

Once Upon a Time

By Ash, aka Susan M. Ballard



Kirby swore soundly and tossed the butt of his smoke aside, glaring daggers at Cajé as he moved over to sit next to Littlejohn. Much to Kirby's disgust, the big PFC got up from his comfortable spot in the warming spring sun and went to sit next to the Cajun.

"You're a jerk, Kirby, you know that?" Littlejohn said. His tone wasn't accusatory, and the soft-spoken Nebraskan wasn't really pointing fingers. He was just stating fact.

"Yeah, yeah, I know! I know, you don't hafta rub it in," Kirby replied sarcastically. Ever since he'd joined up with King Company and in particular, second platoon, he'd felt like an outsider, but then hell, Kirby had always felt like the fifth wheel.

Littlejohn shook his head. "You don't even try to fit in."

"Why should I?" Kirby shot back. "You just gimme one reason why I aughta try to fit in with this group a losers? Huh?" His dark eyes glittered with pent up anger, his wiry body taugth with unreleased energy. Kirby was a ticking time bomb.

"I'll tell you why, Kirby, if nobody else will." Sergeant Chip Saunders walked into the clearing, obviously the worse for wear, his field jacket ragged and torn, his boots mud-caked, and with dark circles ringing bloodshot eyes. As he took his ease among his men, his shoulders rounded from fatigue, he shivered in the freshening breeze.

"Aw, go on, Sarge, spit it out," Kirby replied rudely.

Saunders ignored the sarcasm. He knew how Private William G. Kirby felt. He knew and he understood. It was his job to understand, but also to correct his second newest replacement's feelings of being a loner.



The sergeant dropped down next to Kirby, sharing a seat on the fallen log. Saunders removed his helmet and ran a hand through his tousled hair before laying the helmet on the ground and turning to face the private.

"There's no room for a loner in war, Kirby. Either you learn to fit in with your fellow soldiers or you'll die. It's that simple. They rely on you to watch their backs, keep 'em covered, get the job done and get it done right. And you rely on them. There can't be any shirkers in a squad, in this squad. We all," Saunders indicated the men clustered around him, "do our share of the dirty work and that will include you, Kirby. Understand?"

The wiry private shrugged. "Just 'cause I didn't volunteer to dig holes for the new latrine, that don't mean..."

Cajé quickly interrupted. "It was your turn, Kirby, your turn, and you try to weasel your way out of it by bullying the new kid, what's his name, Littlejohn?"

"Nelson, Billy Nelson," Littlejohn replied.

"Yeah, you try to bully that Nelson kid into it!" Cajé rose to his feet, his menacing posture not lost on Kirby. "Threatenin' to beat him up! Big man!"

Kirby jumped to his feet, fists clenched, ready. "Mind your own stinkin' business, you damned frog!"

Saunders came between the two men, his solid presence quickly defusing Caje's anger, but not Kirby's as a stream of vividly descriptive expletives were directed at all present.

The sergeant pushed in close to the spouting Kirby, coming inches from grabbing the man by his lapels and shaking the living daylight out of him. "If you're itchin' so much for a fight, private," Saunders said, "there's plenty of Germans out there just waiting for a chance to take you on." The sergeant's voice grew softer, calmer and he backed slightly away. "Show the Krauts what you can do, private. Show *them* what you've got."

#

Caught in a vicious crossfire, Saunders lay flattened to the ground, unable even to rise up enough to return fire, even if he had any more ammo. Company had been ordered to take the high ground at any cost. How many times had the veteran sergeant heard that one? And now he lay, helpless, both Tommy gun and .45 automatic out of ammunition, his men scattered around him in whatever cover they could find in an area already decimated by days of pounding by both Allied and enemy artillery, mortars and small arms. Even huge trees, probably hundreds of years old, felled by the relentless barrage, were left splintered, reduced to kindling and offering no cover, no relief.

