

NORMANDY FARM

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The squad spread out along the top of the hill, lying flat, peering between trunks and shrubs at the farm below. The tree covered crest was behind them, and a narrow transitional zone, consisting mainly of berry bushes, was in front of them. Some of the soldiers recognized the ripening raspberries, but it was Littlejohn who knew the gooseberry bushes. Some of the Scandinavian farmers grew them back home.

There was a farmhouse, barn, several outbuildings, and animal enclosures. A road ran past the house, stretching in one direction up the hill on the squad's right. Beyond the fencing, the road, lined with a woody strip of trees, passed between two very large fields. On the other side of them were others, each with a shrubby border.

"Hedgerows," said Kirby with disgust. "I thought we were out of hedgerow country."

"No, no, Kirby," reassured Cajé, "Those are fence lines, more like English hedgerows."

Saunders had the binoculars and nodded his agreement. "They're not built up the way they were before. The road isn't sunken down. There are plenty of places for ambush, but we don't need a tank with a front piece or explosives to get through."

"Do you see any Krauts, Sarge?" asked Billy.

"No sign of any, but our orders are to take and hold the area along the road. So, treat every hedge and tree as if it hides a machine gun nest, got it?"

He was gratified to hear a quiet, raggedy chorus of "Yes, Sarge".

"Cajé, you take the point, Kirby, the rear. Everybody else, spread out and keep your eyes open."

The squad had ten men today. There hadn't been many losses recently, just a couple of wounded. Several replacements had arrived ten days earlier, and during the last skirmish, they had handled themselves well. *Nice to be part of a larger group for a change*, thought Kirby as he watched everyone scurry from tree to tree, hunched like old men, but moving fast. Then it was his turn to leave the cover of the wood lot. He turned to look behind, and saw nothing suspicious. Kirby frowned at a faint, bell-like sound that carried on the summer breeze, but when he listened again, there was nothing. So he focused on the downhill slope and keeping up with the others.

Nine out of ten of the squad saw the farm only as a bucolic setting which could harbor a determined enemy. The tenth man also noticed the broken fences, the unplowed field, an unharvested spring crop, and an empty grazing field. Here and there, small craters dotted the area. The fighting had taken its toll. As they moved past the farm house and barn, he saw the damage to the latter and the lack of any livestock. The large kitchen garden was mostly empty, sporting only overgrown spring vegetables and volunteers from dropped fruit of the previous summer: errant tomato plants, squash vines and a melon of some kind. He tried to focus on looking for the enemy, but his heart was sick with the neglect. The rich, loamy soil was going to waste this season. For a moment, he thought he heard a bell. He strained to hear it more clearly.

"Littlejohn, look alive!"

The farmer-turned-soldier moved his gaze to their objective, the road, and saw Billy looking at him.

"Sarge wants us to check out the barn."

The two soldiers moved easily towards the large building. Littlejohn signaled Billy to go to the right and come in at an oblique angle, using the fence and farm wagon for cover. He would do the same on the left, following some smaller buildings. As Littlejohn ran from an empty chicken coop to a pigsty, a machine gun in the hayloft opened up. He dove into the swine scented mud behind a feeding trough. Large caliber bullets frayed the top edge of the wood as their target pressed himself into the odiferous ground.

Behind the noise of the German weapon, Littlejohn heard the shouts of the rest of the squad as they got into position to attack the barn. During a break in firing, he sat up and fired his M-1 in the general direction of the hayloft. They already knew he was there, so he figured he could make them keep their heads down. He flung himself flat, just as the machine gun resumed. *Maybe they haven't spotted Billy.*

Somewhere behind him, he heard another Garand shoot at the barn. *Probably Cajé, he's really quick. I don't hear the BAR. Most likely Kirby is sneaking around to get closer.*

However, before the rest of the squad could attack the barn, there were two explosions. Billy had reached the side of the barn without being spotted, and had eased his way around to the front. Then, he

lobbed two grenades up into the loft. In the sudden silence, he thought he heard a bell. *Hope my hearing clears up*, he thought.

It took the rest of the morning to make sure that the farm and the trees along the road were free of Germans. The weary men lay on the ground under some trees and waited for their sergeant to tell them what to do.

"Give me the handy talky, Murray," ordered the blond noncom.

"Here, Sarge." The earnest red haired replacement almost dropped it in his eagerness.

"Calm down, Murray."

"Yes, Sarge." The tall, young man practically bounced in place. The older veterans, including their sergeant, shook their heads.

"Murray, come sit over here," suggested Littlejohn. He and Billy companionably leaned against a large tree. There was room for a third. "You did well yesterday," he said to Murray who joined them gratefully.

"Thanks, Littlejohn, I sure didn't know what I was doing."

"Yeah, but you didn't lose your head, and actually fired your rifle in the right direction at the right time."

"Where you from, Murray?" asked Billy.

"Iowa."

"Hey, I'm from Indiana. Littlejohn here is from Nebraska. Most of the guys in the squad are from the Midwest. Kirby's a city boy. He's from Chicago."

The three soldiers chatted about back home, popular music and dances. Murray had played the trumpet, but the Army sent him to a rifle company anyway.

"Never even got to audition for the band. Not that I mind being with you guys. I just miss playing, you know?"

"I miss dancing, and seeing Evelyn."

"I miss my farm," said Littlejohn, eying the apparently abandoned fields.

The three sat silently, their thoughts thousands of miles away.

"Do you hear bells?" asked Murray.

"You, too?" replied Littlejohn.

Billy nodded. "We should tell Sarge."

Saunders approached the trio. He handed the handy talky back to Murray. "We stay here for a couple of days, and hold the road if the Krauts try to come this way. There might be artillery fire, so I want everyone to dig in. We'll set up on both sides of the road. It comes uphill here, which will give us an advantage."

The three men pulled out entrenching tools and shovels.

"Sarge, we've been hearing bells, all three of us," said Billy.

Their sergeant frowned and listened. He didn't hear anything except wind and birds. "What kind of bells?"

Billy and Murray shrugged. Littlejohn frowned in thought and said, "Just a single bell at a time. It has a kinda deep sound." He looked uncomfortable. "It sounds familiar."

"Let me know if you hear it again. I'll tell the rest to keep an ear out."

The men nodded, and then returned to their conversation about home.

Saunders passed the orders to dig in on both sides of the road to the rest of the men. The resigned veterans were soon digging with practiced ease. The new men had limited excavating experience, but set to it with varied amounts of enthusiasm.

"I never thought I'd be such an expert on soils," said Kirby. "This here's a light soil that's easy to dig. I'm two feet down already."

"It's a nice change," agreed Cajé.

"It doesn't have much clay in it," said Littlejohn. He warmed to one of his most favorite topics. "It's a very well developed soil. Look, the topsoil is at least a foot and a half deep, and—"

"Enough," interjected Saunders, "Save the soil judging for later. We're just making holes." The sergeant ordered several men to fell some trees for better firing protection.

Murray started to hum a bluesy chain gang song.



Early in the afternoon, Lt. Hanley arrived. His jeep roared down the road, and slid a good five feet when he slammed on the breaks. The officer extracted himself from the vehicle and strode over to his sergeant.

His face impassive, Saunders pushed his helmet back and said, "Quite an entrance, Lieutenant."

Hanley grinned, "I thought so. Plans have changed, slightly. The Germans are falling back all along the front. We're not sure what is going on, but we're going to consolidate our lines."

"Why not go after them?"

"It looks too good to be true. The brass has decided we've been following them since we landed. They want to hold up for a couple of days, analyze and consolidate. Aerial reconnaissance, send out some patrols, that sort of thing."

"All right, when do we go out?"

"They don't want us. They've picked Item and Love Companies. I know you're disappointed, but Jampel's been told to sit tight and reinforce if necessary. Between you and me, it doesn't look as if we'll be needed, but we can't go anywhere. No passes." He surveyed the fox holes and log emplacements. "In about three days, we'll move forward again."

"What about hot chow, lieutenant?"

"Not likely, but I'll see what I can do. You have enough rations?"

"We won't starve, but if it takes more than three days, we'll run out. There aren't even any chickens here."

"Well, it could be worse. You could be hungry and fighting."

"Gee, thanks, Lieutenant."

"Enjoy the rest, Saunders. Set up a perimeter, keep watch, and be sure to call in. Things could change."

"Yes, sir."

"And be careful."

"Always, Lieutenant, always."

Hanley left, spinning the jeep's wheels as he took off.

"Okay, men, stick to the guard duty schedule. Stay close. Keep your eyes and ears open. The brass doesn't really know what the Krauts are doing, so they could surprise them. And we'd have to deal with it."

"Sarge, here we are with nothin' to do and nothin' to even look at," whined Kirby.

"Oh, I don't know. It's still a break. Besides, it's scenic. There's plenty to see if you're interested in farms."

Kirby rolled his eyes, "Aghhhhhh, why couldn't we be near a town? Or a winery?"

"You want to pull guard duty first, Kirby? I'd be glad to rearrange the schedule."

"No, no, Sarge, tha's okay. I'll find somethin' to do."

Saunders smiled at the quick change in tone. He looked over the rest of the men. Some of the new squad members had formed little clumps alongside the road, under the trees. Billy was on guard duty with two of the replacements. Littlejohn, and Murray were walking around the barn. The big man gesticulated expansively, apparently explaining some agricultural point to the younger man.

