

Working Together

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The noise of the engine, the sounds of the vehicles climbing the winding road ahead and the whistling of the late summer wind almost drowned out the irritating notes coming from a lone jeep trailing a convoy of army supplies. Almost.

"Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me, anyone else but me, anyone else but me. No, no, no...don't sit under the--"

"Kirby, you couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. Which Andrews sister are you supposed to be, anyway?"

"Shut up, Littlejohn. You've done nothing but gripe since we left the village."

"I had hot showers, hot chow and a real bed. Now I'm on my way to patrols, the hard ground, rations and a cold shower if I'm lucky. What's to gripe about?"

"Aw, quit yer complainin' and just be glad we had eight days of the easy life."

Not quite sure he was hearing what he was hearing, Doc leaned forward from his place in the back of the jeep to question the soldier in the passenger seat. "Am I dreamin', Billy? I could swear Kirby and Littlejohn switched personalities."



Laughing, Billy cast a sly smile at Littlejohn then turned to shout to the medic sitting behind him, the wind from the open jeep trying to whip the words away. "Nah, Kirby's still riding the good will from his poker win last night. That real pretty lady at the bar didn't hurt anything, either."

"Just checkin'."

Nudging the medic sitting beside him, Littlejohn couldn't help but smile at their teasing. "Aw, cut it out, Doc. I guess I have been bellyachin' like Kirby, though."

"Hey!" Kirby's indignant squawk was heard only by Billy, as the wind and noise from the jeep prevented the two in the back from catching the word. Kirby started to turn his head to argue with Littlejohn when the rhythmic sound of the tires changed and the steering wheel began to wobble in his grip.

"Ah, nuts. We got a flat, guys."

"Yeah, Kirby. We noticed."

As the jeep drifted over to the side of the dirt road and came to a stop, Littlejohn unfolded his long limbs with relief and climbed out. He lifted a hand to shade his eyes from the noonday sun and watched the cloud of dust from the transport vehicles as they crested the hill. "Well, we better hurry and change the tire so we can catch up to the convoy. I sure don't want to be stuck out here by ourselves."

"Well, then hurry up and help me change it."

With a shake of his head, Littlejohn got the spare tire while Kirby dug around for the jack and tire iron. It only took a few false starts and a minimal amount of shoving for the two to finally work together to get the jeep lifted and the lug nuts loose. Standing on the opposite side

of the crippled jeep, Billy looked across to Doc, who was watching the process with an eye for any injuries. When the medic finally looked up, Billy met his gaze and grinned.

"Next time, you and I change the tire. It'd get done in half the time."

"Boy, you're not kidding. Wonder what makes those two argue so much?"

Pulling off the flat tire and dropping it onto the dirt road beside him, kicking up a small cloud of dust, Littlejohn stood and wiped his hands on his trousers. He stepped aside to let Kirby put on the spare, and frowned at his younger friend. "We're right here, Billy. We can hear everything you're saying."

Sweat ran down Kirby's neck in rivulets as he struggled to lift the new tire into place. It was hot, the sun beating down on his exposed neck as he hunched over and tugged at the stubborn tire. He wished he'd thought to take off his helmet. The weight of it was giving him a headache. Grunting with the effort, he pushed and shoved on the new wheel but couldn't get it to settle into place. With a growl of frustration, Kirby slapped the uncooperative rubber tire and jumped to his feet, kicking the tire iron Littlejohn had laid aside and throwing his helmet on the floor of the passenger side.

"Dammit! Is somebody gonna help me with this or are we gonna sit here all day?"

With a suppressed sigh, Doc dropped his helmet into the back seat. Slipping the worn strap of his medic bag off his shoulder, he laid it next to the helmet. The jacket that only served to make him that much hotter soon followed. With a jerk of his head, he gestured for Billy to help him. Nudging Littlejohn out of the way, Doc knelt next to the tire and looked at it a moment. A shadow briefly blocked the hot sun as Billy settled in beside him.

"What d'ya want me to do?"

"Help me lift this thing into place."

Working together, the two got the new tire settled into position. Fishing around in the loose dirt of the country road, they gathered up the lug nuts and screwed them into place. Billy found the tire iron where Kirby had kicked it, and tightened the lug nuts with Doc's help. Once the two were satisfied that the new tire was securely in place, Doc lowered the jack and passed it to Billy. The younger soldier put the jack and iron back where they belonged while Doc secured the torn tire where the spare had been. Rubber wasn't something to waste.

Without a word, Doc went around to the side of the jeep and gathered up his discarded equipment. Kirby and Littlejohn had the good grace to appear sheepish. Littlejohn had been in a bad mood ever since they'd received their new orders that morning, and Kirby had lost his temper as usual. Once again, it had been their friends who had to step in when the two got at each other's throats.

The flush on his face from the heat deepened with his embarrassment and discomfort as Littlejohn sullenly climbed back into the jeep. His knees bumped up against the back of the driver's seat and he sighed, wiping his sleeve at the sweat dripping from his chin. "You proved your point, Doc. Let's just hurry and catch up to the rest of the convoy."

Feeling like a jerk, but not wanting to admit it, Kirby chose to just ignore the whole incident. Climbing in behind the wheel, he waited for the others to take their places and studiously ignored everyone. They'd have to make up the lost time and catch up to Saunders and the rest of the squad. Being stuck out in the middle of nowhere by themselves was giving him the willies.

