy had been firing. The squad had been together so long and fought in so many different situations that they knew each squad mate's silhouette against a night sky. They knew how each one smelled, breathed and moved. Keeping track of the replacements was tough, but the heart of the squad was so close, so perfectly attuned that they often didn't have to speak, even in the dark. Much of the time they didn't even use signals, they anticipated each other seamlessly. Even though their rhythms were off balance because of their current ill health, they compensated without thought.

Saunders waited the five minutes and then opened up. Cajé and Kirby joined him. After a few minutes, during a brief silence, there was a horrendous fit of coughing from Cajé. This drew more enemy



fire. The Cajun cowered behind a small rock, and wondered at how little things had changed since the previous afternoon. His morose train of thought was derailed by the explosions of two grenades. He shivered in the cold night, and was only mildly perturbed when he realized that he couldn't stop. The pounding between his eyes and his raw throat bothered him more.

Billy, on the other hand, was feeling as if his throat was an open sore every time he breathed. When he inhaled, the pain went straight down into his chest. He could feel vibrations rumbling through his midsection. The rest of the men had their own versions of unpleasant symptoms. They formed a ragged, exhausted group around their squad leader mutely awaiting his orders.

"Okay, we better hustle. This feels like a real snow storm. If we're lucky, it's just a flurry and will stop soon, but I don't want to count on that."

The men reformed their line and plodded along the edge of the large stream. Fortunately, it was fairly straight, and there was a narrow path along the bank. The snow intensified. Saunders could hear faint pings as the dense, icy flakes hit his helmet. The wind picked up. *It's an official blizzard at 35 mph*, he thought, then immediately repressed the pessimistic idea. It was bad enough that the men were sick while they tried to get back to their lines, but if the weather got much worse.... Again, he firmly squelched the thought. There was a loud rumbling blast that sent every man for whatever scant cover they could find. Kirby slipped off the bank and ended up standing in the water. He said nothing. Seconds later there was a bright flash of lightning and more thunder. The men breathed a sighs of relief when they were sure that it wasn't artillery fire.

The rate of snow fall increased as did the wind. A shivering Littlejohn worked his way up the line until he was beside his sergeant. "Sarge, I don't like the feel of this weather." His voice was hoarse and very deep.

"Neither do I, Littlejohn. I'll tell Murray to look for some place we can hole up. It's going to be very cold after the snow passes through. It feels like we've had a couple of inches already."

Saunders jogged up to the front of the squad. Murray was leaning into the wind, his head bowed and his eyes barely open. *So much for spotting an ambush*, thought the sergeant.

"Let me take the point, Mike," he said. "You go back and walk with Doc. He's not looking too good."

The creek made a sharp turn to the right. Saunders got between Littlejohn and Murray, also very tall, and used his lighter to look at the map. If they continued straight, there was a trail or path that led to an unidentified building. He decided they should check it out. It was far enough away from the main roads that it might be safe.

Thirty minutes and another two inches of snow later, they emerged onto a tiny, unpaved lane lined with Lombardy poplars. Saunders thought that the prudent course would be to walk parallel behind the trees, but the ground was uneven and covered with snow. He could not risk having one of his men fall and sprain something. He opted to lead them down the road, hugging the edge. He figured it was a choice between getting somewhere and not getting anywhere at all.



The precipitation did not let up. They rounded a slight curve, trudging in the powdery, six inch deep snow. They arrived at a ruined gate set between two piles of stone rubble. There was a sign. With the aid of the lighter, Cajé was able to read it, "*Couvent de St. Clare*...It's a convent, Sarge."

"Let's take a look. Maybe the fighting has missed them, and we can get shelter there. Cajé, you go check it out."

"Looks like they got the shit beat out of 'em," said Doc, "judging by the rubble and downed trees along here."

All the other men stopped and stared at the suddenly profane medic. Billy looked nervously around, expecting more lightning.

"Doc, are you all right?" cautiously asked Murray, coughing.

The aid man sighed, "No, I'm not, I'm really not." Then he sagged and slowly collapsed into the snow.

The rest of the squad stood around looking at him and each other.

"Well, let's get him up," ordered Saunders. "We have to get out of this weather." He looked down the driveway and could barely see Cajé against the black and gray background.

Murray and Littlejohn seized the medic and picked him up in a chair carry. He laid his head on Littlejohn's arm. They staggered gamely between the rows of trees, sliding a little in the snow. As they approached the building, they passed a garden around a pond with a weeping willow leaning over the water.

When they finally arrived at the entrance, Cajé emerged from the heavily damaged building. "It's pretty much destroyed, Sarge. It's clear, though." He coughed repeatedly, and it took several seconds to get it under control. "The chapel has a roof, sort of. This takes you right in."

The group lurched through the hole in the corner of the building. The small chapel had three and a half walls and most of a roof. Someone, probably Germans, had camped out and broken up a lot of the furniture and railings. There was an altar against the far wall with a huge crucifix above it. Two surprisingly intact stained glass windows graced either side. Artillery had exploded the left corner of the room by an arched door that led deeper into the building. The room was open to the snowy night, but, fortunately, the intact walls blocked the wind well enough. Piles of assorted debris lay randomly around the room. The men instinctively went to the area by the altar, the warmest spot in the room.

Murray and Littlejohn lay Doc down. Within seconds, the squad had collapsed onto the floor like so many abandoned marionettes. Their sergeant glanced at the opening. Somebody had to watch for Germans. He should develop a guard duty schedule. He stood there watching them and listening. There was no talking. Littlejohn was gasping, his lungs heaving. Nelson lay next to him panting. Murray was so pale that his freckles stood out darkly against his oddly bluish skin. He struggled to his feet and walked out the opening. The sound of retching reached them shortly after. He returned, wiping his mouth, and sat next to Littlejohn. The three of them had become a minisquad in the days after Murray arrived. Littlejohn had taken the young man under his wing. Nelson enjoyed having someone younger than he in the squad. The three had quickly become buddies. The tall, skinny kid from Iowa had embodied the best of Midwestern openness. He kept his mouth shut, paid attention to the veterans, and learned quickly.

Cajé, leaning against the altar, looked up at his sergeant hopelessly, "Where do you want me, Sarge?"

Saunders squatted down close to him. "Tell me about the rest of this place."

Cajé punctuated his sentences with racking coughs. "The chapel is the only place with a roof at all. Down that hall, or what's left of it, are the nun's cells."

He saw the look of puzzlement. "Like dorm rooms. Beyond that, I think was the infirmary. Straight back is the refectory. It was their common room. They ate there, and other stuff. They took pretty much everything when they cleared out." He leaned his head back against the wall. His face pounded in rhythm with his rapid pulse. He swallowed painfully.

