

Learning Curve

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After endless hours of marching with little rest, the men were dog tired and hungry. Already this morning, they'd been on the road for three hours, and it was only 8AM. To top it off, they'd been forced to take an unexpected detour when they were in German-occupied territory. Their rations had run out yesterday, and all they were left with was a few sticks of gum and some packets of coffee. At Saunders' request, they'd all turned their pockets inside out to combine their resources, but a little extra pocket lint and spent shells wouldn't get them too far.

With the rest of the squad taking a break about a quarter of a mile back near a small clearing, Cajé scouted ahead, moving silently in the coolness of the early fall morning. In his passage, he tried to avoid the patches of sunlight filtering through the canopy of trees as it lit the thick undergrowth in an angled patchwork of soft yellow columns. Instead, he let his body skirt the shadows, pausing often to listen and allow his senses to screen the background noise, listening for something beyond the normal sounds of the chirping birds and scurrying chipmunks.

Tense with lack of sleep and dulled by hunger, Cajé pushed himself to continue, trying to ignore his own gnawing weariness. The events of the last few days replayed in his head as he remembered Saunders trying to update Hanley on their situation and ETA. The lieutenant's voice sounded strained on the radio as he tried to offer a few words of encouragement. Then the two men were volleying loud responses back and forth as Hanley tried to make himself heard over the sound of shelling somewhere in the background. When the radio cut out mid-sentence, Saunders cursed and shook the handset, calling out White Rook's call sign over and over. The squad simply stared at one another, stomachs rumbling.

With the possibility of at least another day before they reached the CP, or more than that if the Kraut bombing forced a move, the men knew a little creative thinking might be in order if they wanted to eat. Unfortunately, they'd long since ventured off the sergeant's map and hadn't seen sign of any farmhouses or villages along the way, so loose chickens or bread and cheese at the corner bar seemed a distant possibility.

In a lighter moment, Kirby suggested digging for wild onions to cook up a batch of French onion soup in Billy's helmet, but Billy wasn't too keen on the idea of his head smelling like onions for weeks.

Just as Cajé was about to head back to the clearing, he heard a strange snorting noise. He stood still, eyes narrowed in concentration, working to get a sense of the direction the sound was coming from. It was one of the skills that had earned him his place as the squad's scout on so many occasions.

The Bayou back in Louisiana had been a good teacher. Thick with trees, dense hanging vines and foliage, sounds bounced and echoed through the swamps giving even the most experienced of travelers a run for their money.

Deciding on a path, Cajé crept forward, the worn leather soles of his boots silent in the undergrowth, his long fingers tightening around the Garand in his hands as he swung the rifle to a more accessible position. He passed the trunk of an ancient, moss-covered oak, stepping carefully over the fingers of gnarled roots that pushed their way out of the ground. It was there that he spied the source of the noise. A large pink and brown mottled hog was rooting through the layer of leaves that coated the forest floor, pushing its snout through the soft earth beneath in concert with contented grunts. Cajé couldn't believe his luck—the men were hungry and he'd stumbled on a source of food in the middle of the forest.



Very slowly, he lifted his rifle, tucked the stock tightly into his shoulder and lined up the sights. As his finger tightened on the trigger, he paused. After a few seconds, he released the steadying breath he'd been holding and lowered the rifle. Though they hadn't actually seen any German patrols for a few days, a rifle shot could be heard for miles and at the least, it would send a false signal to his own squad that he might be in trouble.

Cautious once more to stay silent and hoping he was downwind, Cajé pushed away from the tree in front of him and trotted lightly away.

The men were in various states of rest and recuperation as the scout came jogging back, easily covering the distance across the clearing in long effortless strides. "Sarge, you won't believe what I found."

Kirby rolled over on his side to look at Cajé. "A hotel with a lotta little French mamzelles waiting to serve us hand and foot?" He plucked a stem of field grass and began chewing on it, then spat the weed back on the ground and began picking the fibrous strand from between two molars.

Billy was lying on his back watching the thin white clouds as they stretched across the sky. He turned his head and managed to muster enough energy to give a half-hearted laugh. "Kirby, you're hopeless."

"No, just real hopeful, kid."

Saunders ignored the joking, but the smile on his scout's face had piqued his curiosity. "What's the matter, Cajé?"

"There's a pig just running wild up ahead."

Doc, Littlejohn, Kirby and Billy sat up, energized by the thought of a meal so close within their grasp.

It was quite clear to Saunders that the squad was happily carving up the pork without thought to the possible consequences. True, it was an effort for him to banish the same thoughts from his mind, but he reminded himself that a free meal was a rare thing. "Look, just because it's loose, doesn't mean it's a wild pig. It probably belongs to some nearby farmer."