Caje sat in the shade, talking with Doc while he began to break down his weapon. The medic was taking stock of his medical supplies and cleaning out his rucksack.

"Maybe we can do some laundry, Doc. I only have one pair of clean socks."

"There's a well over by the house. At least I saw a pump."

"There's a real outhouse, too. That will be a nice change."

"I don't see anything to eat, though. I'm not lookin' forward to three days on rations."

"Maybe we can mix stuff together or something. The farmhouse may have some pots or even some food."

"We could check it out. Kirby and Billings were only looking for Krauts before."

"Sure, I can clean my rifle later."

The two men rose, leaving their knapsacks behind, but carrying the rucksack and Garand, they headed for the house. Although it had been checked once, they took precautions. They waited on either side of the door, and then Caje kicked it in. He moved inside quickly, ducking down and scanning around the room. No one was there. The furniture was plain and heavy. Chairs, books, dishes, and other domestic objects lay scattered about. There were trays of plants lined up by a front window.

"I'll check go through the house, again, Doc, why don't you wait here?" Cajé went into the first floor rooms, and then went upstairs.

Meanwhile, Doc picked up some chairs, noting their sturdy, well made quality. He walked about, and looked at several books, all in French. He found a family Bible, complete with what looked like birth, death and marriage entries. When he examined an enameled stove fitted in the old hearth, Doc found remnants of papers and furniture. He shook his head at the waste. *There's a wood pile not ten feet from the house.*

The kitchen had pots and pans, but there were no knives and little flat ware. *Stolen by the Germans*, he shrugged, *but just as likely stolen by GIs, given the chance.* Doc found a door leading to a cellar, but decided to let Cajé go down first. There was a back door that opened out onto a small yard, worn and scraped by chicken feet, he reckoned. Close by, there was a gate into a large, walled garden. Even Doc's untrained eye could see that it hadn't been cared for in a while. Doc turned and finished looking at the cabinets.

Cajé entered the kitchen, "No one upstairs. There is still some furniture and clothes, although it looks like people went through it."

"There is a cellar," Doc gestured toward the small door. "I didn't go down, yet."

"I'll take a look." Cajé exercised great caution and care moving down the stairs. Some things had become ingrained. He wondered whether he'd ever be able to simply walk into a strange room. He smiled at the thought of sneaking up to a girl's house just to go out on a date. At the bottom of the stairs, it was too dark to see anything. He got out his lighter and flipped it on. There was nothing unusual—a lot of old equipment, boxes, shelves with empty canning jars—in the small, rock walled, unfinished space. He returned upstairs.

"Did you find any food?" he asked Doc.

The aid man shook his head. "Looks like they had quite a bit. I found where they had hams hung up and where they stored vegetables. Everything's empty. I did find some pans, though." He looked out a window. "I bet that's a spring house over there. They'd've stored milk, butter and stuff like that there."

"Anything in the drawers? Cabinets?"

"No, see?" Doc opened up a couple for him.

There was an angry, feminine torrent of French. A young, tall, blonde woman stood at the back door, carrying a bundle over her shoulder. She stood almost eye to eye with Cajé, radiating furious outrage.

"What's she saying, Cajé?"

"She wants to know what we're doing here. She called us thieves and told us to leave. This is her house." Cajé smiled warmly, and spoke apologetically to the stiff backed Frenchwoman.

"Doc, I told her we're Americans and were only curious."

The Frenchwoman was not mollified. Embarrassed, Cajé introduced himself and Doc, and explained to her that they would be staying on the farm for three days, and would not bother her. She stood furiously and silently watched them.

Finally, she gave them her name, "<My name is Éliane Fleury. My family has lived here for 900 years.>"

Cajé translated and added, "I'd guess at least one of her ancestors was a Viking, judging by her height and her hair." He bowed to the farmwoman, "<We will leave now, Mlle Fleury. Good day."

She nodded and watched, stone faced, as the two men started to leave.

At the door, Cajé turned and asked, "<Mademoiselle, we were looking for food. Do you have anything? Chickens? Eggs? We get very little good food from the Army. We will pay for it, of course.">

Tight lipped, she shook her head.

Cajé and Doc nodded and left. Outside, the dark haired private shrugged, "Well, it was worth a try."

"Funny, I've used stuff in houses dozens of times. That's the first time I saw myself as a thief, or a looter."

"Yeah, you forget that all this, the land, the homes, the stuff... they all belong to real people."

The two chagrined men wandered back to their tree and sat down, thinking.

Cajé called out, "Oh, Sarge, the house is occupied."

Saunders looked at him, waiting for more.

"There's a Mademoiselle Fleury. Says her family's lived here nine centuries. I asked if she had any food we could have. She said no."

Saunders got up and made the rounds of his men, ordering them to leave the woman and her house alone.

"C'mon, Sarge, you've got to be kidding! A real woman!"

"Lay off her, Kirby, or I'll find something more creative for you to do with a shovel."

*Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"I thought I heard a bell."



The BAR man moseyed over and sat down next to Cajé and Doc. Cajé had his rifle in his lap, starting to break it down. Kirby followed suit with his weapon. "Hey, Cajé, where's Littlejohn?"

"I dunno, ask Billy and Murray."

Kirby looked over at the two young men deep in a conversation about which Dorsey was better. "Hey, Billy, where's Littlejohn?"

"He's in the garden by the house."

Kirby stretched and could just see Littlejohn's head and shoulders beyond the garden wall, rising and falling rhythmically. Each time he stood, he pitched plants—weeds, Kirby guessed—over the wall onto a large pile of dead plant material. He moved with practiced ease. Even from across the yard, the squad could see the smile on his broad face.

Suddenly, the back door of the house burst open, and Mlle Fleury ran out of the house and into the garden with a yell that carried, angry and shrill, across the air.

Cajé was on his feet in an instant and arrived at the garden wall in time to see Littlejohn and the woman squared off and arguing with each other. The Cajun signaled Littlejohn to be quiet and spoke soothingly to Mlle Fleury, "*Qu'est-ce qu'il y a, mademoiselle?*"

The scout and the Frenchwoman exchanged several sentences. Then he turned to his squad mate and explained, "She says you're destroying her garden. I told her you are a farmer and you know all about gardening."

Littlejohn smiled and held up two giant hands full of thistles and nettles. The woman farmer seemed dubious, but interested. He extended his arms for better inspection. She noted that he had grasped them correctly to minimize thorn damage. He tossed them on the pile, and pointed to the now weed-free row of large, woody root crops and bolted lettuce. Cajé leaned on the wall and watched the two converse via pantomime. They strolled along the rows, differentiating between the plants to keep and the ones to tear out.

"Cajé, how do you say 'too many apples'?"

"*Trop des pommes*"

Littlejohn repeated it quietly, and then pointed at two dwarf trees along the wall and said to the Frenchwoman, "*Trop des pommes*." Then he reached over and pinched off several tiny apples. Éliane watched him closely and nodded her approval. She waved her hand, indicating he should continue work, and disappeared inside the house. By the time the blonde emerged with a flat of tiny plants, he had thinned both trees.

"How did you grow those?" Littlejohn asked.

They both looked expectantly at Cajé who obligingly translated.

Mlle Fleury pointed at the large windows, held herself and shivered. She then acted out planting seeds. Littlejohn pointed in the house and raised his eyebrows. There was an answering nod. He held out his hand toward the house gallantly. She curtsied graciously, and he followed her inside. Moments later, they emerged with more flats. The two repeated this several times until the paths were covered with small plants. The young woman went into another shed and brought a couple of trowels and a watering can which she filled at the pump. The pump screeched in protest, and it took a long time. Littlejohn went to the manure pile near the barn and grabbed a handful which he dumped into the water. They smiled in agreement.

The rest of the afternoon, the two farmers planted the garden. They developed an efficient rhythm: dig hole, plop in the plant, tamp the soil, water, and grab the next one. The Frenchwoman noted how gently yet quickly he teased the ends loose from the tight, overgrown root balls. Littlejohn appreciated that she noticed. They exchanged vocabulary, although every so often, they asked Cajé to

translate. He had moved into the garden, and sat, leaning against the wall, cleaning his M-1. He listened carefully and interjected the correct English or French word when needed. Sometimes, the two farmers would simply point and name things in their respective languages.

"Tomato"

"*La tomate.*"

"Pepper."

"*Le piment.*"

They finished the seedlings. She pulled a small bag out of her pocket and showed Littlejohn the contents.

"Beans," he said.

"*Les haricots.*"

Littlejohn pantomimed eating the seeds. He tried to show a seed growing, picking something long and thin, breaking it and eating the pieces. "String beans."

She was giggling by the time he finished, but managed to get out, "*Les haricots verts.*"

"Verrrr?"

"Green, Littlejohn."

"Oh," comprehension lit the agreeable features, "Green beans!"

The blonde laughed. She indicated it was time to plant them.

"Caje, what is French for dibble?"

"What's a dibble?"

"It makes holes for planting seeds."

"*Mlle Fleury, qu'est-ce que c'est la chose pour repiquer les grains, pour faire les petits trous?*"

"*C'est un plantoir, Caje.*" She looked at Littlejohn, "*Désirez vous un plantoir?*"

"Do you want a dibble, Littlejohn?"