"How come you know so much about nuns?"

"Twelve years of an excellent Catholic education." He winced as he swallowed again.

The rest of the men were no better. Kirby lay on his side, his head rocking slightly, and his hands pressing into his ears. Doc opened his eyes and watched his sergeant. He tried to analyze his own symptoms, but his wretchedness was too general to pinpoint. He lay there, unable to summon the energy to sit up and help without orders.

Billy started to speak, but his voice was completely gone. He couldn't even summon the gravelly croak of the last couple of days. He tried to signal that he could take a shift, but realized that he wouldn't be very useful if he could not call out an alarm. He leaned his head back against the wall and waited for his sergeant to tell him what to do. The stone wall felt good against his head. He took off his jacket, hoping he could cool off a little.

Saunders went and looked out at the dark snowy night. The snow was still pelting down. He knew that once the sky cleared, the temperature would plummet. Littlejohn and probably Kirby knew it, too. They could freeze to death if they fell asleep the way they were. One alternative was to keep everyone awake for the night. A better solution would be to get a fire going and keep them warm. Unfortunately, an open fire would be visible to everyone for quite a distance. He stood up, his mind working furiously. He needed a stove or some way to keep a fire out of sight. He'd have to ignore the possibility of anyone smelling the smoke.

The sergeant moved around and felt each man. All of them were unusually warm. However, Kirby, Doc and Cajé felt the hottest. He was very worried about his BAR man. The way he held his ears and twisted his head reminded Saunders of his little sister with a severe ear infection. She had cried and fussed until her ear drum burst. Later, he had found her pillow covered with brownish fluid. The ear healed just fine, but the fever could have killed her. He had to get their fevers down.

"Littlejohn, Nelson and Murray, one of you sit near the door and keep watch."

The three of them moved as one and sat, leaning against one wall of the open corner. Littlejohn pulled a blanket out of his knapsack which he tossed off to one side and covered them with it. Billy held his rifle. Murray and Littlejohn watched the dark road and garden.

The sergeant went over to Doc. "Where's the aspirin? Everybody's got a fever."

Doc rolled over and revealed his rucksack. Saunders searched through it twice.

"It's not here, Doc."

Doc closed his eyes, searching his memory. Chagrin and fear spasmed across his face. "Sarge, I forgot. They didn't have any handy. They wouldn't let me go to the supply tent, and they were all too busy. I didn't have enough time to wait." He looked at his squad leader. "I'm sorry I let you and the men down."

"What about the morphine, Doc? Where is it?"

"It's under my shirt, in my armpit. I do that to keep it warm."

"Could I give some to Kirby? He's in a lot of pain."

"What from? Did I miss something?"

"He's got an ear infection."

"You could give him morphine for it."

"What about you, Doc, how are you?"

"I'm runnin' a fever. I have a horrible sore throat. I'm guessing that we've all got strep throat. High fevers are the most dangerous thing right now. Aspirin would've helped with that."

"Doc, don't beat yourself up over it. We'll get through it. What can I do besides cold compresses? What about snow?"

"Didn't they teach you anything in basic? Snow could give them frostbite." Doc sighed and thought. "Alcohol rubs would work. Cool water from melted snow would, too." He closed his eyes and searched his mind. His aunt had known a lot of herbal remedies. His face brightened. "Wintergreen. It's a small evergreen plant. It works like aspirin does."

"Wintergreen? How could I find it? There's eight inches of snow."

Doc thought again. "Willow bark. If you boil willow bark, it works too. It's hard on the stomach, though. Oh, Sarge, water. The men have to have lots of water. You know anything about taking care of sick folks?"

"I had younger brothers and a sister. I know the usual stuff."

"Good." The medic closed his eyes.

Saunders looked around at the men. They all needed a doctor. If the fevers weren't controlled they could be fatal. He'd had a childhood friend who died of such an illness in the hospital with the best of care. Here he was in the ruins of a French convent without aspirin, heat, cold weather gear or even a good source of water. He went over in his mind what he needed to do and worked out priorities. First, he had to get a fire going somehow.

The sergeant decided to explore the building himself to see what he could find that might be useful. He returned with a couple rugs, a blanket and a chipped enamel basin. He had found a jar of something that smelled like Vick's VapoRub. He dropped his loot and headed for the kitchen area behind the refectory. Someone had left an empty oil drum out back. He rolled it to the chapel. He had a stove.

He busied himself punching holes in the drum with Billy's German entrenching tool. When he had enough, plus a large one for feeding in wood, he went to Littlejohn and shook him gently. "Hey, Littlejohn, where's your knapsack? Did you bring your hatchet?"

The big blue eyes opened slowly. "It's over... there." He gestured towards the nearest wall. "Careful, Sarge... sharp." He closed his eyes.

The noncom shook Littlejohn again. "Look, one of you has to stay awake. Can you do the first shift? I'll wake someone else later."

Littlejohn nodded and sat up straighter. His normally amiable face was patient misery.

Saunders found the hatchet and started working on the pieces of furniture. Grateful once again for his Scout experience, he soon had some kindling and fuel. Tinder--what could he use to start the fire? He pulled his map out of his jacket and tore off a part he hoped he wouldn't need, and lit it with his lighter,



carefully shielding the light to reduce their chances of being spotted. He put the paper under a pile of smaller branches he'd found in the garden near the entry way. Once the fire had caught, he put the oil drum over it. It continued to blaze. He carefully dropped pieces of wood in. There were only glimpses of flames through the holes in the drum. The room remained dark for the most part, but he could feel heat radiating off the metal. The sergeant breathed a sigh of relief.

His next step was to move the men closer to the stove. When he touched Kirby, the smaller man recoiled, muttering something about a fire. Saunders couldn't think of anything he could say to help him—he was caught up in the past. He tried to shake Kirby awake. The dark eyes were wide and unseeing. He was burning up with fever and his nightmare wouldn't leave him. The sergeant slid him to an area unheated by the homemade stove. At least the private wasn't clutching at his ears for the moment. The three guards were having trouble breathing, but he could not help them at the moment. He covered Doc and Caje with the rugs.

He took the basin, and scooped up some snow. He stopped, looking at the garden. The tree next to the pond—he finally recognized the weeping willow. He put the snow on the stove to melt, and then grabbed the hatchet and headed out for the tree. He returned with several branches. Minutes later he had strips of bark in the basin. He looked around and found Nelson's helmet. It was the squad cook pot, more often than not. Its straps had long since burned off, and soon it was also melting snow.