"C'mon, Sarge, we ain't seen a farm for miles," Kirby groused, "and besides, we ain't had nothin' to eat since yesterday."

Littlejohn pulled a spent gum wrapper from his pocket and held it up, looking at each of his squad mates. "Yeah, and who knows when we'll get another chance at anything to eat."

Billy plucked his blackened helmet off his head and grasped it to his chest protectively. "All I know is there's no way you're cooking it in my helmet."

Doc's stomach was growling audibly at the thought of what they could be having for breakfast, but his conscience and some sense of foreboding was telling him that this was a bad idea. "Maybe Sarge is right. That pig might belong to somebody. Somebody that just didn't know he needed to write 'Off Limits' on it."

Kirby gave a muffled cough at the reminder of his little barnyard AWOL incident.

Saunders let his gaze travel slowly across the faces of each of his men. Beyond his control, his stomach began growling, and the rumble reminded him of how long it had been since they'd all eaten.

Still, he knew better. Time to get the men thinking about something else. He rolled to his feet, knees cracking, and motioned sharply for the rest of the squad to do the same. "All right, knock it off, we're moving out."

Behind his back, Littlejohn and Billy pushed Kirby forward. The BAR man practically hissed at the two partners in crime and then walked over to Saunders. Clearing his throat, Kirby started the campaign to convince their stubborn sergeant.

Before long, Cajé found himself in pig-stalking mode. Littlejohn was the only one of them who'd lived on a farm with a fair amount of livestock, and who'd had experience with anything more than plucking chickens. They'd all done that particular service at one time or another as they foraged for the odd loose chicken about town or about the farmyard. But in this case, because of his stealth, and speed and skill with the bayonet, it was agreed that Cajé would be the logical choice

As he moved within ten feet of the hog, knife in hand, body tensed to jump, the pig snorted softly and looked up, its black beady eyes silently evaluating the approaching human. They stared at one another for a few moments while the tension gathered in the Cajun's lean muscles. A line of sweat worked its way down Cajé's back as the pig's soft pink nose worked back and forth, smelling the air.

He waited patiently until the pig lowered its head to the ground, then he scrambled forward. The soft forest floor gave way beneath his worn boot soles and he slipped to the ground. The startled pig took off with a squeal, throwing chunks of dirt on the scout as it pumped its chubby legs through the dirt.

As Cajé lifted his head to spit out the leaves, he heard Kirby's voice echo from nearby followed by raucous laughter, "That's the way, boy. Bird dog it!"

Ignoring the cat-calls from his so-called friends, Cajé sprang to his feet, balanced himself more carefully on the uneven footing, and took off after the pig.

It was sometime later, as the men were all lounging around the glowing fire and the remains of the feast that they heard the yelling.

A Frenchman in threadbare, dirty clothes had stormed into their encampment, apparently unconcerned with the fact that he had surprised a group of men who were all in possession of deadly weapons.

Saunders pushed himself to his feet, Thompson in hand, ready to tell Cajé to translate the angry words, but his scout had already stood up and intercepted the intruder. Quietly, the sergeant motioned behind him for the rest of the squad to lower their weapons.

"Je ne comprends pas. Qu'avons-nous fait?" Cajé challenged.

The newcomer broke into another string of complaints, complete with wild gestures and jabbing motions toward their recent meal.

A momentary flicker of guilt flashed across the scout's face before he gained control. "Sarge, the guy says his name is Henri Leveque. We stole his pig, and we're going to have to pay him for it. He's too poor to buy another one."

Saunders slid his camo helmet from his head and ran his fingers through his unruly mop of blonde hair. He looked at the ground and shook his head, hoping he wouldn't have to ask Doc for a handful of aspirin for the headache he was about to get. "Cajé, tell him we don't have any money."

Another voice broke into the clearing. "Papa! Qu'est-ce que tu fais? Où est Zoé?"

Automatically, Saunders had his Thompson up. A small girl was running toward them. With a frustrated sigh, he lowered his weapon again. He could hear several of the men behind him releasing tense breaths.

Henri turned toward the girl with a horrified look on his face and rushed to cut her off. "Non, Émilie, vas à la maison!" He pushed her away and shooed her back the way she had come. When he came back, he was even angrier than before.

"Now what's the problem, Cajé?"

By the time the scout was done talking to Henri this time, the mask had slipped. His face was drawn, worry drawing the lines around his expressive brown eyes even deeper. "Sarge, he says Zoé the pig also belonged to his daughter and we've eaten her pet."

