

Wrong Place, Wrong Time

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The usual disclaimer applies. Yadda, yadda, yadda. Not mine, no money (made or otherwise), don't sue. Copyright Mel 2008. This story was started so long ago I don't even remember its origin. I think it started as a bedtime story for DocII. Sleep tight, Doc!

Sometimes the noise from the war got a bit overwhelming. If it wasn't the whine of bullets or the whistle of incoming artillery, it was the loud droning and grinding of an engine along with the jarring rattle of metal walls. It was enough to make his ears ring. The ambulance shuddered fit to fall apart at another hole in the road. Doc slapped his hand on his head to keep his helmet from flying off, while simultaneously trying to keep his seat.

The bumping and jolting felt like it was going shake his teeth loose. He wasn't sure if he should be angry, or scared for his life. One thing for sure, he was starting to worry for the life of the man lying by his feet. The bumpy ride wasn't doing anything for the wounded officer.

"Hey, you think you can slow this thing down a bit?"

A distinctly Brooklyn accent shouted through the open window, wavering a bit with the rattle and bumps. "Not on your life, buddy! We're too close to the lines."

Bracing his foot against the bench across from him, Doc frowned and gripped the edge of his seat. "Well, can ya at least try to avoid one or two craters?"

Keeping his foot braced for stability, the medic leaned forward to check on the recently applied bandages. The next bump was enough to make his worn boot slip from the bench and the next thing Doc knew, he was sprawled on the floor with his patient. Scrabbling around for purchase, Doc managed to throw his left arm over the edge of the seat he'd recently been occupying.

"Slow down for cryin' out loud, or we won't hafta worry about gettin' this guy to the hospital!"

Putting most of his weight on his elbow, the medic managed to lever himself off the floor and back into his seat. Scooping up his helmet from where it rocked on the floor near the ambulance door, he plopped it back onto his head.

As if it wasn't bad enough that he'd had to cut his leave short to get the wounded officer to the evac hospital, chosen seemingly because he was standing where the doctor happened to point, he had the worst driver in the world behind the wheel. He'd be lucky to get to their destination without needing a medic himself. That's what he got for stopping to give a package to a medic friend from Item company in a village too recently cleared and too short on medics.

The occasional boom-thumping of artillery wasn't exactly a confidence boost, either.

Once again bracing his foot to try to keep his seat, Doc reached up to check on the bottle of plasma he'd hung from the hook when they'd first left the sporadic fighting in the village, now far behind.

He stopped with his fingers just brushing the glass bottle and looked toward the front once more. The sound of the engine had changed ominously and the ambulance shuddered and jerked. Not from potholes, this time.

There were a few more jerky hesitations then the engine died completely. The ambulance drifted to a stop as the driver swore and slammed a fist against the steering wheel.



Doc's muttered "Great" reinforced the driver's bellow of "Great, this is just great!"

With a sigh, Doc opened one of the doors and dropped down from the back. Blinking a little in the sudden brightness of the day, Doc walked around to the driver's side door and raised an eyebrow. "Now, what?"

Brooklyn accent thick with anger and more than a bit of sarcasm, the driver shoved open the door, forcing the medic to back up. "We take the bus. What else, we see what's wrong with the old gal."

Biting back a retort that wouldn't help the situation, Doc leaned against the fender as the driver lifted the hood and started poking around.

Eyes darting from the engine to the driver, Doc waited. The Brooklyn private poked and jiggled wires while mumbling under his breath.

Trying to be helpful, Doc gestured toward the alternator. "I think..."

"Hey, Mac, I got it covered. I'll figure out what's wrong with her. What does a front line medic know about engines, anyways?"

Eyes narrowing, Doc shoved his hands in his pockets and shifted his feet.

With a glare at the burning sun, Doc wiped the sweat from his face and tried again. "I'm tellin' ya, I think it's..."

"Don't you have a patient in the back? I'd get this fixed a lot faster without you buggin' me."

Hands stuffed in his pockets, arms stiff with anger, Doc walked back to check on the wounded officer. Not because the driver had told him to, of course, but to make sure the man's condition hadn't changed since they'd stopped.

Doc had just finished changing the bandage when the door swung open once again. The driver rugged, flushed face looked a little sheepish, and more than a little defeated. "Okay, Mac, I give up. What d'ya think's wrong with her?"

Wiping his hands on his pants, Doc slid to the end of the bench and climbed down to join the driver. They both walked back toward the front of the ambulance to look once more under the hood. Pointing, Doc shrugged. "The alternator's out. That's what I've been tryin' to tell ya."

Rubbing a weary hand over his face, the driver turned to squint in the direction they'd been heading, then looked back to size up the medic. "Well, the only way we're gonna get her started again is to get her going then pop the clutch. And you gotta get her going."

Great. Knowing it was no use to argue, since it was the only option, Doc walked around to the back as the driver climbed into his seat and shut the door. He secured the back doors then removed his helmet for a moment. Running a hand through his sweat slick hair, he took a deep breath, replaced the heavy helmet and braced his hands against the hot metal.