Saunders went to Kirby who was twisting his head again. The private was burning up. The sergeant's heart sank with fear that he could lose him. He'd tended his younger siblings when he was younger. He knew about soup, and comfort, and entertaining a sick kid. They had never been close to dying. He always knew it was possible, but it had never been so dire. Here were Kirby and the others, and he was the only one to take care of them. He shook his head. He could only do what he could.

"Too hot. Too hot, can't breathe. Smoke...smoke..."

Sarge decided to take off Kirby's clothes and put on cold compresses. He took off the boots and bit his lip to keep from cursing himself out. Kirby had landed in the stream, and he had completely forgotten about it. Both feet were cold, wet and dead-white. Saunders dried and rubbed both feet, carefully examining the toes. He started to remove Kirby's shirt and stopped. There was a flask under Kirby's shirt. Saunders smelled it and winced. Fine aged scotch it was not, but it would make excellent rubbing alcohol. He quickly stripped Kirby down to his shorts and undershirt, tossing everything in a pile. During the process, he found three pairs of socks in various pockets. He put dry socks on Kirby's feet, and then soaked others in the still cold melt water. One went across his neck; others stuffed into his armpits. He soaked one in the liquor and swabbed his limbs, chest, neck and head.



Kirby gasped, then shouted, "Marie! Marie! The baby! You gotta save 'em!" Kirby struggled weakly against his sergeant's ministrations.

"It's okay. You're safe. We'll get the fever down, Kirby."

"No....no....," with great despair, "No, it'll never be okay. They're gone. I shoulda been with 'em." He thrashed his head, his face twisted with anguish. "Please, stop the pain. I can't stand it."

Saunders went over to Doc, and slipped his hand inside his shirt.

The medic giggled, and protested in his sleep, "Stop, Jackie!" as the noncom extracted the small bag with the morphine ampoules. Doc was hot and dry.

First things first, thought Saunders and returned to Kirby. After giving him some morphine, he settled his patient more comfortably. Then he wanted to kick himself--an unconscious Kirby wouldn't be able to drink anything.

Priorities—he had to work systematically. The sergeant rummaged around and went through everyone's knapsacks quickly. He pulled out rations, a couple of tin mugs and more socks. He left each man one pair but kept extras. He piled up everything near the stove.

Meanwhile, the willow bark had started to simmer. He found Murray's helmet, and he went to get more snow. He paused briefly and looked around. The storm had finally stopped and the sky was clearing up. The moon smiled in the southern sky. He could see surprisingly well in the faint light. He figured the

snow at around ten inches. If they were lucky, nobody would come this way. He wanted to think that there wasn't any importance to this position. *If there had been, the Germans wouldn't have pulled out.*

Saunders took a mug and filled it with the tea. He went to Doc first and woke him. Holding him up, he helped him drink a cup. His patient made a face. He eagerly drank the cup of cool water that was given to him next.

"Sarge, are the men peeing?"

"What?"

"You know, urinating...."

"Oh, no, thank God."

"No, that's bad. If they've got fevers and not enough water, it could kill 'em. They've got to get plenty of fluids. If they don't pee, they're not getting' enough."

"Here, Doc, drink another cup."

The private followed orders and then collapsed back to sleep.

Jeez' the sergeant thought to himself, *They're not getting enough to drink. How am I going to get them more? How am I going to handle this?* He wished Doc hadn't said anything, and yet, he knew it would have killed him for men to die from something dumb like that. He figured he'd just deal with it one problem at a time.

Saunders went to the Three Musketeers—Nelson, Littlejohn and Murray—next. Each one was breathing poorly and now very hot. He had them drink the tea and extra water. He helped them off with their shirts, and then mixed some of the camphor-mint goop that he had found into the hot water in Murray's helmet. He wedged the helmet between Murray and Littlejohn and started to cover the three heads with the blanket, making a kind of tent. He paused when Murray looked at him, bleary-eyed.

"This is a sweat lodge, Sarge.... The Indians back home ... do this, only it... doesn't smell like cold... medicine." His breathing was labored.

"Let me know if it helps."

"Sure thing, Sarge."

Saunders studied the three men. He couldn't do more for them.

Caje was next. The shivering scout practically inhaled the tea. Saunders gave him warm water from Nelson's helmet. "Sarge? Sarge? *Qu'est-ce que nous ferons?*" (What will we do?)

That was all he could understand. Caje spoke too rapidly for him to follow, even with the French lessons he'd been getting. He stroked the scout's hair tenderly. "*Tout ira bien, mon ami...Bois ceci... Très bien....*" (Everything will be okay... drink this... very good.). He had gotten three cups of water, including the tea, into him. He hated to make him get up. "Caje, can you sit by the opening and watch?"

The scout nodded and moved. He sat cross legged, leaning against the side of the opening, his Garand across his knees. Saunders draped the extra blanket around him.

The sergeant looked outside, leaning against the edge of the opening. It was lighter now that the sky was completely clear. The stars were hard and bright; the moon was hovering 30° over the southwest horizon. He figured dawn in three hours. It would be a new moon tomorrow night. He looked up and spotted Orion.

What's your kick, sergeant? You gotta girl? A fiancée?"

Saunders heard the questions in his mind. The infiltrator's smug, arrogant voice came to him unbidden. He had looked down, filled with dislike and unable to speak. He hadn't wanted the man to sense his thoughts. His kicks? He had simple priorities. First was completing the mission, whatever it was. Next was protecting his men and getting them back safely. Third, however, third was personal. Third was Jeannie. She was the secret that helped him stay whole. He looked again at the stars and wondered if she were looking at them now. He had shown her Orion and the circumpolar constellations one night recently, and he hoped she remembered them. He smiled, wishing she were here to help with the nursing. Being a doctor, she'd know the best things to do. The frosty air prompted a look at the stove. He sighed. He'd better chop some more wood.

Later, he circled the room, stopping at each man and assessing his condition. They were resting easy. He shook Kirby until he opened his eyes.

"What d'ya want?"

The private wasn't in as much pain, but he was still hot. More importantly, he was conscious for the moment.

"Here, soldier, drink this."

"What is it?"

"It'll make you feel better."

"Is it booze?"

"No, but it'll make you feel better."

"This stuff tastes awful."

"Drink it up anyway. It'll—"

"I know....it'll make me feel better."

"Now, drink the water. It'll get the taste out of your mouth....Drink it all....That's it." He felt a lot better having gotten some of the tea into him finally. He lay Kirby down, and checked his pulse. It was rapid, as had been those of the other fevered men.