"Oh god, I'm gonna be sick." Billy curled up into a ball and rested his head on his knees.

How much worse is this gonna get? Saunders was now certain he was going to need those aspirin.

"What're we gonna do, Sarge?"

Saunders squeezed his eyes shut and rubbed his forehead. It was a question he had heard from Kirby on so many occasions, but this time, he was at a loss for an answer. He should've told the guy it was the spoils of war, the pig was running around loose, but for some reason, he just couldn't. "What does he want us to do, Caje? We already told him we don't have any money. Come on, everybody, saddle up."

As Henri watched the soldiers gather their coats and belts, he grabbed Caje's sleeve harshly and started another rapid-fire exchange.

"He says if we can't pay, we have to work for him, Sarge. There's a lot to do on his farm and we owe it to him for killing the pig."

Saunders shook his head and turned back to the men, ready to repeat his order to move out.

"C'mon Sarge, what'll it hurt us to help a couple of the locals? It's what we're here for, ain't it?" Kirby piped up again.

Littlejohn was kneeling next to Billy and they were both looking in the direction the little girl had run off. "That poor kid."

The sergeant started to open his mouth to tell Kirby to shut up, but he stopped himself. Saunders had an idea that the work on the farm might not be as easy as the men thought it would be, but all they could see was a little girl and her pet pig. In a moment of sudden inspiration, Saunders decided to take advantage of the situation and turn it into a little training exercise. Maybe they would remember their hasty decision to grab loose livestock if there was enough manual labor involved. And besides, he could keep trying to contact Hanley just as well from the farm. It might actually be a better idea to wait a few hours until the CP had found a new home instead of forging ahead blindly.

Henri was still ranting and mumbling as the squad passed the hedgerow that marked the edge of his field. Saunders had long since stopped paying attention to the drama, having found it easier to become lost in the smell of the earth and the slant of the sun through the trees during their walk. As Littlejohn moved alongside, though, the memories of crisp fall mornings in Illinois under the turning leaves disappeared.

"Y'know Sarge, I wasn't expecting much by the way this guy looks, but his place really isn't that bad. I just might enjoy being back on the farm for a little while."

Saunders rubbed at the layer of grime and sweat on his neck that had accumulated from five long patrol days. In their eagerness to repair something that couldn't really be fixed, the squad seemed suddenly rejuvenated and full of energy. Saunders wondered how long that enthusiasm would last.



The farmhouse was a small fieldstone structure with green wooden shutters, nestled among a grove of chestnut trees. A barn, slightly larger than the house itself, complete with a rusted cast iron weather vane depicting a pig of all things, cast its shadow toward the house. A weathered wagon covered with a thin layer of hay stood silent guard in front of the barn. Beyond the house, a small orchard of apple trees painted a colorful backdrop, their branches burdened with ripening fruit.

The sound of a woman's voice rose above the crunch of the red and gold leaves beneath the soldiers' boots as they walked along the dirt road. The front door to the house opened and a large, heavyset woman in a coarse-woven dress emerged pulling a small girl along behind her. It was the child Émilie that had been looking for her pet pig. The woman wiped her hands on her stained apron, held the little girl to her chest and spoke to her in a scolding voice. The door opened again, and a girl of about seventeen or eighteen came out. She was thin and pale beneath the smudges of dirt and her light brown hair was ratty and unkempt. Unlike Émilie, she seemed to bear no resemblance to the farmer and the heavy-set woman who was most likely his wife. In fact, she was unattractive to point of being ugly.

The woman let go of Émilie and straightened in surprise as the dirty, weary members of 1st Squad came toward the house following Henri. She smoothed the loose ends of her hair back regally and then cautioned the two girls to stay behind as she met Henri halfway.

With a wary eye to the soldiers, she began speaking accusingly to her husband. <"What is wrong? Why are the soldiers here? Did you find Zoé? Why did you send Émilie home when I sent her to find you?">

<"Slow down, Margeaux."> Henri held his hands out to his massive wife as he spoke to her, his shoulders hunched meekly as if he also feared her wrath. <"I ran across these Americans while I was looking for Zoé. Unfortunately, they can't tell a pet pig from a wild hog and decided to eat her.">

The squad didn't have to speak French to understand that Henri had just told his wife about the pig. The expression of horror that spread across her face was quickly replaced with a glare of absolute disgust as she looked at each member of the squad in turn.

Suddenly, Margeaux moved toward Kirby. She looked him up and down, eyes burning, and then she leaned forward to spit on the ground at his feet.

