

# Morphine

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*Sincere appreciation to Doc II, my writing mentor, friend, and beta reader. Thank you for being you and for standing tall. You've made the Combat fan world a better place.*

*This story is for Kyng Tygr, who always asked for one more "fix". Here it is.*

It was inhuman. However, that was the Army way. Once you signed the papers, the government owned you body and soul. Lost in the clamor and mesh of the giant machine, you were added into the gear box and kept in your tiny part that helped roll the mighty caisson forward. The top brass never thought of the common privates in increments less than one hundred, and then only to count the dead against the casualties of the enemy.

Further down the ranks, the situation barely improved. You progressed from a serial number, to a name, and then a face. The few people who actually knew you were the men you depended on daily to stay alive. Total strangers were thrown together and told to live, fight, and die together. You either had to get along or you were dead. More often than not, it was a game against fate as to which friend was killed and which was left alive to try to beat the odds the next day.

In the end, fate always won. You try to buck a stacked deck and you'll lose. One day, your entire company gets wiped out. You and a friend are the only survivors, but the buddy is in critical condition and not expected to live. And what does the Army do? They pat you on the back, slap a medal on your chest, reassign you to a new company, and send you to the showers.

"It's inhuman." The lukewarm water poured over Michael Colton's body, washing away the battle field grime. The words he had moaned were drowned out by the steady stream of water that sought to cleanse his body, but couldn't touch the stain on his mind. "Matt..."

*No!* Michael shut his eyes and leaned his forehead against the cool tiles in the shower stall. He couldn't think about Matt. Not yet. Not like that. The water sliding down him turned cold, but Michael didn't notice. Standing there for countless minutes, he waited until his mind cleared enough for him to shut the shower off. A shiver ran down his back and he searched for a towel.

It felt good to be clean again, to be free from the stench, dirt, and sweat that clung to your clothes and permeated your skin. Hurriedly, Michael rubbed the towel over his left arm, briefly covering the tiny wounds he had received from the freshly finished battle and countless others before. Not wanting to look at them, Michael grabbed an undershirt from the neat stack of clean fatigues and began dressing. Before pulling on his pants, he carefully extracted the pouch he had shoved between the creased and folded trouser legs. Yes, the objects in the pouch were still there, untouched.

Emerging from the shower building, Michael picked up his M1 Garand and helmet from where he had left them on an outside bench. He slung a newly issued backpack over his shoulder. The pouch he had carefully hidden while he was in the shower was securely strapped to his web belt, from which hung his canteen, bayonet, and other pouches containing medical supplies and rations. The only flaw to his perfectly clean state was the muddy boots and faded helmet with its torn net cover.

Reaching the brilliant sunshine of the day, Michael stood still and tipped his head back into the full force of the light. He closed his light blue eyes for a moment and just relaxed, breathing deeply the smell of clean air. Here there was no stink of cordite, odor of burned flesh, or lung rasping smoke. Armed with the knowledge he was momentarily safe in the midst of the command post, Michael knew he could face the day also aided by the contents of the pouch on his belt. He would just do his best not to think about Matt and the rest of the guys.

Now he had to find the new squad he had been assigned to. Briefly recalling the name of the company, he asked a passing GI for directions.

"King Company is stationed down by the river. Follow this street, take the first right, and you'll find them." The man continued on his way.

King Company. Michael had heard of the men who belonged to this part of the army giant, particularly about the ones he was to join in First Squad. They were reputed to be tough, able to get the job done, and good men. *Similar to my squad.* The thought fluttered through Michael's memory, even as he tried to suppress the painful remembrance.

These feelings occupied him until he found himself next to the river. The water looked halfway decent, not dirtied and putrid like so many other others he had seen. Men in various degrees of dress lounged around a sturdy brick building, and all were surveying him with curious expressions. This was to be his new home. These were to be the men in whom he would trust his life and guard theirs in return.



It was wrong. He shouldn't be here.

"Sergeant Saunders?" Michael inquired in a suddenly dry voice.

"That's me," a man leaning against the shady wall of the building spoke. A Thompson and camo lined helmet were on the ground beside him within easy reach.

