

JUST ANOTHER INNOCENT VICTIM, PART 2

By: Ash



The Ardennes, Christmas, 1944

"What's the matter, Billy? You okay?" Littlejohn hunkered down in the snow next to his pal, worry lines etched into his wind-burned face. He rested a gloved hand on the boy's trembling shoulder.

"Just tired is all, Littlejohn. Just tired... gimme a minute." Billy closed his eyes and his head nodded against his breast.

"Sarge?" Littlejohn called softly, hesitant to raise his voice in the still of the forest, so still, so quiet after the on-going battle that had raged going on two long, unending weeks.

Saunders moved forward, his steps leaden, exhaustion etched into every line, and there were many, of the careworn face. He took in the situation and called a five minute halt. Before him, in a line that wavered and snaked out in a ragged, undisciplined formation, the squad members, looking like puppets with suddenly severed strings, dropped to the ground as one.

In the dull gray winter overcast, Saunders realized the men, his men, looked as dull, as gray as the overcast sky, each individual soldier a dark unmoving blot on the white snow. He rubbed a hand across his eyes, but the image remained. He, too, dropped into a crouch, conserving what little of his energy remained and for the briefest of moments, for seconds really, he drifted off to sleep. Waking with a start he checked his watch, angling it to catch what little light there was. The five minutes were up. It was time to move, move before they all slept, slept and froze to death and it would be his fault.

Saunders rose stiffly, painfully to his feet, tapping Littlejohn on the shoulder, "Get Billy up."

The big soldier nodded, too tired even to acknowledge the order. With one beefy hand beneath the boy's arm he levered Nelson to his feet. Saunders looked into Billy's face and felt an ugly premonition. Nelson, thin almost beyond recognition, large eyes deeply sunken into their sockets, lips blue from cold, resembled nothing if not a walking corpse. Saunders shivered.

The squad moved forward at a crawl. Even knowing what lay ahead, warm shelter, a hot meal, uninterrupted sleep, even knowing that did not make the leaden steps any easier, the exhaustion less overwhelming.

A single ray of sunlight pierced the thick cloud cover. Saunders angled his head for a look, blinking at the brightness as he followed the light from heaven to earth. For a moment it made him think of the Christmas story—the birth of the Savior, the Wise Men following the one star as it moved across the sky to point out the place where the Child was born.

"Christmas," he muttered and then he smiled, briefly and to himself, "Christmas." Kirby slogged past the sergeant, but turned at the sound of the noncom's voice. "Huh? You say somethin', Sarge?"

"No... nothing important, Kirby." Saunders motioned forward. "I think the lieutenant signaled a stop. Maybe we're there."

Kirby appeared puzzled. "*There* where, Sarge?" he asked, sniffing back a runny nose.



If Saunders wasn't so completely drained himself, of emotion, of the ability to think straight, then maybe Kirby's stupor would've concerned him. As it was, he only shrugged it off. "There... out of the war."

The PFC shook his head. "Yeah, sure, Sarge. Just like there ain't no Santy Claus... there ain't no such place as 'outta the war.' You oughta know that."

Again Saunders motioned forward. "We won't know that unless we actually get there and we'll never get there if you don't move out."

Chin tucked into his jacket, helmet pulled down tight, BAR cradled across his arm, Kirby pushed ahead.

Saunders looked back, checking to be certain he was the last man in line. Mentally he checked off the squad members. Satisfied he was indeed the last he moved out, slowly, placing each foot into the deep impression Kirby's boots had made—anything to make walking easier, anything to conserve strength.

Lieutenant Hanley had indeed located 'there.' Nestled on the outskirts of a small village, a village the squad had passed through on its way to the front, the tiny homestead was a haven to the war-weary soldiers.

Once inside Saunders located a spot against a wall and dropped his gear heavily to the wooden floor. More than anything he wanted to sink down next to it and stretch out, but Hanley motioned him over; there were introductions to be made. Saunders removed his helmet and made a valiant attempt to smooth out his tousled hair, succeeding after a fashion. However, all attempts to straighten the wrinkled, tattered jacket over the equally wrinkled and tattered uniform were useless.

"Sergeant Saunders," Hanley said, his usually smooth baritone rough-edged from worry and lack of sleep, "these are our hosts, Jean and Marie Pfeiffer."

Saunders pulled off a glove and offered his hand to Mr. Pfeiffer. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said as he found his cold fingers clasped in a strong warm grip. "And Mrs. Pfeiffer, thanks for taking us in, ma'am."

A smile lit the old gentleman's features. "It is nothing," he said in a heavily accented voice.

Saunders did not agree. "No, sir...it's everything," he said, thinking to himself—*years of war and going without yet they're willing, no, more than willing, eager, to share what little they have with us.* Saunders felt a renewed faith in human nature. It was about time.

Night fell quickly although the soldiers of King Company had little knowledge of that fact. Almost to a man they had fallen asleep as soon as their heads hit their



makeshift pillows. Several roused enough to take in nourishment, a thick vegetable soup accompanied by a chunk of crusty homemade bread and hot tea.

Sandwiched in among his comrades, a fire roaring in the grate, his belly full of good food, Saunders gazed sleepily about the room. Something moved among the men, weaving between the forms, the steps slow and mincing, a vague wraith—a cat. Every so often it stopped to sniff, a booted foot, a hand, a half-opened pack. It seemed disappointed and moved on,

disappearing into the shadows where the sergeant heard its plaintive meow, an unanswered call for... for what?