Not entirely sure he could get the battle-scarred ambulance moving by himself, he planted his feet and pushed. Doc was just grateful the ambulance had chosen a downgrade when the engine had died. Maybe gravity would help, because his muscles sure weren't working.

Leaning his shoulder against the door, Doc tensed his legs and pushed harder. His feet slipped in the dirt, but he'd felt a slight movement. Planting his feet in the hard packed dirt once more, Doc pushed again. It was definitely moving.

Bracing his hands once more on the door, Doc picked up his pace, trying to get more momentum. The downgrade increased, lending a bit more gravity to the effort. The ambulance picked up speed as the medic pushed and began to go faster than Doc

could keep up. Stumbling to a halt, Doc listened to the sound of the engine trying to catch.

The dead ambulance was hard to steer, though, and the driver began to drift off the road into the field. It had bounced all the way off the road before Doc finally heard the engine catch and roar to life. Grinning, Doc jogged down the hill after it as the ambulance slowed and began to veer back to the roadway.

Raising his hand in response as the driver leaned out the window and waved, Doc opened his mouth to shout, "I told you so." Before the words could leave his mouth, a wave of heat slammed him to the ground, followed by a disorienting tumble and explosion of sound.

Once the kaleidoscope of dirt, grass and sky stopped, the medic struggled to breathe. Rolling over to prop himself up on one elbow, Doc wiped at the blood dripping from his nose and tried to make sense of what had just happened.

Still trying to draw a decent breath, he knelt in the dirt and watched as the remains of the ambulance burned. Not believing anyone could've survived the explosion, he nevertheless climbed to his feet to check it out. He'd only taken one stumbling step into the field when it hit him. There were a few pockmarks of small craters in the field surrounding the burning wreck.

He'd helped push the ambulance into a minefield.

Very carefully retreating and sinking to sit on the side of the road, Doc dropped his aching head into his hands and tried to think. He was on foot, too close to the line for comfort, with no food, no medical equipment except the bandage on his belt...including no aspirin for his thumping headache. His medical bag was now burning along with everything else in the ambulance.



The officer and driver burned in the ambulance, the heat a growing discomfort on his back. One second he was waving at the boy from Brooklyn, the next...he shook his head once more. Nothing would be gained by dwelling on it. He wiped half-heartedly at his bloody nose then climbed to his feet. His equilibrium was still a bit off. He poked a finger gently into each ear to check for blood. He sighed with relief when he found none. The ringing in his ears from the noise he could easily deal with and would go away. A busted eardrum was altogether different.

Raising a shaking hand to shield his eyes, Doc took a look around. If there were any Germans in the area, they'd likely come to investigate the explosion. But, then, so would any Americans. He weighed his options carefully. Staying meant the risk of getting caught by the wrong side. Leaving seemed his best option, but it was going to be a very long walk. Sgt. Saunders wasn't expecting him back from leave until the next afternoon, since he'd stopped in the village on his way off the line. It would be at least another day before someone began to look for him.

Stumbling a few feet behind, he picked his helmet up from the road and shook out the dirt. With a sigh, he settled it gently on his aching head. Veering away from the intense heat of the burning wreckage, Doc began to walk. Come to think of it, the

doctors had been in such a hurry to get him and the wounded man into the ambulance...he wasn't really sure which evac they'd been headed for.

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Mumbling a rare mild swear under his breath as his foot once again caught in a tangle of vines and root, Doc began to regret his decision to cut through the woodlands. Maybe he'd have been better off sticking to the road. It would take him a week to make it back to his squad at this rate. The relaxation and calming influence his day of leave had gained him was rapidly dwindling, and his stomach grumbled in complaint of the missed lunch and prospect of no dinner.

He bent down to try to untangle his boot from the stubborn vine and froze as the ominous snap of a twig sounded behind him. Dropping to a crouch and subtly trying to free his foot, Doc swept his gaze across the gently swaying trees. Hopefully, what he'd heard was just one of the woodland creatures that called this place home. But he wouldn't want to bet his life on it.

The cold metallic slide and snick of a bolt made him freeze once again. Even his heart seemed to stop. He had started to turn his head to search the trees when he heard a rustle behind him, followed by a quiet command.

"Bewegen sie nicht."

Doc understood the tone if not the words. Swallowing back the bile that suddenly arose in his throat, Doc slowly raised his hands and stood. Jiggling his foot free of the traitorous root, Doc even more slowly turned to face the gruff voice. A man near as tall as Lt. Hanley, dressed in a German uniform, glared back at him. The German jerked his rifle toward Doc's web belt.

"Lassen Sie es fallen."

Reluctant to lose the meager supplies the belt held, Doc shrugged his shoulders and carefully shook his head.

The glare hardened as the German took a step forward and pointed the rifle in Doc's face. "Lassen Sie es fallen, oder ich Scheibe."