"Hey!" Kirby jumped back. "Why's she look like she wants to kill us, Cajé?"

Cajé sighed and slung his rifle up onto his shoulder. He started a pocket by pocket search for his cigarettes, only paying partial attention to the antics of the BAR man. "What do you think, Kirby?" he said, pulling a crumpled pack from beneath his jacket.

Before Kirby could answer, Margeaux shot a few more words at her husband. Henri shook his head and then he grabbed Cajé by the sleeve again. The harassed scout's pack of cigarettes went flying off into the dirt as the farmer fired off another volley of French while he gestured at the barn.

The scout translated to Saunders, "Sarge, there's something wrong with their old work horse. He wants Doc to take a look at it."

Doc's eyes grew wide with this unexpected turn. Even though the medic came from a fairly rural area in Arkansas, he was not accustomed to taking care of animals, and knew almost nothing about what made them sick. Before Doc could voice his objections, Littlejohn stepped forward. "I'll take a look. I've had to deal with livestock since I was a kid back home."

Saunders nodded, lighting up his own cigarette. "Go ahead, Littlejohn. See if you can do something."

"Non!" Henri eyed Littlejohn's uniform and stripes with disdain and then pointed at Doc's helmet and the worn red crosses. He grabbed the medic's arm and started to pull him toward the barn.

"Wait, hang on!" Doc put the brakes on. "I don't have any experience with farm animals. Tell 'im, Cajé."

Henri started shaking his head as soon as the scout started to explain. The old farmer swiped Doc's helmet off his head and pointed furiously at the red crosses.

"Hey, gimme that back!" It took a few moments for the medic to recover his property, smooth down his mussed hair, and slip his helmet back in place.

Kirby was still caught in the crosshairs of the raging glare of Margeaux, Henri's wife. "Sarge, these people are nuts."

Saunders rested his elbows on his Thompson as it hung loosely around his neck. A puff of smoke curled from the end of the cigarette in his mouth. All eyes were on him. He couldn't help feeling that he was trying to take care of a squad of ten year olds. At the same time, he was beginning to find the situation a bit comical. Hopefully, the farmer would have some good, messy jobs in store for all of his men. Lethargically, he waved a dismissive hand in the direction of the barn. "All right, Littlejohn, go with Doc and help him out. If Henri has a problem with that, Caje can tell him you're cleaning the stalls."

Doc objected, "Wait just a minute!"

Littlejohn swung his arm around the stressed out medic and started walking toward the barn. "Don't worry about it, Doc, we'll figure it out."

Doc cast one last pleading glance at Saunders before resigning himself to the inevitable.

As Henri resumed his conversation with Caje, Saunders watched him gesture toward numerous locations around the farm. Except for an occasional heavily accented "Sergeant", the language was still lost on him.

When Henri's discussion with the scout finally ran dry, it wasn't a moment before Margeaux gave her husband a sharp wave toward the barn. The little man stumbled backwards for a step and then rushed away, following in Doc and Littlejohn's wake. With a final parting glare for each of the remaining members of the squad, Margeaux herself stalked away.

"Sarge, Henri just gave me a whole laundry list of things he wants us to do. The fence needs fixed, the cow needs milked, the chickens need fed, apples need to be picked, housework needs done..."

Saunders was just about to cut off Caje's recitation when Kirby interrupted, "Hey, I'm from the city. I don't know nothin' about farming."

"Fine Kirby." Saunders shook his head. "Then maybe there's some laundry you can do for his wife. Caje, we're only staying here until I can get in touch with the lieutenant and figure out where the CP is located. I'll be over there by the apple trees with the radio if you need anything." Saunders slipped the radio away from Billy and started walking lazily toward the orchard, whistling softly to himself as he squinted appreciatively into the sunlight.

Doc stood frozen, several feet from the huge draft horse that lay in the stall, feeling the fierce glare of Henri on his back. He could hear the stomping of the cow and the swish of the milk as it hit the metal pail on the other side of the barn as Henri continued his work, only pausing every few minutes to lean over on his milking stool and glare at the two soldiers around the back of the cow. The farmer had entered the barn and stood watching the two men before heading over to the cow, arms crossed, as if waiting to make sure that Littlejohn picked up a pitchfork as promised instead of heading for the stall that held the ailing equine.



"What're you doin', Doc?" Littlejohn whispered. His head had popped up in the next stall over.

The horse groaned, one hind leg scraping a shallow furrow in the clay floor beneath the straw.