"Yes." To his fellow worker, "*Uh, oui, m'amselle.*"

She stepped over Caje, went to a nearby shed, and emerged holding a T-shaped device with a long handle and a bar with four rounded projections like fingertips. Littlejohn took it, and expertly pushed it into the soil. He took a handful of beans and dropped one in each hole. Then, he smudged the holes closed with his foot. She took the dibble from him and made holes; he did the seed. Caje watched them work their way up and down the rows. After the beans were in, they set up a twine net for the vines to grow on.

"What is farm in French? What is large?"

"*La ferme*, Littlejohn. *Grande* is large."

"Uh, *Ma'amselle*... I have it j'ai, right, Caje?"

"Yep"

"Uh, *Ma'amselle, j'ai un grande ferme.*"

"***Une*** *grande ferme*," she corrected. "*Combien des acres?*"

"Caje?"

"How many acres..."

Littlejohn wrote "500" in the soil. She raised her eyebrows and whistled. She gestured to the fields around the house and barn, and pointed to the woods behind them.

"*C'est tout.*" She shrugged.

"Where's your livestock?"

Before either could ask, Caje looked up from checking the pull on his trigger and said, "*Où est votre bétail?*"

Mlle Fleury suddenly looked at the sky, saw how low the sun was, and leaped to her feet. "*Oh, mon Dieu, que je suis en retard!*" She raced off into the woods.

"She said she was late, Littlejohn. That's all."

Littlejohn finished tidying up the garden, casting worried glances in the direction in which Éliane had run. Caje, finished with his rifle, got up. "Let me know when she gets back. Translating gives me something to do."

"Thanks, Caje."

The slender soldier walked over towards Kirby, but stopped and turned towards the wooded area. "I hear a bell."

"So do I," said Kirby.

All the men turned and looked at Sarge.

"Yeah, I hear it, too," admitted Saunders.

"Even better," said Murray, "I hear chickens." The men's faces brightened as they distinguished the familiar sounds.

"And cows," said Littlejohn as a gentle lowing added a background to the steady, melodic clang, accented by the poultry noises.

A very large horse emerged from the woods on the hill, several yards from where the men had come. The brown and white animal pulled a small cart, loaded to overflowing with crates, bags and barrels. Chicken sounds emanated from the former. Behind the cart plodded a cow, white with small brown spots. Her huge udder swelled out behind her. She had a bell hanging on her neck. Two other cows followed her. A large sow trailed by several piglets trotted along, guided by a long slender rod wielded by the young woman. She pulled firmly on a rope attached to the ring in the nose of a large bull that followed stolidly.

The men froze, mouths open. Littlejohn shook his head and trotted over to join the parade. He held his hand towards Éliane, raising his eyebrows. She handed him the rope and beamed as he also grabbed the lead cow by her bell collar and led the cattle to the barn. Then, he unhitched the horse which had stopped outside the door. Meanwhile Éliane released the chickens into the coop, and herded the pigs into the sty. While his new friend unloaded the cart, he found pails and stools. The Nebraskan washed the former out at the pump, and scrubbed his hands the best he could. She joined him, and they went into the barn. The rest of the off duty squad members drifted over to watch.

Inside, the two farmers milked the cows, the third cow lowing in frustration. Littlejohn finished first with a cry of triumph and moved over to the distressed animal. The Frenchwoman asked Cajé something.

"She wants to know if we want the milk."

"Can't she use it?" asked Saunders.

Cajé and Mlle Fleury carried on a brief conversation. "She can't drink it all. Normally she would make butter and cheese, but she doesn't have time right now."

"Cows have to be milked no matter what or they dry out," added Littlejohn.

"Well, sure," said Kirby, "I ain't turnin' down real milk, even if it is warm."

"It's certainly fresh," said Billings, another of the recent replacements.

The men crowded around, pulling their tin cups out of their packs

"Take some to the guys on duty," ordered Saunders. Three of the new men complied immediately.

Kirby drained his mug quickly and sighed, "This is the best milk I've ever tasted."

"Lots of butterfat, Kirby," said Littlejohn. "It makes the milk creamier."

There was a chorus of "Mercy, m'amselles" as the man finished their treat. The woman went back into the house and emerged with a basket which she tried to give to Littlejohn.

"Ceux-ci sont pour vous à cause de votre travail."

Cajé noticed that Littlejohn needed no translation as the big man answered, "No, m'amselle, I helped because I love to farm, uh, *j'aime la ferme*."

Kirby, Nelson, and Murray strove to see what was in the basket that Littlejohn was turning down. "Hey, Littlejohn, there's bread in there!" urged Kirby. "Don't hurt the lady's feelings. It's bad manners to refuse after she's gone to so much trouble."

"What makes you think you would get any?"

Murray spoke quickly before the shorter, more volatile man could screw things up, "Because you are a kind and generous soldier who has the best interests of the squad at heart." He smiled ingenuously at his friend.

Littlejohn looked thoughtfully at the younger soldier who didn't weigh much more than Billy, but was almost as tall as Lieutenant Hanley. "Cajé?"

"Shall I tell her that you accept her gift because we don't get much fresh bread?"

"Yeah, but please make sure she'll have enough for herself and she understands that I didn't expect anything."

Cajé spoke eloquently to the farmer who smiled and shyly stood on her toes and kissed Littlejohn on the cheek. Then, she handed him the basket. There were three fat loaves inside. He cut off a large piece with his knife and handed the basket to Cajé. The Louisianan cut himself a piece and handed the bread to Kirby, Billy and Murray saying, "Share these with everyone else, especially Sarge, okay?" He handed the empty basket to its owner who disappeared into her house.

"Jeez, I haven't had homemade bread since the last time I saw my grandma," said Billy. "It's awfully good."

The other men nodded, chewing slowly and savoring the flavor. The bread and the milk did more than fill their stomachs. The yeasty and buttery scents evoked memories of peace and home. Thoughtfully, each man slowly made his way to his bedroll.



Caje woke at 0200 when he heard the quiet footsteps of his squad leader. By the time Saunders had reached the corner of the shed where Caje had lain, the scout was on his feet, helmet and Garand in hand.

"You're to relieve Nelson who's on the tree line."

In the dark, the sergeant could barely see the answering nod. He didn't need to. The lithe soldier slipped noiselessly outside to take his turn. Littlejohn, having been relieved by Murray, passed him in the barnyard.

"Thanks again, Caje."

"My pleasure, Littlejohn. Good night."

At 0430 hours, Caje saw a tiny sliver of light appear at a farmhouse window. He watched the large shadowy shape of Littlejohn move from the shed to the barn with an agile sureness he found surprising. The cracks between the barn's wall and door revealed that Littlejohn had lit a lantern. With a smile, Caje turned back to watch the woods. The coming day could be very interesting.

About 0600, Mlle Fleury brought bread and cheese to the shed. The sergeant was up and thanked her. Caje told him that the cheese was Neufchâtel or farmer's cheese that she had made previously. There was another pail of milk, too.

After breakfast, Littlejohn chased Kirby out of the chicken coop. The larger man went through and found half dozen eggs which he put in the springhouse. He spotted the young woman hitching up the horse to a plow. She knew how to do it, but was obviously unpracticed. The horse tossed his head and stamped, restless with impatience. When the American approached her, she grimaced with embarrassment. He reached up and grasped the horse's bridle and held him still, calming the animal with rumbling whispers. When she was ready, he watched her make her way slowly to the field. He rummaged around in the barn and finally found the family's tools hidden in the hayloft. After chopping a lot of wood, he started mending the broken fences.

Once the woman had managed to plow two wobbly furrows in the field, Littlejohn asked Caje to help him talk with her. She was sweaty and frustrated, and took it out on the two GIs.

"She dares us to tell her how to do it better."

Littlejohn answered in English but spoke directly to the tired woman. Caje quietly translated during the pauses.

"M'amselle, you know what to do, but I don't believe you have plowed many fields. Who used to do it?"

"*Mes frères and mon père.*"

"Will they come home now that the Germans are gone?"

"*Ils sont morts avec ma mère.*"

Caje expressed his sympathy before telling Littlejohn that her family was dead.

"Caje, tell her that she doesn't have time to practice right now."

<"I have no other choice. The horse cannot do it himself.">

"Let me."

<"What do you know of plowing with a horse? Americans have tractors.">

"Not always"

Caje stepped back and watched Littlejohn in his element. First, he ran his hands over the horse. He picked up each hoof and inspected it. The right rear caused him to frown. He pulled out his bayonet and dug into the hoof with it. He prised out a small stone and handed it to the blushing woman.

"Caje tell her it is small and didn't do any damage."

Then he took the reins and stepped between the plow handles. The farmer slapped the lines, gave Caje a sideways glance and called out, "*Allez, allez.*"

Both Mlle Fleury and the black haired private laughed. "Where did you pick that up, Littlejohn?"

"I've heard you say it often enough when you're in a hurry."

The horse started to pull and the large man expertly guided the plow in a smooth, straight line.

"Caje, how do you say 'stop' to a horse?"

"*Arrêtez*' should work. You could try 'Whoa.' I think that's universal."

Littlejohn experimented with both during the next twenty feet, and they worked equally well. The horse responded more to the tone than to the actual word, he decided. He turned and gestured for the young woman to get in front of him between the plow handles. He had her put her hands on top of his, and then talked quietly in her ear as he showed her how to push and lean.

Caje decided they didn't need a translator and returned to sit with Kirby. From time to time, one or the other would shout a word to him, and he would respond with the needed vocabulary. The squad watched the two work while they played cards, maintained weapons, mended, and napped.