The man's intent was clear. Doc either dropped his bag or got shot. Sliding the thumb of his right hand under the clip, Doc gave it a twist and let the belt drop from his hips to land in the brush at his feet. The German nodded in satisfaction, nudging Doc backward until the medic bumped against a tree.

"Bewegen sie nicht."

The enemy soldier kept a wary eye on the American as he bent to pick up the discarded web belt. Slinging it over his shoulder, the German jerked his rifle to his left. With a sense of dread, Doc stepped away from the tree and preceded his captor in the direction indicated. He wondered if he was taking his first steps toward certain death.

Though this wasn't the first time he'd been captured by the enemy, it was the first time he'd been captured alone. No sergeant to come up with a daring escape plan. Unless he wanted to end up dead or spend the rest of the war in a POW camp, he'd have to come up with something on his own.

The fifty or so minutes Doc and his captor walked in silence were the longest of the medic's life. He was nearing the point of having to ditch his pride and ask for water when they finally came out of the trees near a farmhouse. A German voice drifted out of the shadows, answered by the soldier pressing a rifle to Doc's back. Sign-countersign, Doc thought. It must've been the right response, because another

German soldier slid out of the shade to join his captor. The two had a short conversation, with entirely too many gestures in his direction for Doc's comfort, before he was once more prodded into movement.

Stepping out of the treeline, Doc saw an old farmhouse at the top of a gently sloping field. He hoped the residents had long since headed for safer pasture. Trudging up the hill between the two Germans, the medic tried to make out any sentries posted nearby. He only saw one as the soldier stepped from the shelter of an outbuilding doorway, but that didn't mean there weren't more posted around the farmstead.

Pushed through the front door of the farmhouse, Doc found himself facing six more German soldiers. They all stopped speaking at the appearance of the American prisoner. There was no sign of the resident's previous owners and the Germans had obviously made themselves at home. The startled silence was broken when a bulky German, a sergeant if Doc remembered their insignia correctly, stood from his chair and raised his eyebrows at the medic's captor.

"Wo fanden Sie ihn?"

"Ich war auf meiner Weise Rückseite und gefunden ihm im Holz. Er war allein."

The sergeant smiled grimly and walked to stand in front of Doc. He eyed the medic up and down, clapped his hands together and nodded at the medic's captor. "Dieses ist die vollkommene Gelegenheit, die amerikanischen Linien einzusickern. Es konnte nicht besser ausgearbeitet haben."

Doc's captor, who the medic was privately calling Fritz, smiled back and tossed the confiscated web belt to one of his comrades. "Ich stimme zu."

The German sergeant narrowed his eyes thoughtfully and Doc sincerely hoped he wasn't trying to decide whether to shoot him. "Wir müssen vor amerikanischen Zeilenwechsel uns beeilen."

Fritz stepped back and lowered his weapon, but kept it ready in case the medic tried anything. "Ja. Bernd sollte gehen. Er ist gescheit und ist fast die gleiche Größe wie der Amerikaner."

The sergeant looked over at the small group of soldiers and gestured to one. "Ich stimme zu. Bernd, kommen her. Ich habe einen speziellen Zweck für Sie."

A young soldier, Bernd, stepped forward smartly to join his sergeant. Doc watched warily as the sergeant placed a hand on Bernd's shoulder and glanced back at Doc. "Sie tragen die Kleidung des Amerikaners und bilden Ihre Weise zu ihren Linien. Erfassen Sie so viele Informationen, wie Sie dann zurückkommen können. Verstanden?"

Looking from Doc to his sergeant, the young man stood straighter. "Ja Sergeant. Ich tue mein bestes."

"Gut." The sergeant gestured at Doc as Bernd started to unbutton his jacket. "Entfernen Sie Ihre Kleidung."

Confused, Doc shook his head. "I don't understand what you want."

His initial captor stepped forward to yank Doc's helmet off and passed it to Bernd. "Entfernen Sie Ihre Kleidung."

Doc hesitated, still not sure what they were saying. The sergeant tugged at Doc's jacket and gestured at the young soldier now taking off his shirt. Doc suddenly understood, but didn't like it. He knew what they would do with a soldier dressed as an American medic. Swallowing against his fear, Doc shook his head. He got a punch in the face that made him see stars for his trouble.

The German sergeant pulled a Luger from its holster and pointed it unwaveringly at Doc's forehead, his blue eyes flashing with anger. "Entfernen Sie Ihre kleidung oder ich Schiebe."

With shaking fingers, Doc shook his head gently to clear his thoughts and struggled to unbutton his jacket. He had to find a way to escape now. He had to warn someone about the infiltrator. Anger was quickly pushing past his fear. He hated the thought of some German walking around in *his* clothes, pretending to be a medic. Jerking the buttons loose, Doc's fingers steadied as he removed his shirt, throwing both shirt and jacket on the floor in fury. His boots, socks, undershirt and trousers soon joined them, much to his disgust. They'd have to shoot him for his undershorts.