Saunders' eyes fell on the pile of rations. Food, they should have food. Come to think of it, he was actually hungry. He checked his pockets, found a P-38, and then he grabbed a can of beef stew. Thirty eight punches later, he dumped the contents into Billy's helmet. He repeated this until he'd mixed several random cans together, then he tasted the concoction. It wasn't half bad. He thought about adding some of Kirby's booze for flavor, but he decided it was more beneficial when applied externally. Using the tin cups he went from man to man and made them drink some of the soup. He repeated this with more water. This necessitated more snow gathering--a moment to breathe and look at the stars—and more wood chopping.

"Sarge, I gotta take a whiz. You gotta bottle or somethin'?"

"Just get up and go outside. Be careful to go across the path. I'm using the snow on this side for drinking water."

Kirby struggled up and took a step. He swayed dangerously. "Christ on a cross," he began. Then he looked up and spotted the sculpture on the wall. "Sorry," bowing slightly. This set him off balance, and he fell over.

"Kirby, are you all right?"

"I dunno, everything is swaying and turning. I don't feel so good."

"Here, let me help you." Saunders put an arm around his waist and kept him vertical until they were outside. He led him a fair distance from the door. "Can you stand on your own, Kirby?"

"Could you lean me up against the tree?"

Saunders did as he asked, then politely looked the other way. A minute later, he helped the wiry man back into the chapel. He made Kirby drink more water. His pulse was slower, and he wasn't as hot as before. The vertigo was worrisome, but that sometimes came with ear infections.

Doc was next. Saunders tried unsuccessfully to wake him. He felt very hot, and he mumbled incoherently when he was shaken. He did get him awake enough to drink some of the tea followed by a melt water chaser. Then he gave the medic a rubdown with the liquor and put on cold sock compresses as he had with Kirby. They had worked for the BAR man; he hoped they would work for Doc. He started when Doc grabbed his arm—

"No! Did you see that? Did you see that? He wants her, too. Daayamn! Ain't that the worst luck? I finally find someone, and he's goin' after her, too. Maybe she'll like me better...God dammit, .who'm I kidding?...Christ! He'll never give up. He never does."

Shocked at the language and the emotions it betrayed, Saunders knew who Doc was talking about. Of the men in the squad, Doc and he were the only ones who'd been interested in the expatriate woman doctor. "You'll find someone...someone better for you."

Doc grimaced, "Yeah, right, like there's a church social every Saturday around here." He sighed, "God, my head hurts."

Saunders stroked Doc's forehead until he relaxed, and thought about the man. He knew it would kill the medic if he realized what he'd said out loud. Saunders hoped the compresses and willow bark tea would ease his fever and bring him back to the present. He needed Doc's advice.

He continued his rounds. The other men seemed no worse. Cajé's temperature was down. The home made medicine had worked well for him. Suddenly, Cajé got to his feet and staggered outside. Saunders heard him retching. He could only hope that Cajé had absorbed enough of the liquids before losing it. When he wobbled back inside, the sergeant helped him lie down, wiped his face, and gave him a couple sips of water. It would be tricky getting fluids into him and keeping them down. He wondered who should go on guard duty next, then gave it up as a lost cause.

The weary noncom next checked under the blanket tent. The scented water had cooled. The three men were deeply asleep. Their pulses were slower, but they still felt warm. He woke them up and

dosed them with the herbal remedy again. After the water chaser, Littlejohn muttered something about needing to go outside. Billy and Murray also stood up

"Stay across the path," he called to them. "Do you need any help?"

"No, Sarge," answered Littlejohn and Murray. Nelson shook his head, still mute.

When they came back in, he gave the tin cup filled with warm water to the young private and told him to gargle with it. It was an interesting combination of sounds, but the smile on Billy's face indicated that it helped his throat. Saunders put his ear on the chests of the three men and listened. The exhalations were as noisy as the inhalations, accompanied with a lot of gurgly noises. He figured the three were still pretty sick, but their fevers were down. He hoped the next day they'd be strong enough to walk back to their lines. He had heated up the minty helmet while they had been outside. He set up the "sweat lodge" blanket again.

Saunders went back to Doc who was now a little cooler. He swabbed him down again, and renewed the compresses. Exhausted, he sat next to the man who had saved their lives innumerable times, and wiped the gentle face with a wet sock. He wasn't raving any more. The sergeant hoped his dreams had moved to something happier. He gently smoothed the light brown hair, and leaned back against the wall.



A deep shiver woke him up. The room was very cold. It would be light soon. He checked the stove. It had gone out. He berated himself for not having put wood in it before falling asleep. He set himself to chopping some more, and then building and lighting the fire. He got more snow from a deeper drift around the corner of the building, double checking the color, and started some more tea. The sergeant checked his watch. He'd gotten about an hour's sleep. It was too soon to give them more of the medicine, he guessed. Anyway, they were all peacefully asleep, even Cajé. He took a look outside, but didn't see anything, and decided to go to sleep on purpose. He added wood to the fire and lay down next to the stove.

When he woke this time, it was morning, and the fire in the stove was low. He built it up, and checked the men again. Cajé had gone to relieve himself. Doc was very weak, but managed to walk outside with some assistance. Saunders figured that they were all getting enough water. They seemed to have passed this crisis. They were weak and wobbly, but he hoped they'd be able to walk back before night fall. His men needed a doctor. The sergeant fixed more rations soup and willow bark tea, and gave more of everything to each of his charges.

While he drank his own breakfast, vaguely aware that his throat felt a little scratchy, Saunders studied his map. They could take the lane to the convent back about a mile, then join the creek from a different place and follow it back to their lines. He hoped they could get a ride to the aid station from there.

Saunders woke each man, "Get up. We've got to eat and get moving. We can't stay here. It's too dangerous."

Kirby didn't touch his ears any more, but he was still quiet. He found his weapon, checked it quickly, got dressed, and assembled the rest of his gear. He drank his breakfast without relish. Cajé still coughed, painfully, and didn't eat anything. He drank a little water, and listlessly got his stuff together. Saunders helped Doc sit up and eat. The medic seemed indifferent to everything except the warm liquid. He reluctantly took the bag of morphine that Saunders handed him, and slowly put his clothes on. Murray, Nelson and Littlejohn had quietly packed their things and eaten their breakfast. Saunders noticed that each one would pause to catch his breath every so often. He was deeply troubled about their breathing.

"We have to try to get back." He looked at each man in turn. "Do you think you can make it?"

The men nodded. They were willing to try. They were eager to return to the company. They were all weak and sick. They knew it would be difficult walking.

"We'll make it as long as the pace isn't too fast," said Murray. The first baritone sounded like a second bass.