Seeing the frown on Billy's face as the young man stood by the passenger side, arms akimbo, Doc reached for his helmet and used it to nudge Billy in the arm. "Don't let it get to ya,

Billy. We're all just hot and tired, and bein' cooped up in this jeep all mornin' isn't helping anything. Once we catch up to the convoy, maybe you can switch with Cajé the next time we stop."

Grumbling to himself, his cheerful mood sorely tested, Billy slapped his helmet on his head and climbed back into his seat. Folding his arms, he refused to look at anybody. He just focused on the splatter of mud on the windshield that looked like Abraham Lincoln if you used a bit of imagination.

Doc reluctantly slid his arms through the sleeves of his jacket, loath to add another layer to the already sweat-soaked wool shirt. Plopping his helmet onto his head, he sighed audibly at the instant increase in temperature. He picked up the medical bag and decided to just hold it in his lap and give his neck a break from the chafing strap. Climbing into his spot in the back, the medic sighed once more. It was going to be such a long day.

"I'm in, Kirby."

The words were barely out of his mouth when Kirby threw the gearshift into first and hit the gas. The jeep lurched forward like a horse from the starting gate and they were off. Slapping his hand on top of his helmet, Doc rolled his eyes and bit back a warning to slow down. As long as he didn't get them into an accident, a little speed would drain some of Kirby's anger.

They'd only gone a couple of miles, however, when Littlejohn's tolerance hit rock bottom. "Kirby, do you think maybe you could slow down a little before you get us all killed?"

"You want us to catch up to the convoy or not? How 'bout you let me drive, huh?"

"How 'bout you pull over and let *me* drive before you wreck this thing?"

Practically turning around in his seat, Kirby shot the big private a glare and pointed with one hand while keeping a grip on the wheel with the other. "How 'bout I pull over and shove my foot up your-?"

The jeep began to drift to the side and Billy let out a yelp of surprise, leaning to his left and stretching out his hand to grab the wheel. "Kirby, watch what you're doing for cryin' out loud!"

There was a loud pop and before he could process the noise, a second followed. The wheel jerked in both soldiers' grasps as the right front tire blew. Three hands fought with each other and overcompensated, sending the jeep careening to the left. Littlejohn shouted something unintelligible and leaned forward, reaching out his own hand. Someone jerked the wheel, nobody could ever be sure just who, and the jeep lost its fight with gravity.



Everything happened so fast that Billy couldn't seem to process anything. It all became a jumble of loud noise, bruising impact with the edge of the roadway and a kaleidoscopic tumble down a ravine. How he managed to keep his M-1, he'd never know. His journey ended in a bush near the bottom of the ravine where he stayed for several minutes, gasping for air and trying to figure out what had just happened.

All he could hear was the shifting of dirt and rocks as the debris continued to slide down the embankment in the wake of his tumble, the pulse pounding in his ears, and the ticking and popping coming from the now-dead engine of the jeep on the roadway above him. Taking

another precious minute to take inventory of his body, Billy was pretty sure he hadn't broken anything. Everything *hurt*, but still functioned.

Taking a deep breath, he sat up slowly and painfully and looked around for the others. A low moan a little above and to the right let him know where to find Littlejohn. Making sure he had his M-1, he scrambled to his feet and made a limping run to crouch in the weeds next to his friend.

"Hey Littlejohn, you okay?"

Groaning, Littlejohn tried to right himself so he no longer had his feet pointing uphill. Once he got turned around, he let gravity and Billy help him into a sitting position. Taking inventory of the aches and pains, one pain in particular was making itself known above all others. Pulling back his left sleeve, Littlejohn grimaced. The wrist was already starting to swell.

"I think my wrist might be broken, but everything else seems to be okay. How 'bout you?"

Wincing in sympathy, Billy shook his head. "Nah, I'm okay. Sore alright, but nothing seems broken."

"I knew Kirby was gonna wreck us, the crazy goldbrick."

Not really sure about his own role in the crash, Billy decided to change the subject. "We better find the others."

Leaning down, he helped Littlejohn to his feet then the two crouched and started up the loose dirt. They hadn't made much progress, when Littlejohn heard muffled swearing behind some bushes to their right. The two soldiers angled their ascent in that direction and were relieved to find Kirby.

Well, Billy was relieved. Littlejohn immediately launched into a tirade as soon as they determined that Kirby was uninjured except for a few cuts and bruises and a sore knee. The two were bickering back and forth about how the accident happened, their voices rising in increments.

But those popping sounds were going 'round and 'round in Billy's head, until he finally thought he knew the source. "Littlejohn, I ain't so sure it was Kirby that caused that. Though driving that fast didn't help. I think somebody shot at us. One must've hit a tire."



Looking at his younger friend with wide eyes, Littlejohn stopped his shouting. "Are you sure?"

"It's what it sounded like. I think I heard two shots before we crashed."

"Hah! Told you I didn't wreck us." Catching sight of Littlejohn's swollen wrist, Kirby immediately switched his tone from angry to concerned. "Hey, we should get Doc to look at that for ya."

The thought seemed to come to all three at once, and they stared at each other with the same look of realization. *Where's Doc?*

With the possible threat of a sniper, Littlejohn lowered his voice and leaned closer to Billy and Kirby. "Either of you see what happened to Doc when we crashed?"