Luckily, they didn't press that issue and Doc was handed a bundle of German uniform as his was gathered up and handed off to Bernd. Loath to don his enemy's clothing, Doc growled in frustration as he jerked the trousers on. Once dressed, the medic scratched at his neck where the borrowed jacket chafed. The ridiculous German boots were too big as well and would no doubt rub blisters.

The infiltrator obviously had the opposite problem. The young man stamped a foot in the American boots and grimaced at his sergeant. "Die aufladungen sind ein wenig kleines."

The sergeant gave a short laugh. "Sie leben."

Once Bernd was fully dressed with helmet and web belt firmly in place, the sergeant frowned and gestured at Doc. "Geben Sie mir seine umbauten."

The infiltrator stepped forward, removing his helmet and lifting his dogtags from around his neck. He removed Doc's tags and replaced them with his own. Switch complete, Doc watched as the young imposter wandered over to a nearby table with the sergeant, where the two held a quick discussion over several maps. The medic heartily wished he could get a look at those maps.

When the two finished their briefing, the sergeant shook the young soldier's hand. "Viel Glueck."

"Sie auch." Escorted by one of his comrades, Bernd opened the door and waved at his remaining friends before slipping out and shutting the door behind him.

As the remaining men in the room turned to look at him, Doc clenched his fists to fight off a wave of nearly uncontrollable rage at his situation. He refused to die here, dressed in a German uniform. Not without fighting, anyway. At a gesture from the sergeant, Doc slid down to sit with his back to the wall. The coat collar continued to irritate him and he unconsciously tugged at it as his eyes roamed the room. He had to keep a watch out for any chance to escape. He simply could not let that infiltrator find his way to the American lines.

Long hours passed as Doc planned, sitting on the cold wooden floor of the farmhouse. Doc's legs and other areas he didn't care to think about were growing numb as he plotted then discarded scheme after scheme to escape. The Germans had taken turns coming and going, obviously rotating perimeter patrols, while the sergeant

went over and over his maps. The medic was never without a guard. Doc shifted his legs, stretching the left one out to ease a slight cramp, and looked up as the sergeant gathered up his maps and slipped them into a ruck.

Fritz stepped outside and waved an arm at the two on the perimeter then slipped back in to gather up his equipment. Once everyone was ready to move out, Fritz poked his rifle in Doc's direction. "Stehen Sie auf."

With a glare at his captor, Doc struggled to his feet and stamped some blood back into them. The tingling from renewed circulation was enough to make him limp the first few steps. Shoved into line between Fritz and a small young soldier that reminded Doc of a cross between Billy and Kirby, Doc struggled find the least blister-making pace he could in the borrowed boots. He'd need to keep his feet healthy if he wanted to make a run for it.

With Fritz's weapon never far from his back, Doc didn't get his chance to make a run for it. The few times they stopped for a break, the medic was tied to a tree much to his fury. His mouth and throat were parched from the unrelenting heat, but Doc was too stubborn to ask for water. He rubbed his tongue against his molars to stir up a bit of saliva and swallowed gratefully. He knew he should swallow his pride as well and ask for water, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it.

His feet were already starting to blister, no matter what he did to prevent it. His hopes of escape began to dwindle, but Doc refused to give up completely. He had no idea where the German soldiers were taking him, but he'd have to be transported somehow if he was to be turned over to a POW camp. He'd have other opportunities to slip from his guards. It had been done before.

After walking until dusk, the soldiers stopped and began setting up shelter for the night. Once again tied to a tree, Doc watched as rain gear was strung up for tents, perimeters were established and ration cans were brought out for their evening meal. Fritz settled nearby and leaned over to offer Doc a canteen. The medic warred with his pride and conscience for several long moments before reluctantly accepting the offered water. He would be too weak to do anything come the morrow if he didn't stay hydrated. Doc drank the water, fighting his disgust, and handed the canteen back to his minder. Apparently food wasn't on the menu, but Doc wasn't sure he cared.

He tried to find a comfortable position against the tree, tilted his head back against the rough bark and closed his eyes. Sweat pooled and soaked into the back of his collar. The itchy, uncomfortable German collar. He'd give just about anything to get back into an American uniform. It didn't even have to fit well. The wool continued to itch and chafe, but Doc did his best to ignore it. It would soon be the least of his worries. Pushing that thought to the back of his mind with difficulty, the medic sighed and tried to relax. It would be a long, uncomfortable night.

Americans were so gullible. Bernd couldn't believe his luck. He had gone back to where Henrick had said he found the American medic, then headed for the road he knew from memorizing the maps wasn't far west of where he stood. Even if that wasn't the direction the medic had come from, Bernd had known he was sure to eventually find transportation to the American lines. He hadn't been wrong even though darkness was falling by the time he heard the rumble behind him.

Sitting in the back of the supply truck, Bernd smiled at his good fortune. He would receive a promotion at the least when he returned to his own lines with the information he was confident he'd be able to obtain. Who didn't trust a medic? Perhaps he'd even get a medal. Wouldn't that make Anneliese proud of him? Perhaps her father would let him call on her when he returned home.