"Wish we had snowshoes," rumbled Littlejohn.

"Or skis," mumbled Cajé, who had spent many winter vacations with relatives in Canada.

"There's about ten inches of snow, plus drifts," said Saunders. "It's going to be tough. It'll take a long time, but we can make it." *We've got to*, he thought to himself. "Okay, Kirby, take the point. Murray, you take the rear. Everyone else, single file, don't bunch up. We'll take turns on point"

The squad set out, moving slowly. The coughs, wheezes and sniffles were as prevalent as when they'd begun the patrol, but the men were all conscious and lucid for the moment.

Kirby trudged valiantly, busting a path in the snow. It was quite deep, crusty on top, but not frozen hard enough to walk on. *Maybe in a day or two*, thought the point man. For now, it was a struggle. Mercifully, his ears were not nearly as painful as they'd been the last couple of days. He had to stop every few minutes to rest a bit. He looked guiltily back at the Sarge, who said nothing nor shot him any angry glares.

The three buddies at the back of the line tried hard to keep watch behind the exhausted group. Sarge admitted to himself that luck would determine their success more than anything else. White clad Germans would have no trouble surprising this fragile group. If the squad could stay in the trees, they would be more difficult to spot.

The day was bright, cold and still. Trees were iced with white, and sparkling in the sunshine. The men squinted against the brightness. The blue sky was reflected in every shadow, every hollow. The woods were a tangle of black, white and blue, and the small creek was snow covered ice.

"Hey, Sarge," said Cajé, "Maybe we should try walking on the creek. It looks flatter."

"Naah, it hasn't been cold long enough. The ice has got to be pretty thin."

Cajé shuddered at the thought of ice cold knee deep water. He longed for the warm, wet air of his native Louisiana. Every breath here was a cold, sharp pain. The men breathed raggedly open mouthed, exhaling clouds of steam. *Like ancient dragons* he mused.

After a quarter mile, Saunders told Cajé to take the lead, giving Kirby a rest. The three men at the back were doing well to keep up. They panted and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. All the same, their eyes wandered constantly, scanning the scenery around them. They took turns looking behind. Their weapons were ready to fire if needed.

After an hour, a flight of bombers with a fighter escort passed way above them. The squad didn't even have the energy to wave or even smile up at the planes. Saunders scanned his flock, noting the signs of fatigue in postures, the way they moved and held their weapons. They could continue a while longer, he decided. He looked at the map and found they had gone a little less than three quarters of a mile. Each man had taken the lead at least once. At this rate, it would be midnight before they returned, assuming slower progress as the day wore on.

When they'd gone about a mile by his reckoning, Saunders looked for a place to take a break. There were some rocks butted up against a hill, and he pointed to them. "Take five," he ordered. "No, make that fifteen."

Everyone found a place to sit, profoundly grateful for the rest. Cajé, who'd been on point again, was breathing heavily. He reached for his canteen but replaced it disappointedly when he found that it was frozen. Doc leaned over and handed him one of his. He had stuck his two canteens under his shirt to keep them warm. Cajé nodded thankfully.

"Kirby, keep an eye on the road back where we've been. Nelson, keep a look out ahead of us."

Both men moved to locations conducive to watching the road. Saunders started with Littlejohn, intending to ensure that each man was doing okay and got something to drink. He was moving on to Murray when he saw Doc examining Cajé after getting his canteen back. Their eyes met and they exchanged a worried look. A few minutes and the rest of the squad later, they convened.

"What do you think, Doc?"

"Nobody's about to die, but we can't push the Three Musketeers over there. If I gambled, I'd bet they should be in a hospital."

"Kirby's better than he was yesterday. I can't tell with Cajé. He's thrown up a couple of times, and his head hurts. He seems to be moving okay, though. How are you doing?"

"I've been better. I was much worse last night."

"Do you think you can make it?"

Doc snorted, "I think others will collapse before I will."

They looked at each other, knowing they had no choice.

Saunders wished he had some chocolate bars, or even better, some coffee for the men. "Okay, let's hit the road. Littlejohn, you take the point. Kirby, you take the rear."

They moved off. While they walked in the bright, winter sun, it was almost warm. Nelson closed his eyes to tiny slits, just enough to follow the path pounded out by his predecessors. He imagined himself skating on a cold winter's afternoon, the thick ice a tiny bit soft on top making it very fast and smooth.

He woke up as he tumbled into a snow bank on the side of the trail. Immediately, the rest of the squad surrounded him, half searching the woods around them, the others examining Billy.

"I'm all right! Really, I am. I kinda dozed off and tripped."

"Okay, everyone, let's take another break."

The squad moved off the trail to a small clearing. Littlejohn and Murray were lookouts. Again, Doc and Sarge moved from man to man, talking quietly and assessing the group. This time, Sarge felt Doc's face and took his pulse.

"You still have a fever."

"Don't we all? Even you feel a little warm. Let me see your throat."

"I feel fine."

"Let me see your throat." In matters of health, the medic's wishes could supersede those of his superior. Doc gently tilted Saunders' face so the late afternoon sun shone on the back of his throat.

"It looks red. I think you've got a low fever. Honestly, how do you feel?"

"Throat's a little sore, and I feel tired. However, I didn't get but a couple hours of sleep last night. I'm still doing better than everyone else." He turned to the rest of the men. "Make sure you get something to drink."

The squad set out again. Cajé was in the middle near Doc.

"What do you think, Doc, we gonna make it?"

"Sure, Cajé, it will just take a while."

"I know where we are. I don't think we'll make it back tonight. What are Sarge's plans?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"How do you think he's doing?"

"He may be coming down with it, but he's a far sight better than the rest of us."

They talked a bit more about the weather and the difficulty of working their way through the snow. Neither Doc nor Cajé had a lot of snow experience.

"It snows occasionally in my part of Arkansas, but this is the deepest I've ever seen. Bet you could make a great fort or tunnels with snow as deep as this."

"I used to go skiing with cousins in Canada, but I didn't have to walk much in snow this deep. What I'd really like now is a sleigh and a couple of horses." Both men laughed.

Meanwhile, Kirby trailed behind Littlejohn. "You okay, Littlejohn?"

"No, I'm not." He coughed. "I can keep walking, though. I'm used to deep snow. We have plenty of it back home...usually in the spring."

"Yeah, me, too. We get our share in Chicago. I've seen plenty of storms just like this one."

"I didn't think this part of Europe would be as cold as the Midwest."

"Yeah, me either. I heard they didn't send us cold weather gear 'cause they thought the war'd be over before winter hit."