Beside him lay Kirby shivering in the wet mud, cold, scared and also out of ammo. But to his credit, the private offered no real complaints over the situation, just the odd muttered curse to which Saunders was quickly becoming accustomed. For a while there, Saunders wondered where Kirby got such a well-rounded vocabulary of truly spectacular swear words. When the sergeant actually got around to asking, Kirby had replied, "Hell, Sarge, I collect 'em! You know how some guys collect like stamps and stuff?" Saunders had nodded. "Well, I collect swear words!" Saunders had stood silent for a moment before breaking into a most unaccustomed laugh. He remembered laughing so hard it actually hurt. Kirby had laughed, too, and that was the beginning of the chink in the private's armor. Progress was made that day, but progress remained slow in the coming. Kirby still had a chip on his shoulder and a fire in his belly. But now, in the middle of a pitched battle, was not the time for Saunders to dwell on that particular problem.

Suddenly, all firing stopped. Saunders cautiously lifted his head for a quick look around. What he saw sickened him. Dead and dying soldiers littered the ground while Germans walked among them, poking and prodding, on the lookout for survivors. Those soldiers still alive were forced to their feet and taken prisoner.

"Ditch your rifle," Saunders ordered. He shoved his Thompson nose first into the deep mud. His pistol followed. "No need for the Krauts to get 'em."

Beside him, Kirby ignored the order. "They ain't takin' me prisoner," he gritted, lifting his bayonet halfway from the scabbard.

Saunders reached over and grabbed Kirby's arm. "Don't be a fool. You'll get yourself killed." The sergeant sighed deeply, "it's over...for now."

Kirby nodded, allowing the bayonet to remain sheathed. "You're right, Sarge."

If Saunders was surprised at how easily the private gave in to his reasoning, he soon found out why. Getting up into a crouch, Kirby bolted to his feet, Saunders too late to pull him back. Thinking quickly, the sergeant got up, his arms raised, "Hey Krauts, over here!" Without waiting for the Germans to acknowledge him, Saunders jogged towards the nearest group,

hoping, praying, their attention focused on him and not Kirby who'd booked it to the nearest meager cover.

The Germans were not thrilled at Saunders' maneuver and naturally began looking around for the reasoning behind his sudden and vocal appearance. When they noticed nothing out of the ordinary, they turned their attentions on the sergeant. A well applied rifle butt to the side of the head instantly put Saunders out of commission.

He woke, bound hand and foot, in what appeared to be a cellar, a large one with hard packed dirt floors, stone walls and dank, foul air. And he was not alone. At least a dozen GIs littered the floor, tied as was he, most silent and still, others whispering among themselves their voices too low to carry. "What the hell is this place?" he murmured, not expecting an answer, but getting one nevertheless.

"We're in the basement of a castle. The Krauts thought I was out when they brought me in. I wasn't." There was a slight pause. "What's your name, buddy?"

Saunders was leery and refrained from answering the question. He didn't know what to make of the man's accent, which he couldn't pinpoint – not southern or New England, not Midwestern either, but then he didn't pretend to be an expert on regional dialects of the U.S. He'd been taken in before by soldiers pretending to be American and who turned out to be Krauts infiltrating the lines. "You, first," Saunders replied.

The soldier laughed, "Me, first? Hell, you might be a Kraut tryin' to get information outta me." Again a moment of silence and the sound of the man shifting on the hard floor and then movement, the motion, what Saunders could actually see in the gloom, snake-like writhing, crude but effective as pretty soon the GI was almost eye-to-eye with Saunders.

It was the sergeant's turn to laugh, though he restrained himself under the circumstances as best he could. The GI, another buck sergeant, was a Negro. "I'm Saunders, 361st," Chip volunteered.

"I'd shake hands, Saunders, but as you can see..." The black sergeant waggled his fingers, his hands, like his counterpart, tied tightly behind his back. "I'm Washington, no relation to George." He smiled. "I'm with the 784th Tank Battalion, straight outta Wyoming to boot camp to here. Just an ole cowboy, heart and soul.

Saunders turned serious. "Since you know where we are, you got any idea why we're here and not in some P.O.W. facility?"

"I know." Washington's smile vanished. "We're here to play a game."

"What kind of game?" Saunders rolled onto his side and forced his body into a seated position.

After a moment of effort, Washington joined him, leaning in close and sharing his knowledge in a confidential whisper. "There's a Kraut officer, some big game hunter type. Been on safari, shot lions, that sort a thing. Seems there's nothin' worth hunting over here so this officer, he made up his own game, his own safari. This here colonel..." Washington paused, swallowing hard. "This here colonel hunts men."