By the time the sound of the 75 mm from a Panzer reached Bernd's ears, it was too late. There was an explosion, the truck veered sharply and rolled over on its side. Boxes and supplies pelted him as Bernd tumbled around in the back. Screams and gunfire fought with the ringing in his ears. Bernd struggled to pull himself from the jumble of boxes when he managed to regain his senses. Hearing a noise, he looked up in relief as a comrade checked the back of the overturned truck, weapon at the ready. His relief faltered when his fellow German pointed his Mauser with intent. Bernd sucked in a breath and held out his hand in desperation.

"Nein! Bitte!"

Bernd didn't have time to feel the pain in his chest before the second bullet killed him. When the German soldiers moved on, they had no idea they left one of their own behind.

Coming around the corner, the Lieutenant heard them even before he saw them. Saunders' squad. *The one he was looking for, though he wished he didn't have to.* He saw the men gathered around on crates and rickety chairs, huddled around a table propped up with a stack of bricks on one side, engaged in a round of poker. Judging by the pile of notes in front of Kirby, the wiry BAR man was having a lucky streak.



Lieutenant Hanley's long legs slowed as he approached the squad. He dreaded having to break the news. His eyes sought out Sergeant Saunders, who was taking their brief break from the war seriously, reclined in the grass by the remains of a wall with his booted feet propped on his helmet. Saunders raised his head slightly and smiled up at Hanley.

"Don't tell me you changed your mind about giving us a break, Lieutenant."

There must've been something in his face that gave it away when Hanley glanced from the Sergeant over to the men gathered around the make-shift poker table, because Saunders dropped his smile and became all business. The sergeant climbed to his feet and dusted off his pants. He bent over to pick up his helmet then held it loosely at his side, ready to head out if necessary. Saunders stood hipshot and scrutinized the look on Hanley's face.

"Something up, Lieutenant?"

The men at the poker table laid their cards down and turned their attention to their lieutenant, sensing something important. Hanley glanced briefly at each one as he gathered his words. Billy Nelson, the youngest, drew his brows together in a slight frown of apprehension. *No doubt thinking they were headed back out for another recon.* Littlejohn, the big, soft-hearted private waited patiently as always. Caje, the

slight soldier from Louisiana was unreadable as always. It was Kirby, the trouble-maker, who would take it hardest.

Turning his attention back to Saunders, Hanley pulled a disc of metal from his jacket pocket and handed it to the sergeant. "I'm sorry, Saunders. Apparently Doc was taking a wounded officer to the evac hospital. His ambulance went off the road for some reason and hit a minefield. They found two bodies-the driver and the officer. Doc somehow survived and wandered off on foot. From what they can gather, he was picked up sometime last night by a supply truck also on its way to evac. The truck was hit and crashed. Doc was found in the back. I'm sorry, Saunders. He was KIA."

Saunders rubbed his thumb gently over the raised metal letters. Name, rank, serial number. So little left of the man who'd worn them. Honored them. He heard the Lieutenant's words, but didn't want to accept them. Losing the medic would be a severe blow to morale. The quiet young man from Arkansas would leave behind a gaping hole in the squad that they'd find hard to fill. Saunders knew he shouldn't have relied so much on the medic's presence and support. He'd known this day might come. But it didn't make any sense.

It was Kirby, naturally, who broke the stunned silence. Jumping to his feet, the BAR man stared at the Lieutenant in disbelief. "What d'ya mean, he's KIA? He was on leave. He wouldn't have been in any ambulance. Some dumb clerk's made a mistake. Doc's supposed to be back any minute. He'll tell ya."

Kirby glared at the others as if daring them to contradict him. "You'll see. When he gets here it'll prove somebody screwed up somewhere."

This was the second medic Saunders' squad had lost. Hanley had known it would be a blow, even worse than the last one. Walton hadn't bonded with these men as surely as Doc had. The Lieutenant would arrange for the men to have a few days leave as soon as he returned to his office. Maybe by the time they returned to the line, he'd have a replacement medic for them. He hoped the new medic would be as welcomed as Doc had been. A good man who'd been lost simply because he'd been standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Saunders sighed and reached out to hand Kirby the dogtag. The wiry private took the tag begrudgingly but shook his head even as his eyes saw the name imprinted there as clear as day. Jaw muscles bunched as Kirby ground his teeth in anger. Without a word, he slipped the dogtag into his shirt pocket then turned on his heel and strode away. The others let him go. It would be a few hours before Kirby had burned off some of the grief and anger and would be approachable.

Saunders ran a hand over his face and turned to meet Hanley's gaze. "I'll write the letter, Lieutenant. His parents deserve to know how much... What he did..." With another sigh, Saunders finished the sentence with a shrug. How could he possibly convey to a grieving mother and father how much their son had done to help so many? How much could that knowledge really mean to a couple who'd lost their beloved child? He hated writing those letters. He'd had to write so many. But it was all he could do for Doc now.