Chip Saunders closed his eyes and remembered back to when he was around seven or eight years old. One summer the old mother cat that lived next door had a litter of kittens. For a reason Chip could not comprehend, the woman who owned the cat got rid of all the kittens. Chip's mother had told her anxious son the kittens had been "taken care of" which led the little boy to believe the fuzzy still blind babies had been given away to good homes. Such was the naiveté of a child. Later, of course, he realized the woman had in all probability disposed of the helpless animals in some heinous manner. That old mother cat had cried so piteously for her lost young that the meowing, entering through the opened windows along with a hot summer breeze, had kept Chip awake for several nights running. He never forgot the sound. The cat here, in this tiny village so very far from Saunders' Illinois home, echoed exactly that same pitiful sense of loss.

Saunders turned his attention to Doc as the medic made his rounds. He thought perhaps he should go on over and ask the medic about his charges, but quickly gave up the idea. To gain his feet meant disturbing Kirby on his left and Cajé on his right—both were snoring softly. And besides, he was just too comfortable to move. It seemed contentment bred laziness. Settling back he realized he could hear Doc just fine without moving. And then he realized there were some things he didn't really want to hear; Billy Nelson was dying.

Mostly it was Littlejohn's denial he heard. "No! That can't be! You're wrong, Doc."

Beside Saunders, Cajé mumbled in disturbed slumber; Kirby kept right on snoring.

Softer now, the tone incredulous, pleading, "No... you gotta be wrong, Doc. Not Billy. Not now. We been through so much together. Not now."

And then it was the medic's voice, soft, placating, helpless. "I've done everything I can do, Littlejohn. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Damn it," Saunders murmured. "Damn this lousy war."

Struggling stiffly to his feet he maneuvered through the sleeping soldiers to where the medic knelt. At his approach both Doc and Littlejohn looked up at him and he felt a sharp stab of their shared pain, a pain so deep it took his breath away. He glanced down at Billy Nelson.

Saunders had seen death before; he saw it now. Even the flickering warmth of the firelight could not disguise the advent of death as he saw it on Billy's face; the gray pallor of the skin, the sunken eyes, the short jerky breaths through drawn-back parted lips. Saunders shuddered. Yet even as he watched, Nelson appeared to rally, opening his eyes. He even smiled and the fingers of his right hand stroked the soft striped ball which rested on his chest. Saunders had missed the kitten (Littlejohn's Christmas gift to his friend) so quiet, so contented it lay beneath the boy's hand.

Doc rose wearily and motioned Littlejohn away, tugging gently at his sleeve when the big soldier seemed reluctant to leave. The young medic's sixth sense never failed to amaze Saunders; Billy needed to talk and it was to the sergeant.

The noncom crouched down, the better to hear Nelson's whisper.

"Sarge, Littlejohn... he doesn't understand. I asked him to take the kitten. He wouldn't. Said it was mine and I had to get better... to take care of it myself." Billy paused to catch his breath. "He doesn't understand... but you do, Sarge."

Saunders nodded. "I do, Billy."

The sergeant turned slightly to look into the nearby kitchen. On the floor beside the hulking old-fashioned stove sat a rather dilapidated wicker basket and in this improvised bed lay a single kitten. Somehow Saunders knew this kitten's siblings had not been "taken care of," but had probably succumbed to cold or starvation or having had the misfortune of being born in the wrong place at the wrong time. *Seems these*

people are just as good at taking in stray cats as they are stray soldiers, he thought, and was glad.

While Saunders watched, the cat he'd seen earlier appeared at the kitchen doorway and trotted unerringly to the basket where she curled her long thin body around her baby. A vigorous cleaning ensued with the kitten attempting to fend off the assault of its mother's rough tongue. Presently the tiny feline settled into its mother's side, the little paws kneading furiously as it nursed.

Billy's weakening voice broke Saunders' concentration. "You take him, Sarge. You take him. Okay?"

Saunders bit his lip, hard; his eyes burned and he rubbed a sleeve back across them. It did no good. "There's somebody better than me to take care of your kitten, Billy, somebody who knows a lot more about such things than I ever could. Do you trust me?"

A feverish light burned from young Nelson's eyes, a too bright light, a soon to be extinguished light. The boy solemnly nodded. "I trust you, Sarge... always."

Saunders got to his feet and walked the few steps into the kitchen. Bending down he stroked the cat's shabby fur. She looked up at him, her green eyes full of trust. Gently disengaging the kitten, Saunders lifted the cat into his arms. She did not protest. Back at Billy's side, Saunders introduced cat to kitten. At first the cat seemed somewhat wary of the small striped stranger, but her distrust was momentary as the kitten woke from his nap, stretched fore and aft and made a beeline toward her. Tentatively at first, then with determination, the cat began her cleaning ritual. Within seconds the sound of the kitten's purring could be heard over the crackling fire in the grate and even above the snoring of the men.

Billy's brief delighted grin warmed Saunders and he felt his idea had been a success for all concerned parties. He returned the cat and her adopted offspring to the warmth of the wicker basket where mother and kittens got down to the business of being cats.

Though he was gone only moments he returned to Nelson's side too late. Doc pulled the blanket up to cover the boy's face and Saunders couldn't help but notice Billy's expression in death was one of total peace. For that Saunders gave thanks. There were a few words of comfort to Littlejohn and to Doc who'd done his best in a no-win situation where too little too late could not possibly make up for weeks of deprivation, cold and almost unimaginable suffering.

Suddenly it was all Chip Saunders could do to make it to his pallet where he slumped back against the wall. Striking a match he checked his watch, noting the time to be 12:14 am, December the 26th. He didn't know why exactly, but it seemed terribly important to him that he would not have to write Billy's mother to say her son had died on Christmas. The match burned down into his fingers yet he hardly felt the pain. Slipping down he rested his head on one bent arm and closed his eyes.

end