Saunders shivered. Of all the atrocities he'd seen in this war, and there were plenty, of all the cruel arts perpetrated one man to another, this *game* took the cake. "Like there's not enough killing going on. This colonel's gotta be one blood-thirsty bastard," Saunders replied.

A door burst open, flooding the cellar in bright blinding light, and an order was barked out. "All right you men, on your feet!"

Around him Saunders heard the moans and complaints of the other prisoners as they struggled to obey.

Filing past the armed German guards, Saunders found himself, along with Washington, pulled out of line. The two sergeants stood shoulder to shoulder, watching as their comrades were herded down a long dark corridor. It was the last Saunders would see of the other prisoners. He and Washington exchanged puzzled shrugs; their confusion wouldn't be of the long lasting variety.

Forced to hurry down their own stretch of dimly lit, narrow corridor and up a flight of steep stairs, the sergeants found themselves somewhere inside the castle. Saunders found little energy to be impressed by his surroundings. He'd seen castles in Europe before, had bivouacked in several, finding them to be too much opulence for the time and place – huge piles of cold stone, offering little comfort and certainly no homey atmosphere. This castle proved no different to Saunders. In fact, it offered nothing aside from an eerie feeling of chilly indifference.

The Americans were led into a high-ceiled library that had obviously been turned into a German officer's command post. But instead of the usual photos of "The Fuhrer," the walls were literally covered with trophies, the heads of a seemingly endless array of wild animals, both common and rare while the floors were thickly littered with animal skin rugs.

Saunders felt his stomach lurch. He didn't need Washington leaning over to whisper, "Told you," for him to come to the conclusion that what the Negro sergeant told him in the cellar was not just rumor, but fact.

The Kraut officer, a full colonel, was certainly not what Saunders expected in the way of a big game hunter. Certainly not imposing in appearance, Colonel Strasser was a smallish, bespectacled man, balding and pot-bellied with a voice so soft as to be almost a whisper. Yet when the colonel did speak, his men jumped to do his bidding. *What was it Mom always said? 'You can't judge a book by its cover.'* Saunders wondered why mothers always seemed to be right for Colonel Strasser's looks and manners would ultimately both prove highly deceiving.

Strasser sat behind the massive oak desk, his eyes, large and gray behind thick-lensed spectacles, as he oh so casually appraised the two soldiers who stood before him. He smiled slightly, but there was no warmth in the gesture.

"You come before me today just two non-commissioned officers. You will leave here the chosen ones." Strasser leaned expectantly forward.

"You will be allowed a bath, a good meal and new clothing. You will be given a head start of fifteen minutes. Your deaths will not be meaningless – lost in a war you can not win."

Sweat dampened Saunders' shirt collar, itching his scalp and running down his back. This couldn't possibly end well. Beside him, Washington nervously shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"You're gonna hunt us down, like animals." Saunders said.

Strasser shrugged and his smile broadened. "But sergeant, you *are* animals." Swiveling around in his chair, the colonel reached behind him and brought out a bolt action rifle.

Saunders knew nothing of sporting weapons, but even he could tell the rifle was a fine example of its kind. The stock glowed with a hand-rubbed finish and when Strasser pulled back the bolt, it slid soundlessly into place. Saunders felt the hair on the back of his neck rise.

“You will be immortalized, Sergeant...sergeants,” Strasser corrected. Handing the rifle off to one of his minions, the colonel unlocked the bottom drawer of the desk and removed a flat wooden case. He laid it upon the desk top where he proceeded to unlock it. He beckoned the sergeants near, but not too near.

Within the velvet lined case were mounted at least a dozen dog tags.

“Originally, I preferred to hunt only officers, but then I discovered something which made me change my mind. It seems officers, perhaps due to their higher educations, or perhaps their more pampered childhoods, lacked the non-commissioned officer’s devious thought processes, their more advanced instincts for survival. And I also found that the Negro sergeant appears to have the most basic survival instincts of all. Perhaps that is due to his not so distant past as a savage.”

Beside Saunders, Washington tensed at the slur, but remained silent as if not to give the Kraut the satisfaction of seeing he’d struck a nerve. Saunders felt his respect for the black non-com rise accordingly. When Washington caught his eye, Saunders nodded his approval.