Looking around for the BAR, Kirby shook his head. "I couldn't even figure out which end was up until the blood started rushing to my head, much less what happened to the rest of you guys. Anybody see my helmet?"

Leaving Kirby to find his missing helmet and weapon, Billy started making his way up the side of the ravine. Littlejohn edged away from the others, angling further to the right in the hopes of running across the missing medic.

Giving up on the helmet, Kirby slid further down the ravine in search of the BAR. Aside from having become attached to the weapon, they were going to need more than Billy's M-1 if they were to catch up to the convoy. He began to lose control of his descent and grabbed at the passing shrubbery in a desperate attempt to stop his slide. Nothing worked, but the bottom of the ravine.

Covering his head against the cascade of rocks and dirt that continued to rain down on him, Kirby crouched and waited for it to stop. Once the worst of it had settled, he stood and ran his hands through his close-cropped hair to get rid of some of the dirt. "Great. Now I hafta climb all the way back to the top. I shoulda ridden with the Sarge."

Shading his eyes to look back up where he'd left the others, he could just make out Billy's form crawling closer to the top. He could no longer see Littlejohn because of the angle. Giving up on finding the BAR, Kirby started the slippery climb to the top, mumbling every curse word he knew. By the time he finally got there, Littlejohn had rejoined Billy and the two were belly down just below the road's edge.

He couldn't help the smile that lit up his face when Littlejohn reached down to hand over the BAR. "Where'd you find it?"

"Right here. Must've come out of the jeep when we rolled over and it landed just over the edge." Looking back toward the road and craning his neck, Littlejohn's voice became gruff. "We've got a problem, Kirby."

Not liking the solemn look on Billy's face, Kirby slid the BAR's strap over his shoulder and sidled up between the two. Stretching to see over the lip of the road, Kirby swore. "Is he-?"

"No. We saw him move just before you got up here." Tightening his grip on his M-1, Billy turned worried eyes to Kirby and Littlejohn. "Should we try to get to him?"

Craning his neck a little further, Kirby sized up the situation. Not more than seven or eight feet from where they lay, the jeep was resting on the driver's side. One wheel drifted around and around in a lazy spin. Doc was lying on his back in the shade of the overturned vehicle, unmoving.

Dropping back down, Kirby's mind raced. He didn't know if the medic had been hurt in the crash or shot by the sniper. The only thing that had kept Doc from tumbling down the ravine with the rest of them had been Littlejohn's M-1. The weapon had jammed itself between the back of the driver's seat and something in the back. Doc's right foot was tangled in the M-1's sling.

Gripping the BAR with determination, Kirby looked over at the others. "We gotta make sure he's okay."

"Any ideas? You and Billy are the only ones with weapons."

Well, it wasn't exactly much of a plan. "I'll check Doc out. If anyone shoots at me, see if you can tell where he's shootin' from. Then you guys go get him."

"Brilliant plan, Kirby."

"You got a better one, Littlejohn? If so we'd love to hear it."

Jaw muscles twitching with suppressed anger, Billy scooted closer to the bickering pair and tried to keep his voice low. "Can't you two just shut up for one minute? Doc doesn't have all day for you to make up your minds."

He thrust his M-1 into Littlejohn's hands and hitched himself a little higher on the incline. "I'll check on Doc and you two go after the sniper. Kirby has the firepower and with your wrist hurt, you aren't gonna be able to pull Doc outta there."

For a brief moment it looked as if Kirby was going to argue the point, but he simply wrapped both hands around the BAR and nodded his assent. "The kid's right. We have the best chance of takin' out whoever hit us. Even if you do have a bum wrist."

Pressing his lips together, not at all liking the rudimentary plan, Littlejohn finally agreed. "I don't like it, but we don't have a lot of choices. Billy, give us two minutes to spread out then go for Doc."

Gathering his resolve as well as his courage, Billy watched as the two sidled away from him. Littlejohn went right as Kirby slid to the left. They all stood a better chance if they fanned out and made it harder for the sniper. He mentally ticked off the seconds, bracing his hands against the dry grass and hard dirt. When he hit 120, he took a deep breath and practically frog-leaped over the side.

Immediately, bullets hit the dirt around the jeep as the unseen enemy fired off three quick shots. Fortunately, Doc and the jeep were close enough to the edge of the ravine that Billy had plenty of time to get to cover. Pressing himself as close to the jeep as possible, he turned his attention to Doc. He didn't like what he saw. Not at all.

The medic's leg was twisted where it was caught up in the M-1's sling, forcing the knee to turn inward at a painful angle. Doc's face was pale beneath the layer of dirt he'd accumulated from the dusty drive, rivulets of sweat making dark trails down the sides of his face before dripping onto the road beneath him. His right hand pressed against his side, his arm trembling slightly from the effort. Billy felt a brief rush of fear at the amount of blood that had trickled between Doc's fingers. The medic's hitched breathing and the way he squeezed his eyes shut, spoke of the amount of pain Doc was in.



Laying a hand on Doc's shoulder, Billy squeezed gently. "Doc. Doc, can you hear me?"

He was surprised when the medic's eyes opened, blinking a few times to see through the sweat and dirt.