"Sounds like your typical Army SNAFU." The big man stopped for a second to catch his breath. "You're looking better today."

"My ear's better; the rest of me hurts like hell. How 'bout you?"

"I feel like I can't get my breath."

"I know what you mean."

They both turned and continued walking.



Suddenly, a white hill ahead of them exploded with machine gun fire. The squad dropped to the ground, digging down into the snow as if it could protect them from bullets. Once again, Cajé found himself exposed and vulnerable with his head pounding. He was flattened into the trail they'd been following. He tried to name every obscure saint he could think of and prayed fervently. Meanwhile, there was nothing to do but wait for rescue again.

Adrenaline can do amazing things, thought Doc as he watched the men operate smoothly.

Nelson had been on point and managed to drop into a small gully that ran off to the left. Murray joined him shortly, and the two squirmed their way up it. Meanwhile, Saunders and Littlejohn laid down a base of fire that inhibited the machine gunners. Doc lay behind a dead tree that was sticking up stark and black out of the snow. He started slightly when he heard the grenade explode. Then, the stifled silence of snow filled the woods along with the sharp smell of cordite.

Saunders ordered the men to check the dead Germans for anything useful. They found several chocolate bars which they immediately divvied up and ate while they continued their arduous journey. As the adrenaline rush died down, the men felt even more sick and unsteady, but they kept going. Littlejohn was on point, having insisted that he finish his turn. He plowed through the snow with a dogged determination. He stopped for a coughing spell, leaning off to one side as the hacking turned into retching. Doc fought his way to his side, and blanched at the bluish pallor of his skin and the yellow, green and red of the sputum in the white snow. Littlejohn avoided his eye, and just stood there, his ribs heaving. Doc was reminded of an old milk wagon horse at the top of a hill, patient and suffering.

"Sarge! I gotta talk with you." The medic and his squad leader met in the middle of the line. The other men searched the darkening woods around them for signs of the enemy. The sun was low over the southwestern horizon. The temperature had been dropping steadily for the last couple of hours. Doc spoke quietly, "They can't go any farther. At least Littlejohn, Nelson and Murray can't. I'm not sure how far I can go myself, much less Kirby and Cajé." He stood there, despairing.

"It's going to get really cold tonight, and we can't have a fire out here." Saunders looked at the other's anguished face. "Let me talk to Cajé."

"Cajé?" The scout was at his side almost before he called. "We need to find a place to spend the night—a grove of evergreens? Spruce would be best, but anything would work." The two men did a 360° turn, peering through the trees for a clump of green.

"Sarge, how 'bout if I go up over that hill, and you go over the ridge on the left side? We can see if there is anything close enough."

Saunders nodded. He looked at Doc, "Get the men settled here for a bit. We'll take about fifteen minutes for a quick recon."

The two men diverged from the main trail, Cajé heading straight ahead and up a fairly steep hill that the creek curved around. Saunders headed up a low ridge on the left. It was much more difficult climbing the steep slopes than following the creek path. The snow rendered dead trees, shrubs, boulders, and other obstacles invisible. They had to step high or push the snow aside and feel for solid footing while fighting gravity as they climbed. It took much longer than they had expected, and the sun was significantly lower in the sky by the time both had returned.

"I spotted a bunch of evergreens at the bottom of that hill," panted Cajé. "It is a tough trek, but I think it will make decent shelter--much better than here."

"I hope so," said Saunders. "I didn't see anything at all close." He sighed, contemplating the exhausted squad. "Okay, men, it won't get easier. If we start now, we'll have more light." He looked at Littlejohn, Murray and Nelson, all breathing hard. "Let's double up to make it easier up the hill. Littlejohn, you and I will go together. Murray, you and Doc. Nelson and Kirby, you two. Cajé, you lead."

The men reformed their line, but going up the hill was torture. They lived the three-steps-forward-two-steps-back cliché. Littlejohn tried valiantly to keep going, but half way up, Saunders almost collapsed under his weight. The big man shrugged off the sergeant and sat down.

"Leave me here, Sarge. I can't make it, and I can't hold everyone up."

"Get up off your ass, Littlejohn, you aren't going to get out of some hard work this easily."

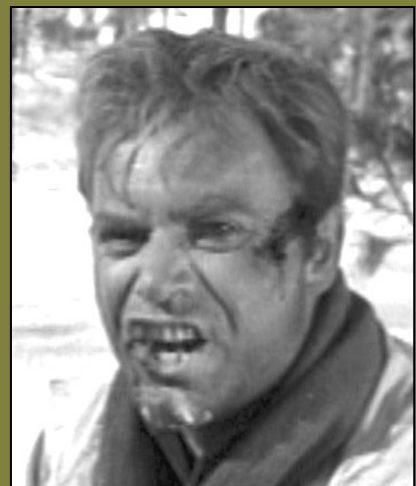
"Sarge, please..."

"I gave you an order, soldier, and I expect it to be obeyed. Now shut up and get moving!"

Littlejohn cowered under the full force of the noncom's fury and contempt.

"I said, get up off your fat ass, you lazy rube and get moving!"

"But, Sarge..."



"Don't give me no friggin' butts, you dickhead, and start walkin' **NOW!**"

Everyone had stopped and stared silently at the two. Kirby shifted Nelson's arm, pulling him closer, and wrapped his arm tightly around his young squad mate. Doc shifted uncomfortably—Saunders had never ever employed the invective style of many other NCOs—and held Murray protectively. The taller soldier leaned on the medic. Both unconsciously sought comfort in the face of the unexpectedly brutal language.

Saunders grabbed Littlejohn's arm and heaved. A stream of words, some of which Doc had never heard before, poured out. He reviled the private, his home state, all of his ancestors and the animals on his farm. Littlejohn's face oscillated between abject despair and anger. He gathered himself together and stood up. He turned to face the hill again, and took a step.

"Well, three cheers, Littlejohn, now take another friggin' step. How hard can it be?"

The two men worked their way upwards, slowly. The sergeant bullied the gentle giant with a nonstop stream of insults, curses and threats. Cajé looked back once and shook his head in disbelief. The other two pairs clung to each other and followed one step at a time.

The sun was barely visible over the rim of the earth just as they reached the crest of the hill. They squatted down low behind some rocks and trees and surveyed the scene in the dying light.

"Over there, Sarge." Cajé pointed to a dark shadow clustered against the hill. "It's going to be hard going down, but at least if we slip, we'll fall in the right direction."