Saunders turned his attention to the colonel, eyeing the man up and down with contempt while not disguising the fact he was doing so. Even the sergeant’s posture took on a relaxed and anything but respectful stance. Saunders slouched, all his weight on one foot, shoulders hunched. He resembled an insolent punk hanging out on a slummy city street corner. All he lacked was a half-smoked cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

“And what are you gonna do if we decide not to play this *game* of yours?”

If Colonel Strasser was taken aback by Saunders question, it wasn’t visible on his face or in his demeanor. The officer actually chuckled before answering. “Why, I’ll have one of my men kill you outright.”

It was Saunders turn to chuckle. “That’s against the Geneva Convention. We’re prisoners of war.”

Strasser moved his eyes, just his eyes, and one of the guards in the room walked briskly to the door of the library, opened it and prodded a very frightened and extremely young, GI, into the room. Strasser opened the door of his desk and removed a Walther pistol. Before Saunders or Washington could protest the action, the Kraut colonel aimed the weapon and fired a bullet into the brain of the youthful American private. The body fell with a sickening thud. Strasser glanced from the body at his feet, blood already flowing precariously close to one of the colonel’s prized animal rugs, to Saunders, a smug grin on the evil face. “This prisoner attempted escape. I was in my rights to prevent that action.”

Saunders’ cocky behavior had gotten him nowhere. In fact, it resulted in a soldier losing his life. He felt sick, sick and defeated. He stared down at the dead soldier, at the boy’s face, eyes wide, mouth slack, freckles vivid against the bloodless complexion. The colonel’s gloating fell on deaf ears as Saunders stood still and uncomprehending. As he and Washington were herded from the office, the Negro sergeant had to take Saunders by the arm and lead him down one meandering corridor after another until they reached their destination, just another nondescript room in the castle. However, this one had a bathroom, with a large tub, towels and a change of clothing for each man.

Saunders sat, straight-backed, staring at the wall before him, waiting his turn for the bathroom under heavy guard. He didn’t want to play Colonel Strasser’s game, but he had no

choice. Dying a meaningless death, a death afforded the young soldier earlier, would accomplish nothing aside from placing a temporary damper on the colonel's pleasurable activity. Another GI would be procured and Strasser's game would go on. Saunders would not die without a fight. He'd play the colonel's game, but the outcome would not be the one Strasser expected.

He laid any feelings of guilt to rest. His actions had not caused the death of the young soldier. The burden of guilt rested on Strasser alone. Saunders put aside his feelings of helplessness and indeed grief while strengthening his resolve. Later, he would grieve later, when this hellish situation had been resolved. He would live, and if he had anything to do with it so would Sergeant Washington. He couldn't promise the same for Colonel Strasser.



A hot bath, clean clothes and a decent meal did much for Saunders. His thoughts cleared and he knew without a doubt the path he must follow. When he and Sergeant Washington were blindfolded and bound, led out of the castle and shoved, head long, into the back of a truck, his mind raced, working out scenario after scenario, working every possible angle. As his plans solidified, Saunders chuckled to himself.

"Um, Saunders, you all right?" Washington's voice held more than a hint of concern. After all, he'd seen how the young soldier's death had affected his fellow sergeant.

A rough stretch of road temporarily kept Saunders from replying, the bumping and jolting not only noisy, but painful as the two GIs banged up against the inside of the truck, each other, and the legs of their Kraut watchdogs seated within.

"Yeah," Saunders answered in a whisper. Then, "Yeah, I'm all right," he confirmed, his voice stronger, his tone full of conviction. A sharp kick to the ribs dissuaded Saunders from any further attempts at communicating with Washington and soon the truck ground to a shuddering halt. Obviously, their destination had been reached.

The sun was high in the sky when the two American sergeants were brought before Colonel Strasser. With blindfolds removed, the GIs blinked painfully in the bright white light, Saunders' hope for rain or at least an overcast day dashed. How much easier to elude capture, or the most probable end, death, with at least clouds to couch your escape?

I'll make do with what I've got, Saunders thought as he stood before the imperious colonel. Strasser sat before a tent sipping a cup of coffee, his orderly standing just back and to the left of the officer, at strict attention. Fragrant steam rose from the delicate china cup and Saunders thought how he hoped the Nazi bastard choked on the stuff. But no such luck.