"What'm I supposed to do?" When he received no answer, Doc scooted over to the side of the stall and almost climbed over the slatted partition. Littlejohn was digging at the muck again with his pitchfork, head bent to his task. "Hey, I thought you were gonna help me?"

"Shh," Littlejohn cautioned. "I don't think Henri wants me over there."

"Well so what." Doc's voice rose in frustration, his eyes sparking beneath the rim of his helmet. The medic huffed and shook his head as he heard steps behind him and he backed away from the side of the stall. Henri was standing there, arms crossed.

"Pourquoi vous ne faites rien, idiot?" he demanded.

"All right, all right." Doc didn't know the exact meaning of the words, but he was sure it was something along the lines of 'why are you just standin' there, dummy'. He walked carefully back to the horse, eyeing the animal's sweaty hide. Wiping his own sweaty hands on his pants, Doc reached out nervously and placed them on its side.

Henri sniffed and walked back to his cow.

The horse reached around and bumped its side with the tip of its nose, knocking Doc's hands away. He jumped back as hooves scraped the ground, narrowly missing clipping his ankles.

The horse groaned again, a deep sound in the back of its throat, and rested its nose in the hay, exhausted.

"Littlejohn..." Doc hissed over his shoulder.

A response floated to him from a few stalls over as the pitchfork tines scraped the floor. "Aren't you from Arkansas? Haven't you ever been on a farm?"

"Well so what. Just 'cause I know what a cow looks like doesn't mean I know how to take care of a sick horse!"

"You're being awful touchy about this, Doc."

"All right, all right." Doc pulled off his helmet and threw it over against the side of the stall with his medic's ruck. He swiped the bangs off his forehead and concentrated on the animal's symptoms. "Looks like it might be the colic. Doesn't that mean we have to get him up and walkin'?"

"That's pretty good. I thought you didn't know anything about horses?"

Doc cleared his throat lightly. "I read Black Beauty as a kid, all right?"

The pitchfork fell silent as Littlejohn started chuckling.

"Henri? Henri!" Henri overturned on his little three-legged stool as Margeaux's voice called out from the house, the milk in the bucket sloshing and splattering the floor in a white wave. Henri climbed to his feet, grabbed the bucket from beneath the cow and headed for the door, casting one last dirty look at the two soldiers as he exited the barn.

Littlejohn put the pitchfork aside and joined Doc in the stall. "Y'know, I'm gettin' the idea that Henri might not rule the roost, here. I wonder how much he really knows about farming?"

"Mmm. Even he looks afraid of Margeaux. Maybe he married into the family business?"

Littlejohn laughed. "Y'know who Margeaux reminds me of? This old Sicilian lady that lived in our town. Real tough old bird. She was always scaring all of the kids away from her fruit trees. Yeah, I can see it now. He married into a family of milking mobsters."

"At least now we can work without Henri getting in the way. Attach that rope to the halter and start pullin' when I tell you to." Doc shook his head as he bent to place his hands on the animal's sweaty hide again. A few hours ago, he was eating breakfast, and now he was playing nursemaid to a sick horse.

"Chickens, yech. I hate chickens." Billy sighed as he grabbed another handful of chicken feed from his upturned helmet and flung it out into the dirt. The chickens fluttered out of the way and then quickly pecked and scratched at the cracked corn, heads bobbing along with each step. With a wistful eye, he glanced over at Saunders. The sergeant was splayed out in the shade of one of the apple trees, his camo helmet pulled down low across his forehead, his breathing even and slow.

For the last few minutes, Billy had tried not to listen to the pained weak groans coming from the horse in the barn, and the low voices of Littlejohn and Doc. Littlejohn had told him about a few occasions when he'd had to help deliver the baby horses on his family's farm, and Billy couldn't help wondering if that was going on right now inside this barn. He'd seen a cat have a litter of kittens on another farm a couple of months ago. He could only imagine that this would be a whole lot more difficult and a whole lot messier.

As Billy's vivid imagination worked overtime, a single black eye beneath a red cock's comb bobbed up and down around the corner of the barn as it took a bead on him in true bird-like fashion. With a flurry of wings and talons, a rooster came screeching around the corner, black feathers flying as it tried to chase off the threat to its brood of hens.

Billy dropped his burned and blackened helmet in the dirt and retreated from the flapping ball of territorial fury. After a few feet, the rooster finally landed and strutted proudly back to its harem, circling the pile of corn and Billy's slowly rocking helmet.