There were several slips. Kirby gritted his teeth and didn't mention a twisted ankle. At one point, Littlejohn sat down and slid over a particularly steep section. The other two pairs shrugged and did the same. Sarge's encouragement took on a less blasphemous and belittling tone. When they hit level ground, they rested until they had the strength to continue. Cajé moved carefully ahead of the group scouting out the fir trees—not as good as spruce, but better than pine.

They ducked between the branches. It was crowded, but they used Littlejohn's hatchet to cut away enough of the lower branches from two adjacent trees to make a little space. They lay the branches down to make a ground cover. The squad sat on them and relaxed gratefully.



Suddenly, dim shadows at the edge of a third fir stirred and stood up. Instantly five M-1s and a Thompson snapped into position, safeties off and ready to fire. Two white clad Germans stepped into the open area, their Schmeissers ready to fire also. The soldiers stood silently watching each other in the gloom.

"*Sprechen sie Deutsch?*" asked the first man.

"No, speakin' sie English?" asked Kirby.

"*Nein, wir sprechen kein Englisch.*"

Again, the quiet standoff. The German soldiers looked at the exhausted Americans.

"*Ihre Männer sind krank.*"

"Krank?" asked Saunders.

The German soldier coughed noisily. "*Krank*," he said flatly.

Doc and Saunders nodded reluctantly.

"*Es wird sehr kalt heute Abend sein*," he said, peering at their faces. When he didn't see understanding, he repeated, "*Kalt*," and hugged himself shivering.

"Cold," said Doc, "It's going to get cold tonight." He looked at the German, "Night? *Nacht?*"

"*Jah, jah, sehr kalt. Ich bin Obergefreiter Heidler.*"

Saunders stepped forward. "I'm *Feldwebel* Saunders, Sergeant Saunders, Corporal Heidler."

"Sergeant Saunders?"

The Americans nodded. One by one the men introduced themselves. The other soldier was Private Feldhaus. The German soldiers went back to their hiding place and dragged over their packs and bedrolls. They also had cut branches from the other tree.

Saunders got Heidler's attention. The short, broad faced man watched as Saunders pantomimed the setting sun, sleeping and waking. He pointed at the Germans and walked his fingers in the air back towards the German lines. He pointed at his men and him and walked his fingers in the opposite direction. Then he raised his eyebrows at the corporal.

Heidler smiled, "*Wir werden nach Hause morgen gehen*," and repeated Saunders finger walking gesture. "*Haben Sie amerikanische Zigaretten?*" He reached in a pack and pulled out a package of sausage and held it up.

This prompted several packs of cigarettes to appear. The men sat in a tight circle, carefully lighting cigarettes and handing around all the rations they had squirreled away. The Germans liked the Spam and cheese. The GIs enjoyed the sausage and black bread. The Americans ran out of energy pretty quickly after eating. The Germans watched sympathetically as Saunders made sure that his men drank plenty of water and put his men to bed. It was quite cold by that time, and he had them lie next to each other. He made sure they were all covered, said good night to the Germans and lay against Littlejohn's back.

The private stirred. "Sarge? Thanks for keeping me going."

"Go to sleep, Littlejohn."

The sergeant woke up a short while later when the Germans lay down next to him. He felt sorry for Private Feldhaus—Caje and he would be the coldest, being on the ends. He smiled, remembering an old movie scene of several people trying to sleep in one bed. The Three Stooges? He closed his eyes, more comfortable than he'd been in days.



The dark was slightly grayer when they started to wake up. The group had become a puppy pile, snuggling even closer during the night. The two men on the end had slid limbs over and around their nearest neighbors in order to get warm. Kirby had his arms around Caje's shoulders whose head was buried in his buddy's chest. The others lay on their left sides like so many spoons in a drawer. Their legs were in a tangle as they had sought what warmth under the blankets they could.

Saunders' eyes opened. His face was pressed up against Littlejohn's broad back. The top of his head felt cold, in spite of wearing his jeep cap. He was reluctant to move but an insistent bladder and the knowledge of how far they still had to go forced him to. He eased himself out from between the sleeping giant and Heidler. His eyes met Caje's who had lifted his head out of Kirby's embrace. Not for the first or last time, Saunders marveled at the intimacy that soldiers shared—private, vulnerable moments at the most primal level. The two rose together and made their way out of the evergreen shelter, looking carefully into the early dawn woods. Their breath formed white clouds as they stepped away from the fir trees. Steam rose as they relieved themselves.

"How're ya feeling, Caje?"

Caje inhaled to answer and broke into another coughing spell. When it stopped, he smiled ruefully, "I'm actually feeling a little better...I think. I slept pretty well..., you?"

"I got more rest last night than in the previous two, so I'm feeling pretty good."

"Do we have any food left?"

"I don't think so. We'll need to get everyone up and on the road as soon as possible."

"Sounds like a good plan to me."

They made their way back into the shelter. They found the Germans up and packing.

"*Guten Morgen, Saunders, Caje.*"

"Good morning, Heidler, Feldhaus." The two noncoms smiled at each other.

Saunders got down next to Kirby. "Kirby, wake up." He spoke gently and shook the BAR man's shoulder.

Kirby's dark eyes opened, "Hey, Sarge. I dreamt I was rolled in a rug."

"You a bug, Kirby?" asked Billy.

"Hey, Billy," said Littlejohn, "You can talk."

Murray opened his mouth, but only a rough squawk came out.

"I musta gotten Mike's voice," answered the young man. "Gargle with some warm water, and it'll get better."

The Germans had their weapons and packs on. Heidler nodded towards Saunders. "*Wir müssen jetzt gehen. Viel Glück, Saunders.*"

"Good luck, Heidler."

"*Auf wiedersehen.*"

A chorus of "Bye" and "See ya around" followed the two men out. Meanwhile, the rest of the men rose, performed morning rituals and made sure they had everything. Outside the fir trees, they stamped their feet and blew on their hands while Saunders checked his map. They could follow the edge of the hill they had climbed the night before and work their way to a road which should take them to their lines. He hoped they could find some cover along the roadside. He didn't think his men had it in them to continue cross country the entire way back.

They worked their way around their shelter and found the path forged by the Germans the previous day. For at least part of their trip, they could follow in their footsteps, only backwards. He hoped that path his squad had beaten would help their sleeping companions as well.

The sergeant put Kirby on point and himself in the rear. The seven men trudged steadily westward through the winter woods. The early morning sun lit them up when they passed from shadow into the beams of light. Their breath clouds glowed.

Littlejohn wanted to groan with every breath. His lungs hurt, and he was a little lightheaded. He thought of asking the others to leave him behind, but remembered Saunders' fury the night before. He lowered his head and kept walking. He'd rather pass out than go through that again. He tried counting his steps, making bargains with himself. "I'll rest after fifty." Then, it was after 100. He kept raising the number until he realized that he would collapse if he didn't stop.