By midday, the field resembled corduroy fabric. Littlejohn rubbed the horse down and combed him while he ate corn that his owner produced from a hiding place. That afternoon, she walked the field, tossing seeds about.

"What's she sowing, Littlejohn?"

"Winter wheat, Caje."

"Pity you won't be here to help her harvest it."

"She'll manage."

"I'm sure she will."

Littlejohn returned to woodworking. He had located nails and a hammer. He looked up to see Billy grinning next to him.

"You may be good at doing some things, but you can't hold up both ends of that board and hammer it."

Murray came up and joined the two. "Let me help."

Pretty soon the men were working together. They repaired the fence, and untied the cows from their stakes, and released the chickens from the coop. Meanwhile, Saunders found and sawed discarded boards into lengths that matched the holes in the side of the barn. Then it was his turn to hammer. Kirby took the pump apart, and cleaned and shaped the parts with a file. Once put together and primed, it brought up water much better than before.

Towards the end of the afternoon, the barn had functioning doors and walls without holes. All of the off duty men had found something constructive to do.



Mlle Fleury had watched the industrious activity without expression. She simply caught a couple of her oldest, fattest hens and expertly wrung their necks. She plucked the feathers efficiently and disappeared into the house, emerging later to pull up onions, carrots and other odds and ends from the garden. Pretty soon, the tantalizing aromas of simmering chicken and baking bread drifted on the breeze, giving the men a preview of food the likes of which they had not enjoyed for so very long. The smells conjured memories of home and family for the young soldiers.

After finishing the repairs, Littlejohn walked along the fence where it came close to the road. He stopped and looked at a cluster of plants growing on the edge. He grabbed Caje and went inside to talk with the young woman.

Caje said, <"The peonies by the road. They will be trampled when the army comes by.">

She shrugged, but continued her cooking. <"I cannot eat them. I have neither the time nor the energy to move them.">

<"Littlejohn says that flowers are food for the soul. You cannot give them up. They will give you beauty year after year if they're in a better location.">

She smiled at the diffident man. <"If you wish to move them, you are welcome to try, but I think you have worked too hard today, and you should rest. They are only flowers.">

Littlejohn shrugged and went outside. With practiced ease, he dug a large hole next to the walk in front of the house. Then he carefully replanted the flowers from the roadside.

Billy and Murray tagged after him, kibitzing. "I hope she can water them until they're established," said Billy. "Peonies can be very difficult to transplant."

"Why put them next to the front door?" asked Murray.

Before Littlejohn could answer, Nelson replied, "Because people can smell them when they come to the house." He looked insulted at the surprised stares of the other two men. "Okay, my mom likes peonies. We have some in a perennial bed."

After sunset, during the quiet of twilight, Mlle Fleury emerged and invited the soldiers to her house. The men brought their mess kits, trying without success to appear casual. Sniffing appreciatively, Kirby asked, "Chicken stew?"

After a murmur from Cajé, she said, "Fricassée." Then she pointed to the bread, the pitcher of milk, plate of cheese and three bottles of wine.

Saunders spoke angrily to Cajé, "Tell her she doesn't need to use up her food on us."

"Sarge, she wants to thank us for helping her out this afternoon. It would be bad manners to refuse after she's gone to the trouble."

Kirby interjected, "I can think of a way she could thank us."

"Shut up, Kirby, she's not that kind of girl, and you know it. You say something like that again, and I'll—"

"Okayokayokay, I'm just foolin' around, Cajé."

"She's a nice girl."

"Okay!" Then Kirby murmured to himself, "Just wish she'd be nicer to me."

"What was that?"

"Nuthin'"

Cajé glared at him.

"Really, nuthin', Cajé. I promise I'll behave myself."

"Where was all the food?" asked Doc, changing the subject. He caught their hostess' eye and gestured at the table with raised eyebrows.

"Dan la forêt. Je me suis cachée là avec la nourriture et les animaux."

She and Cajé exchanged a few sentences. The Cajun explained how she had stripped her house of valuables and hidden them in the family cheese cave nearby. She had taken the animals and food to the woods to hide while the armies moved through.

"What kind of cheese is this?" asked Billy, holding up a piece.

"Camembert. The family made two types of cheese, butter and crème fraîche," answered Cajé. "That's like sour cream."

The men sat wherever they could and devoured everything. Cajé and Mlle Fleury talked recipes for a while. However, when Littlejohn returned from taking dinner to the men on duty, the two farmers talked about milk, cows and wheat. They used gestures, pictures sketched on bits of paper, and occasional help from a nearby Cajé. The other soldiers diplomatically left the two alone.

"M'amselle Fleury," began the Nebraskan.

"Littlejohn, je suis Éliane, vous pouvez me tutoyer..."

"Cajé?"

"She wants you to call her Éliane, and you can use *tu* instead of *vous*."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you are friends, at least."

"At least?"

"Littlejohn, if I have to explain that to you, well, there's no point in explaining it..."

"Oh." He thought, then, "Oh!" He looked at the young woman who busied herself with setting out more butter for the men.

"Littlejohn," she asked, *"Quel est ton prénom?"* She pointed to herself and said, "Éliane."

He grimaced and whispered, "George."

She started to say his name and he shushed her. "Please, uh, *s'il vous...*" he hesitated.

"S'il te plaît," she corrected shyly.

He nodded, *"S'il te plaît, Littlejohn."* He made a thumbs up. Then, he made a thumbs-down, and said, "George," quietly with exaggerated distaste.

She giggled, "Littlejohn."

Saunders watched as his men finish their dinner with gusto, even to the point of licking their mess kits. He caught sight of Littlejohn lugging some water into the kitchen. A while later, Éliane was clearing the empty platters off the table. When she began to reach for the men's dinnerware, the sergeant said, "No, no, mademoiselle..." He didn't see Cajé, so he gestured at the men in the room and pointed in the direction of the pump. He pantomimed pumping water and scrubbing.

Éliane laughed, "*Merci, Sergeant.*"

"No, *mademoiselle*, **merci**," he flashed a wide smile and bowed elegantly towards the young woman, "*Merci beaucoup.*"

Kirby caught the exchange and added his enthusiastic comment, "Oui, oui, mercy bow, **bow** coop. The deenay was trace bone, trace, trace bone."

Saunders and Mlle Fleury broke up.

"What? I'm just thankin' her, Sarge."

Still laughing, he acknowledged, "I think she got the message, Kirby."

The men noisily gathered their mess kits and cups and headed out towards the pump, calling out their heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to their beaming hostess. Littlejohn and Cajé remained behind to help Éliane with the rest of the clean up.

At the pump, Saunders and Doc stepped back and watched the young men jostle and kid each other around the pump.

"I feel like a chaperone on a Sunday School outing," said Doc ruefully, acutely aware of his age.

"More like a Boy Scout Leader." His sergeant frowned, "There probably should be a chaperone in the farm house."

"Littlejohn and Éliane? Cajé is there. He can keep an eye on things."

Saunders snorted, "Cajé? I don't think so. He's a romantic. He's been doing everything possible to get them together."

"Who needs protection, Littlejohn or the lady?"

"In truth? Probably Littlejohn." The older veteran shook his head. "Naw, both of them."

"They're old enough to decide for themselves."

"I know. It's not really our business, is it?"

The men moved towards the pump to quell an imminent water fight, and to take care of their own dishes. Saunders told his men to get some sleep as they would be moving out the next day.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Éliane, Littlejohn and Cajé industriously washed dishes. After about half had been dried and put away, the young woman casually said something to Cajé about there not being a lot left to do.

He looked at her sharply, and then made a great show of carefully and deliberately drying a milk pitcher. He put it on a shelf and yawned noisily. "Well, it's been a long day, and I have to get up in the middle of the night again. I think I'll hit the sack."

Littlejohn, busy with another dish towel, looked up, surprised. "Gee, do we have to go now?"

"No, no, Littlejohn, you stay. There's enough work for two, and I don't mind stickin' you with it."

"But who will translate for us?"

Cajé snorted, "Littlejohn, at this point, if you need a translator, then I have completely misread the situation." To Éliane he said, "*Bonne nuit, mademoiselle.*"

"*Bonne nuit, Cajé...et merci.*"

Cajé left the blushing Frenchwoman and thoughtful American, and returned to the squad's quarters in the shed.

Kirby stirred and muttered, "Cajé, where's Littlejohn?"

"He stayed to help her clean up."

"Clean up? I bet. She's going to thank him getting her farm in shape."

"Shut up, Kirby, Remember what I said. Besides, I think she's falling in love."

"Love," he answered enviously. "With that big lug?"

"That big lug, Kirby." Cajé snuggled down under his blanket. "There's somebody for everybody."

"You really believe that?"

"Fervently."

There was a heavy, resigned sigh. "Let me know if he doesn't make his turn on watch, okay?"

"We can both cover for him, if necessary."

"We won't tell Sarge, though."

"No, not unless he asks about it."

"Good night, Cajé."

"Night, Kirby."

Hours later, Littlejohn appeared for his shift, but disappeared back into the house the instant he was relieved. Cajé and Kirby glanced worriedly at each other, but Saunders said nothing when he made his rounds checking on men.