Colton nodded in acknowledgement. "I'm the replacement," he stated.

The soldier nearest Colton was washing his socks in a small bucket. Stripped to the waist, the man was short and wiry and seemed to jerk with energy. A cigarette dangled from his mouth and he talked around it as he joked with his fellow squad mates. Removing his hands from the wash bucket, the man shook the soap suds off and held out his right hand to Michael.

"Welcome to the First Squad. The name's Kirby, William G."

Michael took the offered hand and shook it firmly. He found himself responding easily to Kirby's grin and friendliness. "Michael Colton," he introduced himself.

"Good to have you with us," Kirby continued, "stash your stuff inside." He motioned to the brick building.

Michael stepped inside the building and found an empty cot upon which he deposited his gear. He returned outside and stood in the doorway, surveying the group of men he was now permanently assigned to. A wave akin to homesickness threatened to smother him, and his uncontrolled hand flew to his pouch. He tried to shake off the feeling of panic and slowly unclenched his fingers. Meeting the gaze of one of the squad members, Michael was momentarily comforted when he saw a soothing smile that seemed to hide behind the blue eyes.

The man rose to his feet, and Michael saw he wore a red crossed arm band around his coat sleeve. The medic moved toward him, holding out a cup in one hand.

"I'm Doc," he spoke in a southern accent. "Want some coffee?"

"Sure," Michael accepted the cup and then sipped a bit of the brew. *Not bad.*

"Take a load off your feet," Doc invited, who had returned to his seat on the ground.

Following Doc's example, Michael folded his legs under and sat down. He took another cautious sip from the cup; the coffee was hot but palatable. Michael chanced a second look around the group, and Doc noticed.

"Meet the rest of the squad," Doc proffered the introductions. "This is Caje," he gestured to a swarthy soldier who was cleaning a well used M1. The man's chiseled face was surrounded by the dark hair of a three o'clock shadow, but he gave a friendly smile of welcome. "And that's Littlejohn." This was directed to a hulk of a man who had a wise look in his eye along with an affable grin.

"Hi," Littlejohn spoke, "you new to the area?"

"No," Michael replied after a swallow of coffee. "I landed on the beaches."

"Great!" Kirby laughed from his sock washing, "bout time they sent us someone who wasn't wet behind the ears and green clean through."

Michael smiled quietly and glanced down at his cup. He knew that feeling all too well.

Before any more conversation could continue, a runner approached the group and hailed them. "Sergeant Saunders? Lieutenant Hanley would like to see you."

"Alright, be there soon." Saunders acknowledged. The runner nodded and continued on his way. Saunders placed his helmet on his blond head and reached for the Thompson before rising to his feet.

Kirby, always the clown looking for a laugh, gave Saunders a typical send off. "Make sure the Lieutenant is signing our two week passes to gay Paree, okay, Sarge?"

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"Hello, Saunders," Hanley greeted the noncom. "I want to go over the assignment you'll start tomorrow."

"Where are we going next, Lieutenant?"

"Recon patrol to spot the position of German infantry units supported by StuG III tanks that have been harassing our left flank. Intelligence reports that they've been last seen near the town of Avongne." He pointed out the town's position on the map. It's a small place, but apparently of good value to the Germans."

The highly produced and utilized Sturmgeschutz III assault vehicles packed an impressive amount of fire power. Coupled with infantry troops, they were a formidable foe. Finding and dealing with this particular StuG group would relieve a major thorn from the side of King Company.

"You just want verification of their position?" Saunders questioned.

"Yes, and avoid contact. Take one of the radios and report back as soon as you've found them."

"Want us to head out first thing?"

"No, make sure the men have a hot breakfast first."

"Yes sir," the sergeant accepted the map, folded it, and stuffed the paper into his shirt.

"Any thing else, sir?"

"No, that should be it." Hanley shook out two cigarettes and offered one to Saunders.

"The replacement catch up with you?"

"Colton?" Saunders nodded and accepted the smoke. "Yeah, he did."