Before Littlejohn could speak, he heard, "Okay, let's take five."

Everyone either sat in the snow or leaned against a tree. Saunders surveyed his merry band. They looked beat already, and he figured they'd be all day getting home. He realized, though, that the temperature was rising with every second of clear sunshine. If there weren't much wind, it would reduce the chances of frost bite.

After ten minutes, they were on the move again. This time Cajé was on point. Nelson was last in line. The woods were a fairy land of sparkling, snow covered trees, smooth undulating white ground and crystal blue sky. Cajé felt split in two. Half his mind was enchanted with the beautiful scenes that met his eyes no matter where he looked. The other half coldly looked for signs of the enemy, possible targets, the best cover, and the easiest, most efficient route around rocks and trees. The frigid morning was beautiful, but it was also deadly. The wind was picking up. There were cumulus clouds parading across the sky, one by one they blocked the light and warmth. He turned and caught Sarge's eye. The noncom moved up the line.

"What's up, Cajé?"

"I'll bet it's going to be colder and windy today."

"Yeah, probably. We have to keep moving. We have no other choice. Although," he smiled, "If you spot a nice, clean motel, let me know."

"Sure thing, Sarge. I'd settle for a barn."

"I wouldn't. We've got to get to a doctor. The Three Musketeers are moving even slower today."

"Yeah, I noticed."

They resumed their march.



When they reached the road, they found the remains of a fire fight. There were German and American bodies frozen in ghastly poses in the churned red, white and brown snow. They could see the trail left by the German patrol as they had approached the battleground.

"Where did our guys go?" asked Kirby.

"That way," said Cajé, pointing westward.

First squad followed the plainly marked route. It was the easiest walking since the snow had fallen. Cajé continued on point. Kirby, Saunders and Doc were helping the others walk as they had the night before. There were frequent pauses for rest and catching breath.

They rounded a gentle curve, and Cajé heard a loudly spoken, "Mackerel!"

"Hit it!" yelled Cajé, knowing what had to happen when they didn't have the right countersign.

The seven men once again plunged themselves into the snow and what little cover was available as the American machine gunners opened up. They lay there hugging the earth while the bullets sprayed

around them for what felt like hours, but was probably only a couple of minutes. Cajé yet again pressed himself flat with only prayers for protection.

Then, there was silence.

"Hold your fire! We're Americans." Saunders' authoritative voice rang out.

"Yeah? What's the password?"

"We don't know. We've been out for three days. We're in the 361st."

"Yeah? So are we, and we know the password."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Ha, ha, very funny. Identify yourselves, or we'll open fire again."

"We're from K Company, 2nd platoon. We're Hanley's first squad."

"This is Love Company. K Company was pulled off the line two days ago."

"We've been gone for three, remember? Look, I'm Sgt. Saunders and I've got some sick men here who need a doctor."

"This isn't an aid station."

"Yeah, you know where one is, don't you?"

Another voice range out, "That really you, Saunders?"

"McElroy?"

There was a flurry of rapid conversation, then, "Okay, come on up."

The First Squad stood up and walked slowly on up the trail. They passed the machine gun emplacement, and then wound their way past the fox holes. Weary, bearded men popped up like gophers and regarded the bedraggled group with welcoming smiles. "Hey, Kirby!"

"Hey, Carmine! Long time, no see. How's it hangin'?"

"Wouldn't know, been on the front line too long."

There was good natured laughter. They'd been told to watch for Hanley's first squad, and here they were, all safe and mostly sound. Sgt. McElroy turned to his radio man, "Call the captain, and tell him he gets to tell Jampel that the lost sheep have returned."



Within two hours, the squad was in a tent, sitting in a row, being examined by a doctor. He was followed by a nurse giving each man a shot of penicillin.

"This should take care of the strep throat," she said kindly.

When they reached Saunders, he protested, "Wait, I'm not sick."

The doctor grabbed his jaw and pulled the chin down. The surprised sergeant opened his mouth. The doctor looked inside with his flashlight, "Give him a shot, too," and moved to the next man.

After he finished, the doctor turned to the nurse and barked his orders. "These three," pointing at Littlejohn, Murray and Billy, "go into oxygen tents." He looked at Saunders. "You're lucky they didn't just drop dead on you." He turned back to the nurse and waved his hand at Cajé and Kirby. "Of the rest, these two are to come back every day for at least two days, maybe three, so we can watch for complications." He pointed to Saunders and Doc, "These two should be careful and rest for a couple of days, but we don't need to see them again, unless they don't improve." The doctor spoke directly to them, "Take it easy for a day or two, and don't kiss anyone. Although," he laughed derisively, "There aren't any women around here for enlisted men. In any case, don't share canteens or anything like that, either." He spoke directly to Doc, "You know the drill?"

Doc nodded. He carefully did not look at Saunders. "I'll make sure we're careful, sir."

The nurse spoke up, "I will brief the men on what to do, Captain Barrett."

Barrett nodded, and left to examine more patients.

The nurse took the three sick privates off to bed and oxygen. The other four men waited in the corner of the tent, watching nurses and doctors bustle around, working on others, most of whom were sick rather than wounded. The members of the first squad didn't mind the wait. They were warm and comfortable. Kirby had fallen asleep, his head on Cajé's shoulder. Saunders watched the people coming and going. Doc watched Saunders. Cajé watched them both.

Suddenly, a tall woman in surgical garb came into the tent. She didn't notice them at first but sought out the triage nurse. "What do you have for me, Milly? How many more?"

The two pored over a clipboard, and she walked over to three soldiers on stretchers. She examined them quickly and said, "This one, then him and the lieutenant last. When Captain Potter finishes, he can take whichever is next. I'll go scrub up."

She looked up and spotted the men. She nodded to Cajé, who smiled and gave a half salute. She nodded to Doc who returned it and looked down. Cajé watched her exchange a quick look with Saunders. It was so fast, and yet so much was exchanged: relief, desire, regret, resignation, and understanding. She had her work. He had his men. Seeing each other alive and well was enough; it was everything.

After she had gone, the first squad was startled to see Brockmeyer in front of them. "Hanley sent me to show you where you're billeted. It's a nice cellar a block away. They put your stuff there as soon as we heard you were back. Sergeant--"

Saunders looked up reluctantly.

"—He'd like you to report as soon as your men are settled in. There's hot chow, and tomorrow, you can even take showers and get clean uniforms."

Saunders stood and stretched. It was going to be nice to be taken care of.

The End