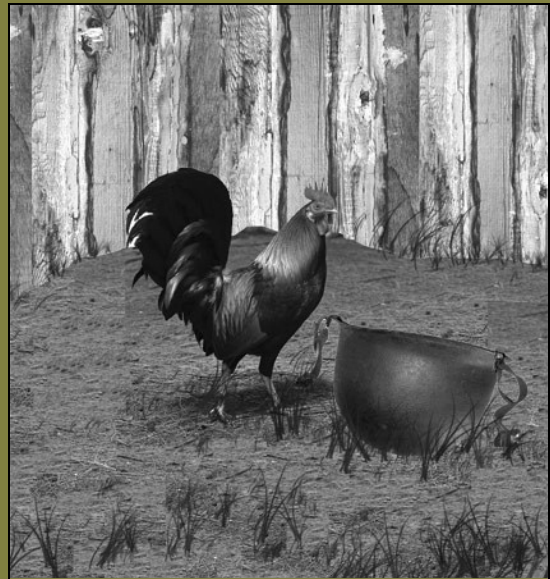
"Idiot."

Billy startled and turned at the female voice. Though the word was spoken in French, it was one of those words that was close enough to its English counterpart to be absolutely clear in its meaning.

Margeaux was standing there, arms crossed, glare as dark as ever. Even though he was expecting it, the young soldier still jumped back as she spat vehemently on the ground before stomping away.

How do I get into these things?

From over beneath the apple tree, a camo helmet slid slowly back down across a set of bright blue eyes as a small smile spread across Saunders' face.



Kirby came to the conclusion that this day had turned from bad to worse. Helping out in the house had seemed like the easiest of the jobs, and he'd thought he'd hit the gold mine. But now, standing here with Yvette, the homely teen, he was definitely having second thoughts. As soon as he'd entered the house, she'd latched onto him and seemed to find it necessary to stand uncomfortably close to him, giggling at everything he said, regardless of the obvious language barrier.

Several times, he'd tried to move away to a comfortable distance, but she seemed to have no natural sense of personal space, whether intentional or not. All he needed was for that crazy woman, Margeaux, to come bursting in and think he was taking advantage of a teen-ager.

Finally, he'd managed to redirect Yvette to the work that needed done. The girl was bent slightly over a dirty rug, bony arms grasping a handmade straw broom as she acted out beating

a worn rug with overemphasized strokes. As she set the broom aside and pantomimed a scooping motion, he realized that she wanted him to carry the largest rug outside.

"Oh! You want this outside?" Kirby rolled his eyes as his words seemed to send her into fits of giggles again. He ignored her reaction as he bent over to roll up the rug. "Hey!"

He shot straight up and quickly backed away from her, almost knocking over a chair, as his mind struggled to figure out if he had really felt a hand caressing his butt cheek. Undeterred, Yvette sidled toward him again with a smile.

As the front door swung open and made a full arc to strike the wall, they both startled like deer in headlights. Margeaux paused ominously beneath the door frame to glare disgustedly at Kirby. With a vile sneer on her face, she turned and continued toward the kitchen.

Kirby sighed heavily and bent to pick up the carpet again. "Whoops." Quickly, he turned to make sure his rear end was pointing away from Yvette as he rolled up the carpet and tucked it under his arm.

He could hear Margeaux banging pots and pans around, but couldn't see her through the doorway to the kitchen. Looking back to the young girl, Kirby tried to pretend he didn't see the dreamy, lustful expression in her eyes. Nervously, he motioned at the door hoping she would lead the way outside. She giggled again and went toward the door, holding it open while she motioned for him to go first. Not quite sure what she had in mind, he decided that if he moved fast enough and kept the rug between them, maybe she wouldn't be able to try anything.

Pleased with this line of thought, Kirby swung the carpet to his other hip and moved through the door. Once outside, Yvette gazed into Kirby's brown eyes, sparse lashes batting as she herded him toward a rope stretched taut between two chestnut trees. The final few feet to the trees, though, turned into the fifty yard dash as Kirby started to feel the brazen girl try to slip a hand around his waist. With a strange feeling, he wondered if he had just met a female version of himself.

Shivering in disgust as the girl smiled through crooked teeth at him, Kirby thought, *No way, I might be a ladies' man, but at least I keep my hands to myself!*

Yvette was gazing into his eyes longingly again. She motioned for him to throw the rug over the rope all the while nodding to him encouragingly like he was some sort of fool. Kirby snorted. He reached up, stretching forward to throw the rug, and Yvette made her advance once more.

Kirby spun around, knocked her hand away, and sternly raised his voice, "Ow! Knock it off! You're as looney as that woman!" Even as he said it, he spotted Margeaux standing in the doorway to the house, watching them.