Strasser handed the cup off to his orderly, directing his attention to the Americans. "The rules of the game are simple," he said, blotting his lips off against a linen napkin. "You two have a fifteen minute head start."

Saunders and Washington exchanged glances. "What about our hands?" Washington asked, turning slightly to show the colonel that his wrists remained tightly bound with cord, as were Saunders.

"Your hands remain bound." Strasser glanced at his gold wrist watch. "Your time starts now."

Saunders took off, his loping gait designed to put as much distance as possible between him and the colonel. He knew affecting a dead run would accomplish nothing. He'd be exhausted in no time. Washington had no trouble keeping up with him, both sergeants extremely fit and used to covering a lot of ground in a little time. They headed, unerringly, to the woods.

Since Saunders figured the colonel would cut him and Washington no slack he'd begun working at freeing his hands while still in the truck. The thin cord afforded him few breaks and in no time his abraded wrists were slick with blood.

The two sergeants plunged into the forest, moving deeper into the protective canopy of trees. Saunders stopped and sank to the ground, the surprised Washington dropping down beside him.

"What the hell you doin', Saunders?" the non-com wheezed. "We've gotta make time!"

Sweat beaded Saunders' forehead as he concentrated on his task. With one final valiant effort he slipped free of his bonds. Washington needed no prompting to turn his back on Saunders so the sergeant could work on freeing him as well. Within seconds, Washington, too, was loose. The sergeants were quick to their feet and off.

Soon the sounds of pursuit reached Saunders' ears. Where he and Washington entered the woods, so too the Germans entered, and by the noise the Krauts made no effort to muffle, there were a lot of them. Saunders remembered something he'd once read, probably in *National Geographic* magazine, and this memory brought him no joy. In India, men, aptly named beaters, pounded the brush to drive game, tigers or such, *toward* the waiting hunters.

"Stop." Saunders grabbed Washington by the shoulder and pulled him to the ground. "We're headed in the wrong direction," he gasped, taking a moment to get a lung full of air before continuing. "They want us to run this way...*toward* Strasser. The bastard's probably already waiting for us. We gotta go back." Saunders jerked a thumb in the direction from which they'd come and from which the sounds of pursuit grew ever closer.

Sergeant Washington looked skeptical. A frown wrinkled the otherwise smooth forehead. "You sure about this?"

Saunders thought before answering, his tone rock solid, his conviction less so, although he wouldn't allow Washington to tune in on it. "I'm sure."

The GIs circled back the way they'd come, outflanking Strasser's *beaters* and exiting the woods the way they'd entered.

Before them, seated on a magnificent sorrel stallion that stamped one foot in anticipation of action, was Colonel Strasser, his fine rifle resting across one arm, its muzzle pointed in the Americans' general direction. "Something told me you were not stupid enough to fall for my little ploy; a ploy which I might add has worked brilliantly in the past. Somehow, Sergeant Saunders," Strasser nodded toward the non-com, "and you, Sergeant Washington," another nod, "I knew you would prove smarter prey than most. However, it appears I outsmarted the both of you." The officer sighed. "It would have been nice had you been just a bit more of a challenge."

Saunders sank to the ground. This scenario was not entirely unexpected. Washington dropped down beside him.

"What now?" Washington whispered.

Saunders shrugged. "We take him."

Washington smiled even as the colonel raised his rifle into firing position.

Suddenly, Strasser's horse sidestepped, doing a bit of fancy dancing and requiring the colonel to shift his attention from his prey to his mount, the horse drawing closer and closer to the soldiers. Washington took immediate action with Saunders following the other man's lead.

Washington threw up his hands, yelling as he raced toward the mounted Strasser while wildly waving his arms. Saunders mimicked the actions. The stallion panicked, throwing the off-balance colonel hard to the ground, his fancy rifle flying from his hands.

Saunders threw himself onto Strasser as the colonel sought to draw his pistol from the holster. A solid right to the officer's jaw put an end to the struggles, permanently. The sergeant rolled the officer over onto his belly and found the reason his single blow had such devastating effect. The back of Strasser's skull had been caved in. Only feet away, in a jumble of exposed rock, the colonel's blood colored several of the stones deep crimson.