Doc clenched his teeth and forced himself to press harder against the wound in his side. "Billy? Littlejohn and Kirby okay?"

"They're doing better than you. Are you hit anywhere else?"

"Nothing else hurts so bad, 'cept my leg. Not sure."

Knowing it would hurt, hating inflicting such pain on a friend, Billy nevertheless forced himself to pry Doc's hand away from his side. He gripped the sides of the hole in Doc's jacket, slippery with the medic's blood, and ripped the material so he could get a look at the damage.

Wincing at the hole in Doc's side, he slid a hand underneath the medic's back to check for an exit wound. He found one.

"Doc...it, uh, it doesn't look too bad."

Doc reached up a hand, feeling weak and clumsy, and tried to give Billy a reassuring pat on the arm. It didn't work. Letting his arm drop back down into the dirt, he swallowed convulsively. He felt dizzy and sick. "You ain't a good liar, Billy."

"What do I do, Doc?"

"Can you find my bag?"

After digging almost frantically through what was left tumbled in and around the jeep, Billy finally came up with the medical pouch. "Got it!"

Sliding back to kneel over the medic, Billy opened the flap and started to dig through the medical supplies. "What do you want outta here?"

Swallowing against his stomach's desire to empty itself, his mouth feeling as if it was full of cotton, Doc blinked slowly. It was getting hard to think.

"You know what to do, Billy. Sulfa. Two large bandages. One for the entrance; one for the exit. Tie 'em tight. And, if you could...uh, if you could...do somethin' 'bout my leg, I'd 'preciate it."

Glancing back and forth between the twisted leg and the bloody wound, Billy tried to gather his frantic thoughts. A sudden burst of gunfire behind the jeep made him jump. Ignoring the fighting going on unseen, Billy worked to stop the bleeding. Sulfa first: his trembling fingers, slick with Doc's blood, making it difficult to tear the package. Once he'd managed to get a bandage on the entrance wound, Billy rolled the medic toward him to reach the one on his back. The movement twisted the trapped leg even more, causing Doc to moan painfully.

"Hurry, Billy. Feels like m' knee is gonna rip off."

Billy worked as quickly as he could until both bandages were snugly in place. Letting Doc relax onto his back, Billy leaned over to gently untangle the twisted leg from the rifle's strap.

"Does anything feel broken in your leg, Doc?"

Licking dry, chapped lips, Doc tried to concentrate. It was getting harder to do. "Dunno. Hurts...knee hurts pretty bad. Feel...feel the bones 'n see if anything is outta place."

Wiping his hands on his trousers, Billy reached for the injured leg and hesitated. Taking a deep breath, he wrapped his hands around Doc's lower leg and pressed his thumbs against the shin. He moved upward toward the knee, feeling for any deformities in the bone. He skipped over the knee and did the same with the thigh. Far as Billy could tell, none of those bones were broken. Going back to the knee, he tried to feel for any abnormalities as gently as he could. He winced as the medic lost any color he might have had before.

"Jeez, Doc, I'm sorry."

"S' okay." Doc swallowed a few times then moaned softly. "Gonna...gonna be sick."

Doc managed to roll himself away from Billy before losing his breakfast. Slumping back to the ground when he was done, Doc struggled to control his stomach and watched the sky spin lazily above him.

"Doc, I don't think anything is broken. Your knee is so swollen, it's hard to tell."

"Where's Littlejohn and Kirby?"

"They went after the sniper. I don't hear any more shooting, though. Maybe they got him."

"Can ya, can ya check for me? See if ya see anything?"

Billy scooted over to the front end of the jeep and paused to take a deep breath. Mentally crossing his fingers, he poked his head around to take a quick look. Not seeing anything, he crawled over Doc and looked around the back. He smiled in relief when he saw Kirby sliding down the hill on the other side of the road. Littlejohn was right behind him.

When the two soldiers walked boldly across the road, Billy stood and took a few steps toward them. "Did you find him?"

Wiping sweat from his face, Kirby smiled grimly. "Yeah, we found him and a coupla buddies. Bastard was up a tree at the top of the hill. He ain't no more, though. A whole convoy to shoot at and those guys don't come along until we drive by."

Littlejohn quickened his pace to brush past them and round the jeep. Squatting down next to Doc, he took in the pale face and bloody jacket and looked back to Billy. "How is he?"

Doc flopped an arm over his face to wipe away the itchy dirt and sweat, and tried to laugh. "You can ask me, y'know. I ain't dead yet."

Smiling at the medic's attempt at levity, Littlejohn reached for his canteen. "You aren't gonna, either. We've got you good and broken in. Don't need to be training another new medic."

He held the canteen to Doc's mouth and let him take a small sip. Too much would make him sick again. Screwing the cap back on, Littlejohn stood and joined the other two at the back of the jeep. "What do we do, now?"

Kirby frowned and shifted his feet, squinting up at Littlejohn. "What d'ya mean, 'what do we do'? We get Doc outta here and get him some help."

"What if moving does more harm? Are you willing to risk killing him?"

"He ain't gonna get any better just sittin' here."

"Sarge'll come back for us when they realize we're missing." Littlejohn's face reddened with anger at Kirby's tone.

"What if the Germans come lookin' for that sniper we killed?" Kirby took a belligerent step forward. "Suppose they get here first?"