She glowered at him through narrowed slitted eyes and growled disdainfully, "Américain," before she spit on the ground and stormed off.

Kirby turned stiffly back to the hanging carpet, covertly trying to rub his backside. "I've finally got a French broad grabbing my butt, and it has to be a teen-age circus freak." He rolled his eyes again as Yvette giggled.

Where in hell's the Sarge?

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Caje stood behind the barn, eying the empty pig sty and the stampede of tracks scattered out across the potato field. The fence itself wasn't broken, but a sizeable hole had been dug beneath the lowest board allowing Zoé and, according to Henri, four smaller pigs from a spring litter to escape. The farmer had managed to herd all but his daughter's pet back onto his property and now the majority of them seemed to be fairly close by, happily rooting and grunting their way through the soft dirt in search of a meal.

There were several piles of rock thrown to the side of the field, carefully pulled from the field over years of steady non-mechanized plowing and harvesting. In no time, he had his

borrowed bucket full, and he was heading back to the sty with a rusty shovel he'd picked up in the barn. Avoiding the worst of the clinging muck near the edge of the fence, Cajé tossed the dirt-encrusted rocks into the deep hole, packing them tightly with shovels of the surrounding dryer earth. In less than half an hour, he was satisfied that Henri would have little to worry about as long as he kept an eye on the repair throughout the year.

The morning chill had receded while Cajé had been working on the enclosure, bringing out a light sweat, and soon he'd stripped himself of his uniform shirt, leaving the well-worn undershirt. Luckily, catching the smaller pigs turned out to be much easier than the athletically challenging chase for their brunch that morning. He figured that they had become somewhat tame with Émilie hanging around the pen feeding and talking to them; still, catching them and getting them back into the pen were a different matter altogether.

The first one offered only marginal resistance to being picked up and carried by the Cajun. Still, his sweaty, muscular arms were straining to keep the pig from slipping through his grip. At best estimate, he was guessing the thing weighed at least seventy-five pounds. He was in the best shape of his life, but a pig was an awkward burden, even when it was behaving.

As he neared the sty, the pig squealed and twisted, turning into a torrent of sweaty pig skin. He tightened his grip and almost had it lifted over the fence rail when it gave one last jabbing kick with a stubby pink hind leg. As they both fell to the ground, the pig's hoof caught him in the side, ripping a hole in his thin t-shirt. Unexpectedly freed from the human's grasp, the pig quickly rolled to its feet, scrabbling mightily on all fours for purchase until Cajé managed to hook one of its rear legs. The pig pulled and jerked wildly at the end of the scout's arm, flinging dirt and grit into his eyes. Shoulder muscles straining to move the solid bulk bucking at the end of his arm, Cajé pulled the pig backwards, snagged one of the front legs, and in one fluid motion, he swung the startled animal up and over the fence into the sty.

While protests were squealed at him from the enclosure, he looked down at his torn shirt. His uniform had definitely seen better days. A ragged hole now stretched from the left side of his ribcage all of the way down to the waistband of his pants. He stripped off his remaining shirt and tossed it across the fence.

<"Monsieur, have you seen my pig, Zoé?">

Cajé spun around. Émilie was sitting atop the fence a few feet away, watching him. His shoulders sagged. He couldn't bring himself to lie to her, but what was he going to say?

<"Émilie! What are you doing? Come away from there!"> At some point, Henri had also joined the party and was standing out beyond the front corner of the barn holding a milking bucket. <"Get over to the house, your mother will be waiting for you!">

With one last forlorn look at Cajé, the little girl jumped from the fence, neatly clearing the worst of the surrounding mud and scampered off toward the house.

Relieved at escaping his confession to Émilie and the watchful eye of Henri, Cajé returned to his pig-stalking endeavors. Unlike its smaller littermates, the fourth pig seemed to have taken more of an interest in the Cajun scout's struggles over the past few hours. It was a larger male, outweighing the rest of its littermates by at least twenty-five pounds, marked with a bristly stripe of hair forming a ridge down its back.

Instead of running, as the others had, this one turned to face him, chewing and snorting around a set of immature tusks. Cajé continued his approach, certain that an absence of fear on his part would win the battle over the animal's tiny brain.



Unfortunately, the pig didn't seem to understand these universal signals of nature and proceeded to defend his right to freedom. Convinced that it was a mock charge, Cajé held his ground. He shouted and waved his arms, trying to break the pig out of its headlong flight with a firm stance that he wouldn't back down. But as the freight train of pork barreled closer, his attitude changed. Spinning on his heels he began a mad dash toward the closest refuge... the sty. He didn't need to look back to realize the boar was hot on his heels and gaining. Arms pumping and legs churning, he vaulted over the wooden fence, catching the toe of his boot on the top rail. With a startled yelp, he landed in the deep mud on hands and knees, scattering the three piglets in the sty in a flurry of cloven hooves.