When Doc's captor nudged him awake, it was almost a relief. He's spent a miserable night and looked forward to a miserable day. But at least they'd untie him and he could stretch his muscles. He felt like one big cramp. As Fritz untied his hands, Doc winced in anticipation. It only took a moment for the numbness to change to a tingling sensation then inexorably into a stabbing pain as the blood was finally allowed to pump its way in full force to his hands and fingers. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Doc shook his hands to get the blood to flow a little faster. He breathed a sigh of relief when the feeling ended and he could move his hands freely.

Glaring up at the German, Doc sat up to ease the cramp in his back. Today's march was going to be agony and he hoped it wasn't a long one. He begrudgingly accepted the canteen from Fritz but refused the offer of whatever was in the tin the German held out to him. It looked worse than what the Americans gave their soldiers. After handing back the canteen, Doc stretched and bent his legs in slow repetition to get the blood moving there as well.

Once the Germans had packed up their equipment Fritz jerked his rifle and Doc climbed wearily to his feet. He found a shuffling gait that kept his feet toward the front of the borrowed boots as much as possible so the heel would stay off his blisters. It made navigating the roots and brush a bit trickier, but he'd stay on his feet longer. No sense in giving the Germans a reason to shoot a prisoner they didn't want to carry.

Once they left the shelter of the trees, the heat of the day grew more and more sapping. Doc could hear the sound of rushing water off in the distance somewhere and it taunted him with its promise of thirst-quenching coolness. Shuffling step after shuffling step, the medic struggled to keep a pace ahead of his guard's jabbing rifle barrel. Sweat rolled its tickling way down his face, dripping off his nose and chin. The German collar was rubbing his neck raw and he tried not to turn his head. How much further were they going to go? Where exactly were they going, anyway?

Doc barely had a moment to blink as the point-man suddenly waved his arm and dropped to his knee. Fritz tackled Doc to the ground, knocking the medic's breath from him in a surprised whoosh. Sucking in a breath and immediately coughing from the inhalation of dust, Doc twisted to free an arm. Pain exploded as his guard twisted the freed wrist in a direction it was never meant to go. Doc stopped struggling, knowing any more pressure and the wrist would give.

With a growl at the medic, the German climbed to his feet at a signal from the scout and jerked Doc to his feet. A jab from the Mauser had Doc walking again. Fritz prodded him to join the others gathered around a figure on the ground. As they neared the group, Doc counted an additional two Germans, besides the one on the ground. Stragglers, helping a wounded comrade back to their lines, maybe. Instinct had him kneeling next to the bloodied soldier on the ground before anyone could stop him. It looked pretty bad. Though his friends had done their best at bandaging, they hadn't been able to keep it from bleeding fairly badly.

Lifting the bandage just long enough to get a good look, Doc shook his head. He automatically reached for the bandage kit at his belt, only to come up empty handed. Searching the circle of German uniforms standing in a ragged circle around him, Doc waved a hand at Fritz.

"I need your kit. I need the bandage kit-I know you've gotta have one."

But, of course, the German couldn't understand a word he said. Raising up in his knees, Doc made a frustrated gesture with his hands and tried to think of a way of making his need known without getting his head blown off for his trouble.

"Henrick, Er benötigt den Verband und das Puder von Ihrem Beutel."

Doc twisted around at the voice behind him. One of the newcomers. To his amazement, Fritz handed over the kit without a word. Doc took it gratefully and pulled the bandage and sulfa packet from the small pouch, making quick work of cleaning and bandaging the nasty shrapnel wound in the German's leg. The kid looked younger than Billy, staring up at the American with wide frightened eyes.

"He thinks he is dying. He did not believe us when we told him he would not."

Glancing back up at the newcomer, Doc saw honest concern. There was a lot of war etched in the thin dirt-smudged face. This man had been fighting for a long time. Dark brown eyes met his own and the medic quirked a grin. "Tell him I said it looks bad enough to send him home, but not so bad I think it'll kill him. Maybe he'll believe that."

Narrow shoulders relaxed a bit as the German stepped forward to kneel next to the frightened young man on the ground. Placing a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder, he smiled reassuringly. "Der Amerikaner sagt, dass Sie nach Hause gehen können, aber Sie nicht sterben. Da er ein Arzt ist, denke ich, dass er vermutlich weiß, über was er spricht. Sorgend. Gut?"

With a hitching sigh, the wounded young man relaxed slightly and gripped the hand on his shoulder briefly in thanks. Standing once more, Doc's translator reached out his hand. "Thank you. He is my cousin."

Hesitating just a moment, Doc took the offered hand and shook. "Just doin' my job. Sure am glad to see someone who speaks English."

"I am Alrik. My cousin is Dierck. We are grateful, American."

Shrugging off the thanks, Doc raised his hands warily as he got to his feet. "Will you tell these guys I'm harmless so they don't shoot me if I move too fast or something?"