"Suppose the two of you just shut up for once?" Billy was losing his own patience at the constant bickering between the two soldiers. "I think we should ask Doc what he wants us to do. He'll know better than we do how serious his wounds are."

All three turned and looked down at the medic, who was blinking slowly back at them. Billy squatted next to him to shield him from the glaring sun and shrugged. "So which is it, Doc? Stay or go?"

"Go. Jus' put me in the shade somewhere and try to catch up to th' convoy. Come back for me."

Kirby snorted and folded his arms. "Figures. Okay, we go. But we ain't leavin' Doc here."

Nodding in reluctant agreement, Littlejohn shouldered his M-1. "Help me find some branches, Kirby."

Doc's eyes tracked the pair as they headed out of his line of sight and he shivered. It was strange. He was burning up in the heat before the jeep wrecked. Now he was cold. He shivered again, wincing at the stab of pain it created.

"Billy, can I have your jacket? I'm cold."

"Sure, Doc." Shrugging out of the stifling jacket, he spread it over Doc's torso and frowned. "What's the matter?"

"Just a bit shocky. 'S okay."

Billy was fairly certain it wasn't okay, but he'd leave the medic to his illusions. He gathered up the scattered medical supplies and started to shove them back in the rucksack. "Hey, Doc, you want some morphine? You've got several ampoules of it in here."

Such was the pain that Doc actually considered it for a moment. But they were far behind the rest of the convoy by now, possibly not yet missed, and had a long way to go. Anything could happen and likely he'd need to be as clear-headed as possible along the way. Much as he wanted the blessed relief of oblivion, Doc shook his head. "Better save it for later, Billy. Might need it more then."

With a reluctant shrug, Billy put everything back in the medic's bag and closed the flap. He shifted his weight to block the sun from his wounded friend and looked up in relief when Kirby and Littlejohn returned. He didn't like Doc's pallor and wanted nothing more than to get the medic to an aid station as fast as they could.

Without a word, Littlejohn and Kirby set down the long branches they'd managed to find and shucked out of their jackets. Working together, they quickly fashioned a field stretcher and slid it next to Doc. Tilting his helmet back from his forehead, Littlejohn dropped to one knee and glanced anxiously at Billy.

"He doin' okay?"

"So far. We need to get him some real help, though. Ain't a whole lot we can do for him."

Kirby squatted at the medic's feet and tried to smile reassuringly. "How's about it, Doc? You ready to get outta here?"

Bracing himself for the inevitable movement, Doc tried to smile back. "Yeah, Kirby. It's about time it was me hitchin' a ride. I've carried you goldbricks often enough."

"Truer words were never spoken, Doc." Grabbing hold of Doc's ankles, Kirby nodded to Billy that he was ready. Once Billy had a good grip on the medic's shoulders, the two moved him to the homemade stretcher as quickly and gently as possible.

Once Doc was settled, Littlejohn stood and reached for Kirby's BAR. "I'll take the BAR, Kirby. I can't carry the stretcher with this wrist. I'm not the sharpshooter you are, but the BAR will be better than the M1."

When Kirby didn't argue the point, to Littlejohn's surprise, he shouldered both weapons and took a few steps toward the receding tracks of the convoy. When he glanced back, Billy and Kirby were lifting the stretcher and adjusting their grips. Without a word, they fell into step with Littlejohn.

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When the truck in front of them slowed to a crawl and then stopped, Cajé leaned forward from his seat in the back of the jeep. Saunders was letting the engine idle, waiting to see if the convoy started up again while Lt. Hanley unfolded his map. "Why'd we stop, Lieutenant?"

"You know as much as we do, Cajé. I'm sure we'll get started again, soon."

The Cajun couldn't help but tighten his grip on his M1 and stare into the trees on either side of the road. He hated this kind of trapped feeling. At least he wasn't trapped in the same jeep as Doc and Billy. Looking behind them at the settling dust, Cajé expected to see Kirby's vehicle coming into view behind them. Just a cloud of dirt and dust trailed down the road. No jeep.

"Hey, Sarge? When did you last see Kirby?"

Sergeant Saunders twisted in his seat to first cast Cajé a puzzled look then to look past him at the empty dirt road. Rolling his eyes skyward, the sergeant groaned softly and turned back around. He raked his fingers through wind tangled hair and tried to decide if he should be angry or worried. Looking over at his passenger, Saunders raised an eyebrow.

"Well, Lieutenant? Should we wait or go looking for them?"

With a heavy sigh Lt. Hanley refolded his map, but didn't put it away. "Kirby was driving, am I right?"

A smile quirked at the corners of Saunders' mouth. "Yessir."

"And Littlejohn was riding with him?"

"Yessir. A recipe for disaster if ever there was one." Saunders rubbed the side of his nose and frowned thoughtfully. "But Doc and Billy were with them. Nelson might just go along with whatever the other two get themselves into, but Doc wouldn't. It's one reason I asked him to ride in that jeep."

Hanley looked back at the settling dust behind them with a sense of dread. Still, a hundred different things could've held the other jeep up. Who knew how long they'd be waiting while whatever the problem was up ahead was dealt with. They had the time to wait. He turned back around and stared through the dirty windshield at the truck in front of them then unfolded the map once more.

"We'll give them a little while to catch up. If they haven't caught up by the time things start moving again, we'll go back."