Saunders patted down the dead man's pockets hoping to find something of strategic value, but came up empty. He rocked back, the colonel's Walther pistol in his grasp. At the frightened horse's head stood Sergeant Washington, reins in hand and cooing softly to the distraught animal. The sergeants exchanged relieved expressions.

"Nice work, cowboy," Saunders acknowledged.

Washington tilted his head toward the dead officer. "I could say the same."

"Yeah, well, I can't take credit for that, but what's done is done. Time to beat a hasty retreat," Saunders got to his feet.

After smashing the colonel's fancy rifle to a battered pulp against the nearest tree, Saunders stepped up behind Washington on the spirited stallion's back.

"Any idea where our lines might be?" Washington asked as he got the big horse into an easy lope.

Saunders took a fast look around attempting to judge their position. "North, due north," he replied, "but can't this horse go any faster? The colonel's men gotta realize something's wrong..."

Before Saunders could finish the sentence, Washington kicked the sorrel into a run. It was all the city-bred Saunders could do to hold on for all he was worth. "Damn cowboy" he swore against Washington's back, but there was a smile in his voice that the Wyoming cowboy couldn't help but notice.

#

Back at his own lines after a lengthy debriefing, Saunders was shocked at the changes that had occurred in his relatively short absence. Not only was Kirby sitting next to Caje, the two were sharing something tasty out of an open box on Kirby's lap, and Caje was laughing.

Saunders scratched his head. "Maybe I've been gone longer than I thought."

"Hey, Sarge is back!" A chorus of greetings followed and Saunders was soon engulfed by his men, most of whom he thought never to see again, in this world. He was confused, especially about Kirby since when he'd seen the private last, Kirby was high-tailing it to deep cover, seemingly without a thought to those left behind.

"What happened to ya, Sarge? Where you been, huh? Where you captured? How'd you escape?"

Saunders sighed deeply, found a place to take a load off and bummed a cigarette off Cajé. Lighting the smoke, he inhaled deeply. "You first," He pointed at Kirby.

"Aw, Sarge...why me first?" Kirby whined and for a minute Saunders figured things in second platoon, King Company, hadn't really changed at all. Kirby hung his head, and if Saunders wasn't mistaken, the gesture seemed like one of embarrassment. Okay, so maybe things *had* changed.

"Kirby don't wanna talk because he's a hero, Sarge. He just don't wanna talk about it no more is all," Cajé replied, slinging an arm about Kirby's thin shoulders.

Saunders sat back, the cigarette dangling precariously from his bottom lip, his expression one of deep shock. "Kirby...a hero?"

"Yeah," Littlejohn replied. "He made it all the way back to our lines. Brought reinforcements. Kirby saved us all from a P.O.W. camp. Lieutenant Hanley's gonna put him in for a Bronze Star. Can ya beat that?"

Kirby blushed red all the way to his ears and a sheepish grin lit his face. He shrugged.

"Well...well, I'll be damned," Saunders replied reaching a hand out to Kirby. The private shook it. "What happened to you, Kirby? What happened to that loner?"

Again, Kirby shrugged. "Don't know, Sarge. Guess he just realized that fittin' in was easier than always bein' the outsider, and ole William G. Kirby *always* takes the easy way, you know that, Sarge."

Saunders nodded and Billy Nelson piped up, "The lieutenant's makin' Kirby our new BAR man, too, Sarge! Is that neat or what?"

"That's neat," Saunders echoed. "We can use a good BAR man." The squad's former rifleman, Grady Long, was sorely missed by all, though no man missed Long more than his friend, Chip Saunders.

Nelson plunked himself down on the ground near Saunders' feet. "Your turn, Sarge. What happened to you, huh?"

Saunders took a deep drag on his cigarette and settled comfortably back. "Well, I spent time in a castle, met a big game hunter, a Negro cowboy from Wyoming, and escaped a bunch a Krauts on a huge red horse."

To a man every soldier of Saunders' squad raised their eyes skyward in disbelief. "Aw, come on, Sarge, tell us what really happened!" Kirby pleaded.

"Okay." Saunders blew a smoke ring skyward. "Once upon a time...."



END