“Caje!” The voice whispered urgently. “Caje!”
 “Littlejohn? What time is it?”
 “It’s almost sunrise.”
 “What’s wrong?”
 “Nothing, really, I just needed to ask you something. Does ‘*vierge*’ mean what I think it does?”
 “*La Vierge* is the Virgin Mary—we usually leave out the Mary.” Caje sighed and turned onto his side.
 “Thanks, Caje.” Littlejohn turned to leave.
 Caje started, “Wait...Littlejohn?”
 “Yeah?”
 “Are you saying she is...was...?” Caje couldn’t decide which tense to use.
 “Yes, she was.” He grimaced. “If I’d known, I wouldn’t have...you know?”
 “Yeah, I know.”
 “But by the time she told me, well, uh, it would’ve been...uh, bad manners to refuse when she’d gone to so much trouble.”
 Caje smiled and nodded, then asked, “Is she all right? Do you want Doc to look at her?”
 Horrified, “Good God, no!”
 “I mean, sometimes, the first time, well, things can go wrong...”
 “No, she’s fine. Everything’s fine. I just wanted to make sure I understood right.”
 “Well, you should get back to her. She shouldn’t wake up alone.”
 Littlejohn grinned. “Uh, Caje, we’re farmers. We’ve been up for hours. She’s milking the last cow. I’m supposed to be hunting for eggs. I hope to talk her into making flapjacks. She doesn’t have maple syrup, but she has honey.”
 Caje yawned, “Sounds good. Save some for me.”
 “Good morning, Caje, and thanks.”
 “You’re welcome.” The scout rolled over and was asleep in moments.



Later that morning, Éliane set up a couple of vats with hot water, one with soap. Then, she hauled a wringer out of the storage shed, strung up ropes, and started washing a few things. When she was about finished, Éliane called to Caje, “*Vous et vos amis, vous pouvez faire votre linge, si vous le désirez.*”
 “Hey, anybody want to do laundry? It’s all set up,” he announced to the squad.
 Pretty soon, most of the men were standing around washing socks, shirts, shorts, undershirts and other articles of clothing. They carefully ignored the meaningful glances exchanged by Littlejohn and Éliane. The two tried to be discreet, but the air crackled every time they looked at each other.
 It was a rare, breezy, sunny day. She set up an ironing board and brought out a huge iron.
 “How does she heat it up?” asked Murray.
 “I saw her put coals in that top compartment,” said Billings, who’d met Murray at the repple deppele.
 She ironed some of her own clothes, then ironed Littlejohn’s shirt. She gestured, offering to iron others. Saunders gently took the iron from her hand and expertly pressed his, as did Caje. The other men took their turns.
 Murray watched carefully. “I never learned how to iron.”
 “Really, kid? Not even during Basic?”
 The red haired Iowan shook his head.
 “Well, watch this.” Kirby brandished the iron and starting with the collar and cuffs gave a demonstration with commentary.
 Meanwhile, Éliane and Littlejohn cleaned out the barn. The rest of the squad watched with mixed emotions. None of them had any desire to shovel fresh manure and straw. On the other hand, the happy attachment between the two was obvious and envied.
 “No way I’d work with that mess,” said Kirby shaking his head. “I don’t care what the reward.”
 “Shut up, Kirby,” said Caje automatically.
 “Me neither,” said Andrews, another new man. “I spent summers on my grandparents’ place. A farmer’s life is not for me.”

The younger men tended to agree with Kirby and Andrews. They talked quietly amongst themselves. The older veterans watched the happy couple, and wished for the best. They said nothing because of the inevitable, tragic conclusion.

A smiling Littlejohn tossed forkfuls onto a large manure pile. Éliane cleaned out the chicken coop. Later, the couple carried several bales of straw into the barn, to scatter as bedding for the horse and cattle.

Saunders sat under a tree, and observed the interactions around him. He automatically noted and filed away information about the new squad members, adding to what he had already learned from their reactions to combat. This was the first leisure time for the squad since it'd been reinforced.

Murray and Billy sat on the fence, continuing their discussion about music, even singing some of their favorite songs. Some members of the squad waited for turns with the iron, recounted favorite menus, and occupied themselves with other housekeeping chores and napping.

Digby, short and thin, sat near the others, listening and watching. Although quiet, the new man managed to be part of the squad. Saunders also sensed that he was a killer. The squad leader didn't think the soldier sought or enjoyed it, but he was good at it, dispensing death easily and without a qualm. *'A lot like Cajé,'* the sergeant thought. *'A lot like me.'*

Feet drawn up, the noncom rested his chin on his upper arm. He inhaled deeply, savoring the slightly soapy, faintly scorched scent of the fabric. It transported him to miles and years away.

Abruptly, he opened his eyes. He felt watched and looked up to meet Cajé's thoughtful gaze. They shared a troubled look, and then turned simultaneously, towards the barn. There had been no sign of the couple for several minutes. Both men then surreptitiously checked Kirby. The BAR man, unlike most of the others, was still watching the barn, and had just checked his watch.

Cajé rose smoothly to his feet and called to his friend, "Hey, Kirby, how about some cards?"

Surprised, the smaller man grinned, "Sure!" He queried loudly, "Anybody interested in a little poker?"

There were several takers, and they settled under a tree. A pile of chits and odd bills from at least three countries swelled, deflated and flowed back and forth across the "table." On the hour, Saunders caught the eyes of three of his men, held up his arm, and tapped his watch. They grabbed helmets and weapons, and headed out to relieve the sentries.

"This peace and quiet ends tomorrow, right Sarge?" Doc settled down next to his squad leader.

"Fraid so."

"Gonna be hard on Littlejohn."

"Yeah, well, he knew that goin' in."

"Doesn't make it easier."

"No, but there's nothin' he can do about it, either."

"No, I guess not."

The two men retired to their own thoughts for several minutes.

"Do you think it's worth it? Or should he have stayed away from her?"

"I dunno, Doc." Saunders took a deep breath. He almost never gave out personal stuff, but Doc could make it easy. "I try not to get involved because it can't end well over here. We leave the girls behind, buddies get killed or wounded, little kids are starved, orphaned and worse, but the truth is, I can't help it. Against my better judgment, people start to matter. Then it hurts in the end." He looked into the cherubic face of his medic. "How do you deal with the loss?"

"I dunno, Sarge. Like you say, the pain is unavoidable. But we have to care or we lose what makes us decent human beings." He leaned his head back against the tree, sighing wearily. "When it's too big a burden, I pray. God shares the load, sometimes." He smiled ruefully, "I get the feeling that wouldn't work for you."

"No, Doc, it wouldn't."

"So, how do you handle it?"

"I don't. I focus on what has to be done, and figure out the best way to do it. Then, I do whatever it takes to get it done. The more we all do that, the sooner we head home."

Doc saw a flash of helplessness and resignation. Then, it disappeared, replaced by the unrevealing watchfulness that the medic knew best. He shook his head. "It doesn't go away. You know it'll all come back out someday."

"Hopefully in a time and a place when it won't matter."

"I don't think you can control that."

"Hmm, I suppose not." The noncom looked thoughtful. "I once thought it wouldn't be as painful if I didn't get to know the men, but that didn't work. It always hurts when we lose someone. So, I make myself learn their names. I feel like I owe them that, at least. Some of them don't even make it past their first day. Most of 'em don't last long, one way or another." He looked at Doc. "What do you make of Digby? He seems awfully good at all this."

Doc nodded. He made an effort to know something about all of the men. He saw it as part of his mission. This squad, unlike most others, really tried to help the new guys—give them advice, tips they didn't get in training, look after them—but there was only so much they could do. No man knew what combat was until he was there. There was no way to predict who could take it, and who couldn't.

"He's a hunter, Sarge. I got him to put three sentences together. He's from West Virginia and has hunted all his life. Like Cajé, just different geography..."

Suddenly, there was the sound of small arms fire at the edge of the woods near one of their outposts. Everyone grabbed helmets and weapons. The poker game ended instantly with men grabbing their gear and then the paper which they crammed back in their pockets as they dived for cover. Saunders looked up to see Littlejohn and Éliane running out of the barn. The big private dragged the woman over to Cajé.

"Cajé, how do you say 'cellar'?"

"Le collier. Allez dans votre collier, mademoiselle. Dépêchez vous!"

She started to protest, but saw the grim expressions on their faces. She raced off to her house, looking back only once. Littlejohn moved to the spot indicated by his squad leader. They positioned themselves on both sides of the road, in the foxholes and behind the barricades they had constructed on the first day. One of the sentries caught Saunders' eye and signaled that it was only a squad with no armored vehicles, but they had a machine gun.

"Murray," hollered Sarge, "Get the lieutenant on the handy talky. Tell him what we're facing, and tell him I think it's just a probe."

The young soldier complied. There were at least eight Germans, hiding in the trees across the road, the machine gun set up in the middle. Saunders put half the squad, including Cajé, Littlejohn, Digby and Collins on the right, closest to the wood. "Watch for flanking movements," he told Cajé.

He put Kirby and the rest on the left; they were dug in behind the logs. They had figured they would cut them up for firewood before they left. They probably wouldn't have the chance now.

The Germans did indeed try to cut across on their left. Cajé took out the first two. The third was pinned down behind a rock by Digby who carefully fired on the right and left sides, chipping off pieces of stone. He established a rhythm then changed it quickly and killed the enemy soldier when he moved out a little too far.

Two Germans on the other side tried to make their way up along a depression that ran along the road. Kirby sprayed bullets at a couple heads that rose a little too high. If the Krauts weren't dead, they had retreated back to the woods.