Knowing the decision had been made, no matter that he didn't agree, Cajé twisted around in his seat to watch the empty road behind them. He had a bad feeling about this.



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Worry for the wounded man they carried kept Billy's mind occupied. He tried to concentrate on the road. That German might not have been the only sniper set up on this long lonely stretch of nowhere. But he just couldn't keep from fretting over the medic. Doc had patched them all up at least once, with never a complaint. Bullets, shells, potato mashers... nothing seemed to matter to the man but the patient he was working on. Billy wished he could be more like him.

Glancing back at Doc's pale face from his position at the medic's feet, Billy felt guilty relief that their patient seemed to have finally passed out. He just couldn't stand to see the pain on Doc's face. Turning back to stare at Littlejohn's back, Billy tried to breathe through the cloud of dust the big man's feet stirred up with every step.

After an endless amount of walking, the stretcher started to jerk oddly in Billy's hands. It took a few minutes for Billy to realize it was from Kirby's increasingly awkward gait from his sore knee. A bit surprised that the goldbrick hadn't made any complaint, he slowed his own steps and forced them all to a stop.

"We need to take a break, Littlejohn. I need to check on Doc."

Kirby couldn't quite hide his relief at the chance to stop and rest for a moment. Laying down his end of the stretcher with a grunt of effort, the wiry BAR man limped over to sit on the grass at the edge of the road. Rubbing the stiffness from his knee, he watched as Billy fussed over the medic.

"How's he doing, Billy?"

The younger soldier paused in the act of adding a fresh bandage over the one on Doc's abdomen and frowned thoughtfully. "He don't look so good, Kirby, but he doesn't seem much worse than before."

"That's a good thing, right?"

"It's a good thing, Kirby. It's not so bad. Prob'ly didn't even hit anything important." The raspy voice of the medic brought a visible look of relief to his friends' faces. Wincing when he tried to move, Doc squinted up at Billy. "Where are we?"

Scratching at the sweat-damp hair irritating his forehead, Billy raised an eyebrow at Littlejohn. "I've just been staring at Littlejohn's back for the last few miles. Littlejohn?"

Turning to look up the road, Littlejohn frowned as he tried to remember the map they'd all looked at briefly before the convoy had left the village that morning. "If they get all the way to checkpoint Charlie before realizing we're missing, we've got about three or four more hours of walking. I'm hoping they realize it a lot sooner and turn around for us."

Grunting his agreement, Kirby climbed to his feet and groaned softly at the pain in his knee. It felt swollen inside, but he couldn't feel any inflammation on the outside. "You got my vote on that one. I don't much care to haul Doc all the way to Charlie."

Before Billy could voice the displeasure so clearly written on his face, Doc chuckled painfully. He and Kirby had an understanding. Doc understood Kirby's way of masking his feelings, and Kirby understood that Doc would keep that knowledge to himself. "'S your own fault, Kirby. I told ya to leave me. 'Sides, consider it payback for all the times I've hauled your backside outta one scrape or another."

"I don't know, Doc. You weigh more than I do. I'm thinking we're even after this one."

Doc squeezed his eyes shut and panted against the discomfort as Kirby and Billy once more lifted the stretcher. Gaining control of the pain, he tilted his head back and peered up at

Kirby's face. "Kirby, I've become more familiar with your feet than my own. No way you'll ever be even with me."

Laughing, Kirby adjusted his grip on the branches of the stretcher and limped forward to match Billy's pace. "I don't know what you're complaining about. I've got nice feet. Had a gal tell me so, once."

Turning back with a grimace from his position on point, Littlejohn shook his head. "I could've gone the rest of the war without ever hearing that, Kirby."

Trying to resist tensing his muscles against the stretcher's movement, Doc closed his eyes and smiled. "Me too, Kirby. We could all have done without that bit of information."

"You guys just don't know beauty when you see it, is all."

Even Billy had to smile. He'd volunteer to fix up Kirby's feet himself if only the Sarge would come find them. His arms were beginning to burn from effort and Billy wasn't entirely sure Kirby could go on much longer.

#

The rumble of engines rippled down the road from the front of the convoy and Saunders reached to start his own vehicle. He turned to Hanley and shrugged. "Go on or go back, Lieutenant?"

They hadn't been delayed very long, but still Hanley hesitated. If something more than a mechanical difficulty had held up the other jeep, then time was something they didn't have a whole lot of. He suddenly wished they'd turned around when Caje had first noticed the other vehicle missing. If it had been a simple mechanical difficulty, then lead-food Kirby would've caught up by now. The Lieutenant adjusted his lanky frame in his too-small seat and weighed his choices.



"We go back, Saunders. If for no other reason than to give me more time to yell at Kirby for screwing up something as simple as driving a jeep."

Saunders put their jeep in reverse, glancing behind him and hiding a smile. Lt. Hanley could bluster all he wanted, but the sergeant could tell his friend was starting to worry. His smile slipped as he caught Caje's concerned look. That didn't bode well. Turning the jeep around, Saunders pressed the gas a bit harder than necessary. The others had probably just had engine trouble or something. Still, it didn't hurt to hurry a bit.

Saunders' driving echoed Caje's sense of urgency. Sitting forward and bracing against the front seats, Caje lifted his M1 to be ready. There was no way to know what waited for them down the road, but the scout believed in being ready for whatever came.