Doc slowly lowered his hands and watched the quiet conversation between Alrik and the German sergeant. It was a quick discussion and the sergeant barked orders to two of the men still standing in a ring around Doc. The two men nodded their understanding and broke away as Alrik walked back. Dierck moved his leg restlessly, reaching for it with his hands as if to still the pain.

"Hey, how d'ya say 'don't move' in German?"

Stopping to stand so he blocked the sun from his younger cousin, Alrick frowned at the lines of pain on the pale face. "Bewegen Sie sich nicht."

Trying it out, Doc chuckled to himself. He'd never get that whole throat-clearing sound, but he did his best. He reached out a restraining hand just as all hell broke loose.

A burst of gunfire came from a ravine to the west of them, the direction from which Doc had heard the water. Screams of agony mingled with the harsh bark of a BAR. For a brief, irrational moment Doc was sure it was Kirby and the rest of the squad.

Gunfire erupted all around him and Doc hit the ground to cover his patient, no matter that he was German. He covered his head and tried to ignore the screams of the wounded and dying. The yelling, gunfire and occasional grenade seemed to go on forever, but soon enough the fighting stopped. Raising his head carefully, Doc stared into the terrified eyes of Dierck who mouthed a painful, "Alrick?"

"Bewegan Sie sich nicht. Uh, I'll look." Pushing up onto his knees, Doc froze at the familiar painful jab of a rifle barrel in the back.

"You just freeze right there, Kraut. Raise your hands nice and slow. I know you speak English 'cause I heard you just now."

Sagging in relief, Doc twisted around and smiled at his rescuer. "Boy am I glad to see you. I thought I was headed for a prisoner of war camp for sure."

"You still are, Kraut."

Doc stared up at his fellow American in surprise for a moment then glanced down at the clothes he was wearing. Of course. Here he was in a German uniform, in a squad of Germans. Doc wouldn't believe it either.

"Listen, it's a long story. I got captured. They took my clothes, made me wear these and marched me off to who-knows-where. We stopped to help this wounded kid and now here we are. I know you don't believe me, but it's the God's truth."

"Sure, Mac, whatever you say. Now get up and go join your Kraut buddies over there. We'll rig a stretcher for this one."

Kirby was never, ever going to believe this story.

It was hot, the shimmering heat radiating up from the cobblestones, but it wasn't the weather that dragged at Billy's feet, making each step like trudging through molasses. Nothing had seemed to touch Doc. Sure, the medic had been wounded once or twice, but never very badly. Never so much he hadn't managed to hobble on his own two feet and still treat someone else if need be. Doc had been like a good luck charm. Now their good luck charm was gone.

Billy clutched the can of coffee to his chest that he'd gotten from Garcia in the mess tent. He didn't know why having the coffee was so important. Maybe he thought the smell of it would draw the guys away from their bunks. Maybe Kirby would finally say something. The usually loud-mouthed private hadn't said a word since they'd heard the news of Doc's death. A replacement was coming in the morning and Billy felt bad for the guy. He'd have a hell of a time gaining trust from Kirby. *Or Caje.*

At least Billy had Littlejohn to lean on. Littlejohn was always there to talk to and never tried to say everything was okay. Just that they'd go on and do their job and go home when the war was over. But if even Doc couldn't make it home, how much hope did any of them have?

Kicking at a stone as he rounded the old inn, Billy sternly told himself to stop thinking like that. To think positively, just like Littlejohn had told him to. Just follow orders, keep his head down, teach the reppledepples which end was up and he'd go home when the war was over.

Raising a hand in a friendly wave to the grim-faced MP standing by the front door of the inn, Billy smiled. He often wondered what it was like to be an MP. It looked kinda boring, but then again maybe it was safer than being a dogface. He could faintly hear voices drifting down from the open window on the second floor.

"I'm telling you for the last time, I'm not a German. I'm a medic. King Company. Saunders' squad."

Billy's feet slowed and he stopped below the open window. It couldn't be. Could it? No, it was just wishful thinking. But that southern drawl had sure sounded-. Turning on his heel, Billy trotted over to stop in front of the MP.

"Hey, buddy, mind if I go in? I think a friend of mine is in there."

Without even glancing at him, the MP shook his head. "Nobody's in there but people assigned here and a few German prisoners. Beat it."

He hesitated a moment, but Billy knew he'd never get past an MP. He wandered over and stood looking up at the open window. Billy could only catch the occasional word now that the voices had lost volume, but he dropped the can of coffee when he heard a distinct Arkansas accent demand in absolute anger and frustration to, "Just go ask Lt. Hanley."

"Holy cow!"

Leaving the aluminum can forgotten in the dirt, Billy ran as fast he'd ever run back to his squad. He needed Lt. Hanley. By the time he'd found Littlejohn and Kirby lying listlessly on their cots, Billy hadn't come across anyone who knew where the lieutenant was. He slid to a stumbling stop by Littlejohn and grabbed him by the lapels, trying to pull the bigger man to his feet.