During the flanking attempts, two more came slowly up the middle under covering fire from the machine gun. However, once they were close, both ends of the squad's line had decent shots at their attackers. Collins, unfortunately, stretched up too high when tossing a grenade and was hit. Doc worked his way over to him quickly and tried to staunch the flow of blood.

"They hit an artery, Sarge. I'll do what I can. I think I can clamp it off, but he's gotta see a doctor right away."

"Murray, call Hanley and tell them we'll need a jeep for some wounded."

"Yes, Sarge."

Saunders thought quickly. There were only about four Krauts left. He didn't want any to get back to their company.

"Sergeant!" yelled Murray. "The lieutenant says they're sending up the rest of the company. We're going to move up to reinforce Love Company. He says we gotta knock out the machine gun."

"What about Collins?"

"A jeep is on its way."

Saunders caught Digby's eye. He signaled to the young man to go with Cajé to the trees higher on the hill, then circle around to attack the Krauts from behind. The rest of the squad would keep them busy. He watched the two hunters slide into the woods. The squad kept up a relentless fire.

Cajé and Digby slithered through the trees. They sensed each other and moved with silent coordination. Early on, the two had recognized each other, sensing their mutual skills and ruthlessness.

They went easily, gliding from shadow to shadow, in a large arc. They used the sounds of the firefight to orient themselves.

Suddenly, in the distance, there were the sounds of Sherman tanks, deuce and a halves, and the tread of advancing foot soldiers. The company was moving up. The push had begun. The Americans intensified their fire. They needed to end things soon.

Caje and Digby crept up on the machine gun, and spotted a lone German soldier watching the rear. Caje rustled a branch to attract his attention, and Digby slipped up behind him and cut his throat. He held the dying man tightly to prevent his thrashing about and alerting his compatriots. A grenade silenced the machine gun, but a survivor ran off into the woods.

"Caje! Get him! We can't let him get back!" shouted Saunders.

Caje and Digby took off after the fleeing man like hounds on a fresh scent. The hunters were swift and relentless, leaping fallen trees and dodging branches. Their prey stumbled and ran almost blindly. He left the forest for the woody strip along the road. A glance passed between the two Americans, and Digby continued on the German's heels while Caje cut to the left and ran along the road, outpacing them both. When the Kraut burst out of a thicket, Caje tackled him. The desperate man pulled a knife, but Caje pinned the arm with his left hand and smashed his right forearm into the man's throat. With a look of surprise, the German dropped the knife which the American picked up and plunged up under his ribs.

"He was already dying, you didn't have to cut him," observed the West Virginian.

"Drowning in your own blood for a couple minutes is a bad way to go. He didn't need to suffer."

Digby nodded. "Caje, have you killed someone you wanted to hurt? Someone you were glad to kill?"

"Not yet. There've been a couple I wanted to, but so far, each time, someone else beat me to it."

"I'm good at this, but I take no pleasure from it, at least not yet."

"Hang onto that."

They looked at each other, aware of the excitement of the hunt juxtaposed with its grim finale.

By the time they had returned to the squad, the company had arrived, and they were loading Collins onto the jeep for the ride back to the aid station.

"He gonna make it, Doc?" asked Kirby.

"Good chance of it."

"All right men, saddle up. We're marching up to reinforce Love Company." Saunders mobilized his squad. The men moved quickly, grabbing packs and weapons even before he finished speaking.

Littlejohn worked his way up to his sergeant. "Sarge, can I go check on her, make sure she's all right? Let her know we're leaving?"

Saunders looked at him and said plainly, "We're taking off now, Littlejohn."

"Please, Sarge, I have to see her and say goodbye. I'll catch up. I can make time when I have to."

The other men focused pointedly on assembling their gear and filling their packs.

Saunders gave a quick nod. "Make it fast," he called to the private's back, "We won't wait."

"Caje, how do you say 'I'll come back'?" yelled Littlejohn.

"*Je reviendrai*," answered the Cajun. He watched the farmer run through the yards and into the house. He shook his head at the young woman's imminent pain.



For the moment, it wasn't raining. A spring wind blew sharp and cold through the town. The jeep pulled up to the CP, and the driver hollered, "Mail call!"

Every soldier within fifty yards poured out of their below ground billets, braving the chill with eagerness and hope. The driver exchanged bags with Brockmeyer, Hanley's clerk, and took off for his next stop, First Platoon on the other side of town. Brockmeyer started calling out names. There were cheers and good natured comments as men gratefully received their letters and packages. It had been three weeks since their last delivery.

Within minutes, soldiers had retreated back into their warm shelters, tearing open the envelopes and parcels. They hastily scanned the pages for the most important news. The homesick would reread them again and again, savoring every word, every crumb of home. Food would be shared, eaten quickly by the lucky man's buddies. Recipients would display and discuss other gifts for weeks.

Each man in First squad received something, although several letters were quietly sent back. Littlejohn received the biggest stack. Two packages came for Kirby, his birthday having occurred three and a half weeks earlier. Cajé had only one letter, but it was a long one from his sister, full of family news. Saunders had two letters, one from home and one from a field hospital. This one had been hand carried by ambulance drivers and dropped into the regular mail bag at a previous village.

As the men settled in their cellar, Cajé called out, "Who's got letters from Dr. Jeanne?"

Sarge and Doc raised their hands.

"We can read them later, after we've read the stuff from home, okay?" asked Doc.

"Sounds good," said Kirby, already deep in the communiqué from his mother.

Saunders opened the anonymous letter first. The sergeant found two letters in the envelope. One was a chatty description of events at the hospital meant for the ears of the squad. The second page was personal and intimate, meant only for his eyes. He settled in to read it, shutting out the sounds around him.

Littlejohn flipped through his letters and froze when he encountered the last two. The return addresses were from "Mlle É. Fleury, La Croix Blanche." He tore them open with anticipation, but his face fell when he saw pages written in French. He looked over at Cajé who was immersed in his sister's letter. "Cajé?"

The dark haired scout looked up, intrigued by the odd tone in Littlejohn's voice.

"When you get a chance, I've got a couple letters that need translating."

Something about the diffident way he spoke prompted Cajé to fold up his letter and move over next to the other man. "Let me see 'em, Littlejohn." He received the pages and looked them over. He realized who the sender was and his face brightened. "Do you want me to write them out in English? Or should I just read and translate out loud?"

Littlejohn looked at the other men, engrossed in their own personal news. He spoke quietly, "Could you translate them out loud? But keep it down, okay?"

Cajé nodded and started with the oldest letter:

My dearest Littlejohn, I hope this finds you safe and well. The garden thrives, and the soldiers who pass have left me and the animals alone. I miss you, and I think about you every day. The peonies are growing well this spring, and should bloom in May.

I hope that you found someone to translate this for you, someone you can trust. If it is our friend, Cajé, I send my regards to him.

Cajé smiled and went on.

I write because I must know something right away. You said you would come back. I need to know if you spoke truthfully, or if it was something a soldier says to ease the pain of his departure

"... could be 'leaving'..."

Please let me know right away. There is little time, and I have to make important decisions. René DuBois, who owns the farm next to mine, wants to marry me. If you are sure that you will come back, then I will wait for you with pride until the war ends. If you do not expect,

"She could mean 'hope'..."

'hope to come back, I will understand and cherish my memory of you and the days we...'

"Uh, passed? No, 'spent together.'"

Then there followed a detailed description of animals and crops which Cajé hurried through. When he finished, the two men looked at each other soberly.

"When was it sent, Cajé?"

He flipped the page over and looked. "A little over a month after we left."

"Cajé, she sounds worried. Is that just the way you translated it? Does it sound that way in French?"

The scout took a deep breath and wished he could say something reassuring. "It sounds the same in the original, Littlejohn. Something is wrong."

"What do you think it means?"

"I'm afraid to guess."

"You think she's pregnant?"

Cajé was relieved that Littlejohn said it first. "Sounds like it to me, Littlejohn."

There was a long silence. Then, "They give emergency leave for that, don't they? They'll let me go back and marry her, wouldn't they?"

"I expect so. You can't be the first." He looked thoughtfully at Littlejohn. "Would you marry her if she weren't?"

"I'd wait until the war's over, but, yeah, I would. I wrote to her, and told her how I felt, but I guess she didn't get the letters."

"You'll have to see the lieutenant about it."

Littlejohn started to get up.

"Wait, Littlejohn, the other letter." Cajé shuffled through the pages. "Ah, here's the first page.

Dear Littlejohn, my dearest, my love, It was so long since I wrote, and I heard nothing. My happiness was great when your letter finally arrived, I knew you lived still!"

"That had an exclamation point, Littlejohn."

My confessor translated it for me. He will keep my secret.

Cajé looked up and explained, "If you tell a priest something in confession, he cannot tell anyone." Cajé looked over the next paragraph and continued.

My darling,

"Or dearest"

My best loved,

"Beloved?..."

My strong, great soldier, I know the good God,'

"Sounds better in English as good Lord"

...will watch over you. I will be content forever with that knowledge. I am filled with joy to know that you love me, and that you would have come back to marry me."

Cajé went back over the sentence to check the tense. He had read it correctly. He looked at Littlejohn. The gentle man said nothing, but he mirrored Cajé's worry. The scout looked over the rest of the letter. When he finally looked up, his expression was anguished. "I'm sorry, Littlejohn, I'm really sorry."

"Just read it, Cajé."

"Okay,

If you please, I beg you, find the strength and love to forgive my lack of faith. Forgive me for being weak and afraid. I did not have enough trust in you or in God.