#

Doc had long ago closed his eyes, the movement while lying flat on his back reminding him a bit too much of the seasickness of D-Day, but he could still hear Kirby's soft grunts of pain at every other step. Gripping the sides of the make-shift stretcher, Doc opened his eyes and lifted his head.

"Billy, we gotta stop."

Glancing back at the medic, Billy tripped on a root and almost dropped their patient. He stumbled to a halt, forcing Kirby to stop as well. "Littlejohn, hold up. Something's wrong."

At Doc's waving motion to be let down, Billy gratefully bent down to lower his end as the muscles in his back tightened and twitched. How Doc did this all the time was beyond him. "What's the matter, Doc?"

Eyes once again closed against a sense of vertigo, Doc waved a hand toward his head. "Kirby's hurtin'. We need to stop for a bit."

Littlejohn scanned the area nervously. They were skirting the edges of the trees to avoid being completely out in the open, but still had visual contact with the road in case Sgt. Saunders came looking for them. Even this close to the road was making the spot between his shoulder blades tingle, like a target was painted there.

"We can't stop here for long. It's too exposed."

Kirby sank to the grass and tried to rub away some of the soreness in his ankle through the boot. "I hate to admit it, Littlejohn, but I can't go much further."

Doc flopped an arm over his eyes to shield them from the red brightness of the sun seeping through his closed lids. An idea was forming and he nudged a foot at his web belt that Billy had laid between his feet along with his medical ruck. "Use my belt and a couple of yours to make a strap. Slide the ends of the stretcher through the loops on the belts and make a harness. Littlejohn can use it to take the weight off his hands and still help carry me."

Kirby tilted his head as he visualized what Doc was talking about. "Huh. That might actually work."

Willing to do anything that got them moving again, Littlejohn handed the BAR back to Kirby and loosened the belt at his waist. He unhooked the canteen and bandage pouch, setting them between Doc's feet by the medical bag. He did the same with the canteens and bandage pouch on the medic's belt then reached out his hand for Billy's. It took a little adjusting to get the belts at the right lengths, but it didn't take long before the makeshift harness was ready.

Billy eyed the strap with some hesitation but shrugged and knelt at the stretcher's head as Doc instructed. The difference in height between him and Littlejohn meant one end of the stretcher would be higher than the other. Doc said it would be best if his feet were elevated as it would help with shock. Billy knew nothing from nothing when it came to medicine, so he'd take the medic's word for it.

Climbing once more to his feet, Kirby slung the BAR over his shoulder and helped lift the foot of the stretcher for Littlejohn. The big man pulled the strap over his head, settling it over both shoulders and shrugged it to a comfortable position. At Littlejohn's nod, Kirby let go his side and let the full weight settle on the straps. The web belts held up with no problem.

Littlejohn made a few minute adjustments and smiled at Kirby. "What d'ya know. It works."

"Huh. Wonder what else they teach in medic school."

"Nothing that would prepare me for patients like you, Kirby." Doc twisted a bit to ease the ache in his side and winced. The downward angle was already working for him, making things a bit less muzzy.

"I'm one of a kind, Doc, and don't you forget it."

Snorting a laugh, Billy gripped the branches tighter and fell into step as Kirby started out. "As if we could, with you reminding us at every turn."

Kirby smiled to himself as he limped through the grass, stepping over the tree roots that threatened to trip Nelson. When he glanced behind him, his smile slipped a bit. The red stain on Doc's bandages seemed to be getting bigger. They really did need to find help, and soon. Good field medics were scarce these days and he'd just as soon they kept theirs. Doc was a confidante and friend. One who listened to him on the rare occasions that Kirby felt like talking about himself, and never spoke a word to anyone about what they'd discussed.

Steps faltering, Kirby frowned and turned to walk back to the stretcher. At Littlejohn's questioning look, he shrugged and crooked a grin. "Just occurred to me that I don't know Doc's real name."

At the clinking of his dogtags, Doc blinked open his eyes and peered up at Kirby in puzzlement. "What're you doin'?"

"Just satisfyin' a curiosity." Squinting to make out the small raised letters, Kirby burst into laughter. "Jeez, no wonder you just answer to Doc. I think we have enough Williams in this squad already."

Billy smiled at them both. "William? No kidding?"

Pulling his dogtags from Kirby's grasp, the medic sighed. "We'll just stick with Doc. It's less confusing."

Still chuckling quietly, Kirby walked back to point and waved his arm. They simply had to find help soon. No way was he going to let a fellow William down.

#

Common sense overcame urgency as Saunders slowed the jeep to a more prudent speed. If the men had had to abandon their transportation for any reason, they'd more than likely be sticking to the tree line. If he was driving hell bent for leather, he would pass them before they could see the missing men.

His eyes burned from the dust and sun as he focused on the road. Still, it was the familiar sound of the BAR that had him standing on the brake. Shading his eyes with his right hand, Saunders sighed in relief as Kirby's wiry figure stepped away from the shadow of the trees. His sense of relief was short-lived when the other three came into view. A quick headcount showed it was the medic that was being carried.

Caje was out of the jeep and jogging to meet the missing squad members before Saunders could say a word. Climbing out as the group approached, the sergeant helped to load the stretcher onto the back. "What the hell happened to you guys?"