Cajé stood slowly, grabbed his shirt off the rail and used it to wipe the muck from his hands. He threw the shirt away again and stared at the boar with loathing, perspiration dripping from his muscular chest and broad shoulders. He knew he had to come up with a different plan.

Saunders jerked awake as something impacted his helmet and rolled off into the grass, the fingers of his right hand curling around the Thompson in his lap. With his free hand he pushed his helmet away from his eyes and sat up. A small laugh drew his gaze up into the tree. A boy sat about ten feet above him, balancing happily on one of the autumn colored branches.

Saunders picked up the apple core that lay in the grass by his side and tossed it further away. "You do this?"

The boy canted his head and reached for another piece of fruit as the sergeant climbed to his feet. Readjusting the strap of his Thompson, he waved impatiently at the kid. "All right, come on down. Come on. Allez, allez."

The boy shrugged and tossed the second apple to the ground. He gripped the branch tightly and swung down, scraping the edge of his shoes along the smooth bark to slow his descent.

The kid reached out toward Saunders' Thompson, eyes gleaming. His fingertips had just touched the stock when the sergeant batted his hand away.

"GI Joes...kill Bosche."

"Yeah, that's great," Saunders answered flatly. He had had his fill of overenthusiastic children, and this one was no different. He didn't want to encourage another doe-eyed tag-along.

"White Rook, this is King Two, over." The radio squawked to life, clear of static. Saunders snagged the beat up piece of equipment and answered his lieutenant with the customary call sign before starting his report.

"We've stopped at a farmhouse, lieutenant. I've been trying to contact you every hour to get a location before we move out."

"The CP is about twenty miles south of our old position," Hanley told him. "You won't find it on your map. It's a town called Courtabon."

The radio was dragged from Saunders' ear as the boy pulled on the sergeant's arm. "Courtabon, oui." He pointed down the road past the farmhouse.

"I need you to try to get your bearings, Saunders, and head in. According to S2, there's going to be a big push by the Krauts. That was the reason behind the heavy bombing. I've got another job for you and the men."

"I don't think that'll be a problem, sir. We seem to be close by."



"What's that smell?" Billy's nose wrinkled as he pulled a couple of black feathers from his helmet and slid it back onto his head.

Littlejohn was scraping the soles of his boots across the hard ground. "Take your pick." He nodded his head at Cajé and Doc in turn. "I don't think that barn's been cleaned out for months, Cajé's been swimming in the pig sty and Doc...well, he's covered with..." Littlejohn cleared his throat. "The horse needed some gentle nudging to keep going at times, and he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Doc stood miserably as the smelly mess dried and stiffened the material of his uniform, while Cajé bent down to finger one of the many tears in his own muddy, pig-filth ruined clothes.

"Aw, why don't ya just quit griping, ya jerks. Let's get outta here."

"Sheesh, Kirby," Billy shot back, "what do you have to be so grumpy about? You got off easy."

Kirby snorted and walked off down the road, dusty handprints clearly visible on the seat of his pants.

Saunders shook his head and readjusted his helmet. "All right, everybody, let's move out. I want to be checked in with the lieutenant before dark. We're being briefed by S2 for a mission tonight."

A gurgling noise interrupted the steady footfalls of the squad as they headed down the road in single file. Billy grabbed his belly and frowned. "I hope we at least have time to get something to eat before Hanley sends us out again. I can't stand night patrol on an empty stomach. The Kraut's'll hear me from a mile away."

Littlejohn turned to look at his friend, shuffling backwards for a few steps. "How can you even think of food after today? Are you still growing, or something?"

Doc chuckled from his position in front of Littlejohn. "Hmm, around the middle."

"Hey!"

"Maybe we'll run across a wild cow on the way back," Kirby commented irritably.

"Count me out." Cajé shook his head, punctuating it with a wave of his Garand. "Someone else can be the chase man this time."

"Don't worry, Cajé." Littlejohn swung his rifle across his shoulder and fished a crinkled piece of gum out of his pocket. He folded it into his mouth, wadded up the foil wrapper and threw it carelessly on the ground, leaving it for Billy to scoop up behind him with a frown. "Gum is starting to taste a whole lot better, now."

Saunders smiled to himself from his position at the rear of the squad as Littlejohn's comment was met with grunts of approval. Maybe they had learned something after all.



The End