I was so frightened that I could not wait, my dear. I hope that you can understand, that you can be sympathetic to my situation. You told me that you come from a small country town. You must know how things are—everyone knows everyone's affairs.

"Um, business is better."

So I accepted René's offer.

"er, proposal."

'We were married in the church three days before your first letter arrived. Cajé can tell you what that means.'

"It means she can't get a divorce, Littlejohn. She can't do anything without everyone knowing all about it. The Pope himself would have to annul the marriage."

Littlejohn nodded. He seemed to sag and shrink as her letters and Cajé's words worked their way through his mind. "Finish the letter, Cajé."

Cajé can tell you what that means. Believe me that you will live in my heart. I will pray for you every day for as long as I live. It is my fault that we will not be together. It is my cowardice that has made the path we must...

"travel, no, follow,"

...must follow.

"Please have no fear for me. I will be well; I will have a good life. René is an honorable and generous man and I am fond of him. He has loved me since we were children. He knows about you. I would not deceive him. He promises to love our child as his own. That is our child, Littlejohn, yours and mine.'

"We were right about the first letter. She was desperate...uh, let's see,"

That is the reason that I did not wait very long. He has told his family that he is the father, so there is little shame as everyone expected that we would marry some day. The baby will not suffer.

"The baby is..."

"Uh, *attendu*...what's the word? Awaited?"

...the baby is due in the beginning of April. I am not worried about...

"...l'accouchement....um, lying in or delivery..."

'...the delivery. My doctor expects no complications. The women in my family have the bones for motherhood.

It breaks my heart to beg you to write me no longer. I have a great longing to read your words and to know that the father of my child goes well, but I do not wish to humiliate René. The sooner we become a family, the better our lives will be.

My Littlejohn, you are so kind, so passionate, so beautiful that I shall love you always. When the peonies bloom each year, I shall think of you. You are my heart's center, my gentle lover; please remember me with love and with affection, your--

"This is in English, Littlejohn."

--Beautiful Farmer, Éliane.'

That's it." Cajé could hardly bear to look at the mournful face.

There was a long silence. Littlejohn sat silently, working his jaw, his huge hands moved restlessly. Suddenly, he stood and bellowed, "Godammit to Hell!" and, threw his helmet across the room.

He never cursed and rarely lost his temper. Littlejohn walked across the room, acutely aware of his stunned squad mates. He picked up his dented helmet and returned to his seat. He leaned his head back against the wall, and closed his eyes, ignoring their open mouthed stares. Eventually, the others uneasily went back to their mail, trying to be invisible.

After several minutes, the large blue eyes opened, and he ground out through clenched teeth, "The fucking, stupid mail! Shit! I'm going to be a father, and I'll never even see the kid." He closed his eyes again and shook his head, as if fighting to free himself from the cruel turn of events. He struggled against overwhelming frustration and rage to maintain his composure, breathing carefully to keep tears at bay.

Cagé surreptitiously got out his sister's letter, trying to give Littlejohn some time. He just finished the letter when Littlejohn sighed deeply with a long, shaky exhalation.

"Cagé, I guess it's too late now. There's no use crying over spilt milk." The image was more painful than he'd meant it to be. There was another long pause. "I can't blame her. What else could she do? She was all alone and so young. She's only eighteen."

Cagé said nothing, but waited sympathetically.

The big man said helplessly, "What can I do, now? I want to help. I want to do something. I want her to know I'm all right. I want her to know that I understand. I want her to have some peace of mind about it. I wish I could tell her I'll always love her, too."

"She doesn't want you to write, Littlejohn. It's a small town. The postmaster would wonder. Her husband might not take it well."

"I know exactly what she's talking about. In our town, between Mrs. Grantham at the post office and Mrs. Treadwell at the telephone exchange, there aren't many secrets."

The two sat and thought.

Doc came over and squatted next to them. "Uh, excuse me, Littlejohn, but I couldn't help overhearing—"

"Couldn't help overhearing, Doc?" exclaimed Kirby, "If you'd stretched your ears any more you'd look like Mickey Mouse himself!"

"Speak for yourself, Minnie," said Doc darkly.

"It's okay, I know this isn't the best kept secret," acknowledged Littlejohn.

Doc continued, "Anyway, as I was saying before I was interrupted." He glared at the BAR man. "I've got an idea. What if we send her a letter from the squad saying we heard of her marriage and her baby, and wanted to send our best wishes? We could address it to the married couple. No one could be offended by that, could they, Cagé?"

The dark Cajun pulled on a newly lit cigarette and exhaled a cloud. "That should work, Doc. We'd have to word it very carefully. If we all sign it, and it goes to them both, it could ease her mind without insulting her husband."

"Could we send some money, Cagé?" asked Littlejohn. "As a wedding present? Or a baby present? Unless we think of something useful we could send, like a jeep or a deuce and a half...." He tried to think of a suitable item they could actually get their hands on while the other men laughed at the concept.

"We could give them enough to buy a cow, Littlejohn, or something for the farm. We could explain that's what we'd like them to spend the money on."

"How much does a cow cost?" asked Kirby.

"I don't know," said Cajé. "Hey, I'll be back in a few minutes. I'll ask the priest at the church. He would know." Cajé took the cellar stairs two at a time.

Doc pulled out a piece of paper. "Let's start writing the letter. Cajé can rewrite it when he gets back. "

Dear Monsieur and Madame—

"What was the name, Littlejohn?"

"DuBois, René DuBois."

—DuBois, We hope that you remember us. Last summer, we enjoyed your kind hospitality and your cooking, especially the chicken, the cheese and the bread.

Does that sound right?"

The other men nodded. The medic continued to read aloud as he wrote.

We learned of your marriage and the imminent arrival of your first child, and we wanted to show our appreciation for your generosity. Please accept our congratulations for your good fortune and our best wishes for your future happiness. We would like to get you a new cow for your herd to replace the one that was killed. We are sending money because a heifer would not fit in the envelope.

That's a little farmer humor, eh, Littlejohn?" Doc smiled, his eyes twinkling.

The corners of Littlejohn's mouth actually turned upwards slightly.

May God continue to bless your family and farms. You will remain in our thoughts. With brotherly affection, your squad...

"And then we all sign, alphabetically so no one stands out." Doc reread it. "Do you think the 'brotherly' is too much?"

"We can ask Cajé," said Littlejohn, "But I like it."

Again, they all nodded, and then looked up as Cajé came down the stairs.

"Two hundred dollars should get them the finest cow available."

While the men gave money to Doc, Cajé read over the letter. "What's a heifer, Doc?"

"A virgin cow."

"Oh, I don't know that word." Cajé dug into his pack, looking for his dictionary. It wasn't there. "Sarge? You got my dictionary?"

Saunders looked up from a letter he was writing, a small brown book balanced on his knee. He had diligently stayed focused on his personal correspondence. His beloved spoke French, so he tried to use some in every letter. "Yeah, it's right here." He tossed it over to Cajé. "What's going on?"

Doc explained briefly, and the sergeant pulled some money out of his wallet.

Cajé muttered as he flipped the dictionary's pages. "Let's see, 'heed, heel, hefty...' Ah here it is, 'génisse,' Ah! La génisse...it's feminine."

"Of course, it's feminine," said Saunders, "It's a cow."

"Yeah, I knew that," said Cajé sheepishly. He finished writing out the letter.

"Jeez, Cajé, you've got great penmanship," marveled Kirby. "How come you write with your right hand? I thought you were a lefty."

"Both the handwriting and the hand choice are courtesy of the nuns at St. Clare's parochial school. We got our hands smacked with a ruler if we didn't do it right, and I mean right."

The men laughed as they lined up to sign. "Do we have enough for a cow, Doc?" asked Littlejohn, having put in three quarters of the money.

"And then some, Littlejohn. It'll be a good wedding and Christening present."

"Thanks, I really appreciate this."

"Sure thing, Littlejohn, she's a sweet kid," mumbled Kirby.

Cajé addressed the envelope with a flourish. The entire squad marched over to the CP to give the letter to Brockmeyer.

"What is this?" asked Hanley.

"We're sending a wedding present to the girl in Normandy," announced Doc.

Hanley looked sharply at Littlejohn and the rest of the squad, none of whom sported anything except the blandest of faces.

"How long before she gets it, Brockmeyer?" asked Kirby.

"Not long, the mail's been working pretty well lately."

Their business concluded, the men thanked Brockmeyer, saluted the lieutenant, and headed out, while Saunders stayed behind.

"There's a story in that envelope, isn't there?" asked Hanley.

His best noncom took off his helmet and vigorously scratched his scalp. "Yeah, but you've already guessed what it is. You remember the girl at the farm where Littlejohn plowed the field?"

"I remember."

"Well, she had to get married."

"Had to?"

Saunders nodded.

"Littlejohn's?"

Again, there was a nod. "By the time he found out, she'd married the boy next door."

"Too bad."

"Yeah, but it coulda been worse. He's taking it okay."

"Keep an eye on him. For a big, farm boy, he's, uh, deep."

"I know, lieutenant, I know." He looked out the window at the departing quartet. "We'll all look out for him."



It was early July, 1970. This year the squad families were doing the Fourth at Littlejohn's. A group of older children clustered around a tractor listening raptly to the farmer's opening lecture on driving tractors. By the end of the week, after more instruction and a lot of practice, each one would be signed off on the John Deere. While none of the children at the farm was actually his, a group of adoring youngsters always trailed after him. Littlejohn was by far the most popular of the "uncles." His wife, Dolores, and he poured torrents of love onto the offspring of their friends.