"Littlejohn, you'll never believe it! You hafta come with me. I tried to find Lt. Hanley, but nobody knew where he was. Have you seen the Sarge anywhere?"

Struggling to his feet, trying to pry Billy's hands loose, Littlejohn stared at the younger man in complete bewilderment. "What are you babbling about, Billy?"

Even Kirby showed some interest in the garbled outburst. "What the heck has you all riled up, Nelson?"

Glancing from one to the other in excitement, Billy shifted from foot to foot. "I went to get some coffee from the mess tent and was comin' back. I went past the inn where they're setting up headquarters and such and heard Doc."

A dark look of anger slipped over Kirby's face as he slowly pushed himself up from his cot. "That's not even kinda funny, Nelson."

Billy took an unconscious step back toward Littlejohn and held out a placating hand. "No, no Kirby. I'm serious. I heard a voice sayin' he wasn't a German, that they'd taken his clothes and he was a medic. Mentioned Sgt. Saunders and Lt. Hanley. I'm tellin' you, Doc is alive. I heard him with my own ears."

Littlejohn reached out to turn his friend around and look him in the face. "Billy, are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. Maybe it was like Kirby said. Somebody made a mistake somewhere."

Not really sure what to believe, Littlejohn nodded nevertheless. It was worth a shot. "Okay. You show us where you heard him and we'll see what's what."

Keeping his excitement to a slow jog, Billy led them up the hill and over several blocks to the inn. He could tell by how far Kirby lagged behind them that the BAR man didn't really believe him. Billy couldn't wait for Kirby to hear it for himself. He slowed to a walk as they neared the window. He didn't want the MP to chase them off.

Stopping below the window near the corner, Billy pointed to it. "Right there."

It was several long minutes, long enough for Kirby to start looking threatening, until they heard it. "Would you, for pity's sake, just do like I told ya? Just ask for



Hanley. How hard is that? No, I can't sprechen Sie Deutsches. Unless all ya want is for me to say 'don't move'."

Kirby stood stiffly for a moment, staring incredulously at Billy. "Jesus, it is Doc." The spell broke and Kirby, always the troublemaker, bent to pick up a handful of small stones and debris from the base of the wall. Standing swiftly, he threw the stones one-by-one at the open window.

"Doc! Hey, Doc, tell 'em to let you go 'cause you owe me ten bucks!"

The stern face of an intelligence officer appeared at the window as a surprised shout from their missing medic sounded behind him. "Kirby?! Kirby, go get Hanley!"

The officer disappeared from the window and Billy shuffled his feet, trying to decide whether to stay or run and find Hanley. "Holy cow. That was a Major."

A panicked glance behind him caught a familiar figure in Billy's peripheral vision. "Sarge! Hey, Sarge!"

All three seemed to sag in relief when Sgt. Saunders changed direction to join them. That in itself was enough to make Saunders sigh and rub at his forehead. "What have you jokers done now?"

Littlejohn drew a breath to launch into the whole story, but was cut short by the MP who ordered them all inside. All four were escorted up the stairs, with Billy and Kirby talking over each other as they tried to explain everything to Saunders. Led down a short hall into room, no explanations were needed. Sure as Billy had said, there was Doc.

Their medic was covered in dust and looked worn to exhaustion, wearing a German uniform and practically sagging in a straight-backed wooden chair. Doc tried to dredge up a weary smile at the sight of them. "Hey, Kirby. Sorry, but some Kraut took my clothes. He's got your ten dollars."

"Keep it, Doc. I'm sure you'll win it back from me sometime anyway."

Saunders could hardly believe his eyes. "Doc, we thought you were dead."

Jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the intelligence men, Doc frowned. "They said something about my body bein' found in a truck. Must've been the guy who took my clothes. I think they were tryin' to get him to our lines. Gather information. Even took my dog tags."

Doc swiveled around to look at the Major with concern. "Hey, my folks weren't told I was dead, were they?" He turned back to Saunders with a worried frown. "Can you make sure they know I'm okay, Sarge? That it was all a big mistake?"

"Sure, Doc. They probably haven't even received the telegram yet."

The intelligence Major sighed and waved one of his aides off on some errand. Presumably to look for Lt. Hanley. "Okay, medic. You win. It's obvious a misunderstanding has occurred somewhere and you're not a German. We'll get this straightened out with your CO then you'll be debriefed. Until then, I have to ask you to stay here. Your friends can wait with you if you like. I'm sure they have a lot of questions."



Without another word, the Major and his remaining assistant slipped past Saunders to leave the five squad members to exchange stories. Reaching into his pocket, the sergeant pulled out a chocolate bar he'd received in a package from home just that morning. He handed it over to Doc then pulled over a seat. Easing himself into the old wooden chair, Saunders watched the medic eat the candy in obvious relief at having some nourishment.

"Doc, what the heck happened out there?"

Wiping a bit of chocolate from his mouth, Doc swallowed and shook his head as he thought back on how it all started. "I was standin' in the wrong place, at the wrong time Sarge. You just wouldn't believe it."

The End