Kirby climbed in and moved Doc's feet to perch on the end of the stretcher. It'd be a tight fit for all of them in the jeep. "Sniper, Sarge. Shot out a tire, not to mention hitting Doc here. Jeep rolled over and here we are. We got behind when we stopped to change a flat."

Hanley couldn't believe this squad's bad luck. Or good luck, either, since they always seemed to get out of their many scrapes. "How bad is Doc?"

Settling Doc's feet across his own legs, Kirby shrugged. "I ain't a doctor, but I figure two holes in a guy can't be a good thing."

Squishing himself into the back next to Kirby, Littlejohn propped the goldbrick's bad ankle across his knees. If he'd heard Doc mention elevating an injury once, he'd heard it a thousand times. "He was doin' okay until about ten minutes ago then he passed out on us."

Hurrying everyone else into the jeep, Saunders climbed in and levered the idling engine into gear. "Squeeze in and hold onto something, we've gotta hustle to catch up to the convoy. There're a few medics and a couple of doctors in an ambulance near the front."



True to his word, the sergeant pushed the loaded jeep as fast as he dared to go. He didn't want to send any of the others tumbling to the road in his haste to get Doc medical attention. Doc's pale face whenever he dared to look back spurred him onward. It was just a lousy convoy. Why his men always seemed to find trouble, he didn't know, but he wasn't about to lose one of them to something as stupid as a delay from a flat tire.

Once he caught up to the rear, Saunders laid on his horn and made his way around the large trucks aiming his way to the middle where he knew the ambulances were. Vehicles slowed as he passed and had stopped altogether by the time they reached their goal. Stopping the jeep next to the ambulance, Saunders climbed out to meet the medical officer stepping from the passenger side.

"Got a wounded man, here, doc. Can you give us a hand?"

The medical officer barked a few orders to the medics jumping down from the back of the ambulance as he made his way to the makeshift stretcher on the back of the jeep. Lifting up one of the bandages, he raised his eyebrows but smiles reassuringly to the anxious group of GIs gathered around him.

"You men did good job getting him here quickly. We'll do our best."

With those words the medics worked together to move Doc to their own stretcher and slid him into the back of the ambulance. As the doors shut and the ambulance crept forward when the convoy started up again, Kirby slid his helmet off and rubbed a hand over his close-cropped hair. "You think he'll be okay, Sarge."

"I'm sure they'll be fine, Kirby. Now get in so we can get going. The sooner we get to battalion aid, the sooner we'll find out how he's doing."

Without another word the rest of the squad scrambled into the jeep, shielding their faces from the dust kicked up by passing supply trucks. They'd have to take their place at the end of the line again. When the last truck passed by Saunders pulled in behind, hoping his words to Kirby would prove true.

"Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me, anyone else but me, anyone else but me. No-."

"Kirby, would you put a sock in it? It's enough to wake the dead."

Confused and disoriented, sure he'd been here before, Doc licked dry lips and struggled to open his eyes. "S enough to wake me, anyway."

When he'd finally managed to open his eyes and blink away the sleep crust, Doc looked up to see a ring of faces hovering over him ranging from worried to relieved to jubilant. "Where are we?"

Sgt. Saunders was the first to answer as he sat back down in the battered wicker chair at the foot of Doc's cot. "Hospital at battalion. We were starting to worry about you, you've been out so long."

The dryness in his throat and the cotton feeling in his head made Doc believe it. He felt like he'd been asleep for a week. "Everyone okay?"

Littlejohn had a bandage around his sprained wrist and Kirby balanced beside Doc's bed on a pair of crutches. Uncharacteristically, Kirby made light of his injury. "Nothin' a few days R&R won't cure, huh Littlejohn?"

"Depends on whose idea of R&R we're talkin' about, Kirby."

"Well yours is boring, so I'll just take a bit of William G. Kirby's cure for all ails."

Doc resisted the urge to explore the bulky bandage on his side with difficulty. Searching for a distraction, he asked for a drink of water. Taking the glass Billy handed him with gratitude, he sipped the lukewarm liquid slowly. It was like drinking fine wine. Handing the glass back to Billy, Doc looked down his feet at Saunders and smiled.

"They tell you what they did after the accident?"

"Something about taking out a few Germans, building a stretcher and walking back."

With a crooked grin, Doc gestured to the two walking wounded beside him. "You woulda been proud, Sarge. Littlejohn and Kirby worked together like a well-oiled machine. After Billy set 'em straight, anyway."

Saunders braced his foot on the cot and pushed his chair back to balance on two legs as he smiled. "See, boys, that's what I've told you all along. All you need is a little cooperation and ingenuity and nothing is impossible."

"Except maybe getting Kirby to sing in tune."

"Shut up, Littlejohn. You ain't exactly Bing Crosby, you know."

Looking over at Billy, Doc smiled conspiratorially. "I think this is where we came in."

Setting his chair upright with a thud, Saunders stood and grabbed Littlejohn's sleeve. "And this is where we go out."

The guys each said a few words of farewell and encouragement then turned to follow Saunders out. Doc reached out and touched Billy's arm to stop him. "Thanks for what you guys did for me. You saved my life."

Billy shared a glance with Littlejohn and Kirby then shrugged off the thanks. "Just returning the favor, Doc. Just returning the favor."

The End