Toddlers and babies tumbled about in a shaded play area, watched by a small group of parents. "How long are you on duty, Yvette?" asked a tall, brown haired, fifty-something woman of the shorter, pixyish blonde.

She laughed, "Holly will relieve me any minute, but who's counting? I'm having a great time. It's easier than managing the teenagers."

"I'd trade teens for rug rats any day." Both women laughed.

"What's so funny?" Cajé came up and kissed his pretty, second wife on the neck.

The blonde twisted her head to deposit a smack on his mouth. "Just mother talk, *mon cher*."

<"Do I hear a request for another baby, lover? I'd love to give you that present.">

<"My friend, shhhhh, there are bilingual children present."> Jeanne, admonished the couple.

"Don't be such a Puritan, Jeanne. Your husband might not like it," warned Yvette.

"My husband would never believe it."

"Believe what?" asked the former sergeant.

"Nothin', Sarge. We're just talking about having more kids."

Saunders reacted with mock horror, <"Ah, my love, please tell me that diapers and midnight feedings are not in our future.">

<"*Mais non, mon cher, je t'assure*. Only with grandchildren.">

He grinned with mock relief. His vasectomy twenty years earlier and his wife's age rendered the entire issue moot. Cajé and Yvette, on the other hand, were somewhat serious. The Louisianan pulled his young wife to him. <"We'll talk later, yes?">

She nodded.

The four of them looked around at the clumps of happy people. In the nearby field, serious, multigenerational baseball was in progress. Some junior high school aged girls sat, giggling and watching a group of slightly older boys. A group of teens and young adults played guitars, singing folk songs and current popular tunes. Another mixed age group clustered around Doc, listening to one of his tall tales. Twenty-somethings engaged in a civil, if intense, political discussion. The clang of horseshoes added a bell like background to the activities. The middle aged "elders" circulated, making sure that work was shared, little ones supervised and older ones discreetly chaperoned.

A tall, dark haired, one armed man strolled up to the four. "Whew! I need something wet and cold. I've been watching teenagers flirt, and they've raised the air temperature a good ten degrees."

"Who's keeping an eye on them, now?" asked Cajé.

"Kirby."

"Thanks, Gil." The tone was distinctly sarcastic.

"He'll do fine. If anyone can anticipate the moves of the horny, adolescent male, it's him."

The five of them laughed. The squad and the squad wives looked up at the sound of a car coming up the driveway.

"Anyone recognize the car?" asked Saunders.

The others shook their heads.

"I'll get Littlejohn," said Jeanne. Saunders, Hanley, Yvette, and Cajé ambled towards the driveway turn around in the front yard. About a dozen cars of various types were lined up neatly on the grass. The nondescript sedan sent up a cloud of dust as it worked its way towards the house. It pulled in at the end of the line, and a young man got out. The four looked at each other with raised eyebrows. None recognized him. He was very tall, a little taller than Hanley, and looked about thirty. He had a strong, plain face with honey blond hair.

The stranger stood uncertainly, contemplating the organized chaos of the squad reunion. He made a move as if to get back into the car, but stopped and stood unmoving as the four amiable friends approached him. He took a deep breath, closed the door firmly, and determinedly walked towards the welcoming committee.

He smiled, and said, "Allô! I look for George Littlejohn." His voice was heavily accented.

The solid blond man said, "*Bonjour, je m'appelle Chip Saunders. Littlejohn vient.*" The accent was unmistakably American, but comprehensible.

The stranger smiled broadly, <"One speaks French here?">

The thin, dark haired, bearded man spoke with an impeccably Gallic accent, <"Yes, almost everyone here speaks both French and English. How can we help you? Are you selling something? If so, this is not a good time for business, but you are welcome to join the picnic.">

The newcomer stiffened, looking over Cajé's shoulder. He barely moved when the others turned to see Littlejohn striding towards the group, accompanied by Jeanne.

Yvette spoke quickly to the stranger, <"Littlejohn's French is not that good. You'd do better in English ">

Littlejohn looked offended, <"It has improved. One must speak the language to stay ahead of the little ones.">

There was general laughter, and then the group quieted with the transfixed look on the new arrival's face. The two tall men examined each other.

"Hi, I'm Littlejohn. Welcome to my home. What can I do for you?"

"Allô, I am Jean Petit DuBois."

The Sarge and Cajé looked at each other incredulously. The women and Hanley remained oblivious. By this time, most of the other squad members had arrived.

"What's up?" asked Kirby.

"This is Jean Petit DuBois," answered Cajé.

"You're kidding!" said Doc.

"*Chhht!*" hissed Saunders.

DuBois stepped up to Littlejohn and extended his hand. He spoke formally, sounding rehearsed, "I am Jean Petit DuBois, son of Éliane DuBois. I believe that you are my father."

There was stunned silence. Littlejohn took an unsteady step towards his son and clasped the large hand in both of his. He pulled Jean closer and embraced him, tears in his eyes. The two men separated still staring at one another.

"Well, who do we have here?" asked a cheery, feminine voice. Dolores Littlejohn, a round, farm wife greeted their newest guest.

Her husband swallowed and said, "Honey, this is Jean DuBois, the son of the woman in Normandy I told you about."

There was a slight hesitation in her step, but she smiled broadly and shook her husband's son's hand. "Why don't we sit down in the shade and have some lemonade? There is a lot of catching up to do."

She led the group to the long picnic table behind the house. Then the other squad wives disappeared to the kitchen to get the drinks and cookies. They set down pitchers, serving plates and glasses in front of the group on the picnic table. There was another table on which they set up a buffet of mid-afternoon snacks for the other revelers. The ball players came, drank a large quantity of iced fluids and returned to their game. Others drifted by in small groups at different times.

Meanwhile, the conversation between the new squad kid, his father and his father's friends had begun in earnest, in a mixture of French and English.

"How did you find me?" asked Littlejohn. "I thought your mother wasn't going to tell anyone other than René about my being your father."

"She didn't, but after she died, one night, my father was *ivre*, uh, drunk. He told me he couldn't have loved me more if I had been his because if it weren't for me, she would never have married him. I was shocked and didn't completely understand what he meant until after he died. In his papers, I found a letter from my mother to me in which she explained what happened during the days that you were at the farm." He looked at his biological father. "The peonies you planted still bloom every spring. My younger brother and his family live there."

"Why are you here in the States?"

"I am an agronomist." To the others, who looked politely bewildered, he said, "I specialize in soils. There was a convention in Lincoln, and I presented a paper on flocculants and soil testing accuracy."

"Boy, that explanation didn't help much," complained Kirby.

"He's in an agricultural profession," said Doc. "It runs in the family."

"He looks like Littlejohn," said Hanley.

The others nodded.

"I decided to take some extra time and search for you. I had your name and the name of your town from her letter. I looked you up in the telephone book." His gray eyes looked steadily at Littlejohn's. "My mother named me after you. My *papa* took care not to notice, I think. I never suspected, not once, that he was not my father, but when I found out, I had to see you. At least I had to try." He looked around at the squad kids and grandkids. "How many of these are my brothers and sisters?"

Littlejohn shrugged and answered, "None. My wife, Dolores, and I were never blessed with children. You are the only one I ever had." He stared in wonder. "I have often wondered what became of you. I didn't even know if you were a boy or a girl. I am very glad to meet you." He smiled shyly, "Do you know if your parents got our wedding present?"

Jean grinned, "Yes, they bought two heifers with the money. It was an important part of building up the herd after the war. They were exceptional milk producers, and they also were excellent breeders...I guess you don't want to hear the details of all that."

"I'm a farmer, so of course I do, but," he said, looking at the rest sitting at the table, "Most of them are not interested. Perhaps later...We will talk more."

"How long can you stay?" asked Dolores.

"I must leave for France on Monday."

"Excellent. We'll find room for you with the single men."

"I could not impose."

"Nonsense. You're family."

"I am overwhelmed." His eyes glistened. He paused to gain control. "What should I call you? *Papa* or *mon père*, they belong to another."

"Most adults call me Littlejohn. The children around here call me Uncle Littlejohn. Take your pick."

"Littlejohn, then. I have turned twenty-five."

"I know. You were born in early April?"

"*Oui, le cinquième.*"

Doc gasped, "4-5-45. Now that's an easy date to remember."

Jeanne asked, "<"How many brothers and sisters do you have? Did your mother have many children?">

<"Yes, I have four brothers and three sisters. One is a researcher in milk production. One brother, as I said, lives on the farm. They have a large herd and make the cheeses, butter and *crème fraîche* as our family has for hundreds of years. The rest? One has a restaurant in La Croix Blanche, another breeds cattle, still another teaches, one priest, one nun, one writes and another is a florist. My *maman et papa* did well, *n'est-ce pas?*">

"*Oui, très bien.*"

"Are you married? Do you have any children?" asked Dolores.

"Not yet, I have not met the right woman."

"Perhaps you will meet someone here. There are many about your age."

"Ever the matchmaker, eh, Dolores? You have someone in mind?" asked Cajé.

"Well, I can think of two or three who might suit. Once we're finished here, we'll take him around, make some introductions."

"Yeah," said Saunders. "You never know. Welcome to the family, Jean Petit."

The End