"Good." Hanley took a drag on his cigarette and exhaled the smoke slowly. "He's a good man, excellent record."

Saunders merely gave a slight inclination of his head. The invisible "but" Hanley had left unsaid hung in the air. However, the lieutenant knew all too well Saunders' wish not to pry into his men's past histories. Letting the subject slide, the two men finished their cigarettes in silence.

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Michael was beginning to feel uncomfortable again. The men around him were talking easily to each other, but their camaraderie was reminding him too much of his old squad. His hidden feelings were mounting and threatening to overwhelm him. Glancing at his watch, Michael felt sweat starting to build on his upper lip. The time was wrong; he shouldn't be feeling these reactions now, and he desperately struggled for control.



It took a moment for Michael to realize that the short, energetic private named Kirby was asking him a question. Giving one last shake to his mental stupor, Michael felt the squad's collective gaze resting on him.

"Sorry, you were saying?" Michael excused himself.

"What outfit were you with?" Kirby posed the question again.

"Baker Company, Fourth Squad," came the soft reply. Kirby's innocent yet probing question was again conjuring up the ghosts of the not so distant past.

Seeing Michael trying to hide a look of discomfort, Doc attempted to steer the conversation into safer channels. "Been a while since we've gotten some rain. Sure would be nice and it would help cool things off."

Michael nodded, rather grateful for the medic's help but mostly irritated that he couldn't hide his uneasiness better. In the back of his mind, Michael knew that sooner or later his past would come out, but for now it was easier and safer to run from that unwelcome revelation.

Littlejohn picked up the conversation. "The farmers here sure need the rain for their crops. They need all the help they can get, though there sure won't be a big crop of anything this year."

"Just burned out houses and flattened villages," came Caje's quiet comment, which promptly killed any further remarks about the weather. Somehow small, every day matters always seemed to point back to the war.

Finished with his sock washing, Kirby spread them on the hot cobblestones to dry. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a rather bedraggled deck of cards, fanned them out, and started shuffling.

"C'mon, anyone want a game of poker? It's too quiet around here."

"How can it be quiet when you keep yapping?" Littlejohn's teasing words seemed to come from second nature when he spoke to the B.A.R. man.

"Annggh, I meant quiet as in lack of action."

"I don't think he can sit still for more than five minutes." Littlejohn spoke the loud aside to Caje, who smiled.

"Sure I can, I just don't want to right now." Kirby was in high spirits today. "What ya say, Colton? Five card stud?"

"Haven't gotten my pay yet." Michael made a noncommittal gesture. Around him the rest of the squad members signaled their intent to sit out as well.

"Oh well, some other time." Kirby slipped the deck in his pocket and then unwittingly moved back into dangerous territory. "Say Colton, you said you were Baker Company. Do you know Charlie Smithton? Him and me went through basic together and I think he landed in one of Baker's platoons. Boy, I sure cleaned his clock in a poker game once."

"Don't know him," Michael managed to squeeze out from a suddenly contracted throat. Charlie Smithton was as foreign to him as the Emperor of Japan, but another soldier named Charlie had served with him in his old squad. Served and died along with the rest of the men.

Another gray wave of panic swept over Michael. He had to get away from Kirby's questioning voice; he had to before he snapped.

"Excuse me," Michael muttered as he shot to his feet, holding the empty coffee cup out to Doc. Doc's hand found the cup by pure reaction, he along with the others were regarding Michael in confusion. Barely able to lift his feet fast enough, Michael hurried away along a path that led next to the river.

A few moments went by in which Kirby was still stunned to silence. Littlejohn broke the quiet.

"Don't you ever know when to shut up, Kirby?"

"How is it my fault?" The scrappy man was indignant. "What did I say?" For the life of himself, Kirby honestly couldn't remember if or how he had gone wrong.

"Well, it was obviously something he didn't want to hear," was Littlejohn's conclusion.

“That ain’t no answer! I mean, I wouldn’t go off the deep end if someone asked me to join a poker game. And he said he didn’t know Charlie Smithton.” Kirby shot back defensively. “What do you think, Cajé?”

Cajé shrugged. “He’s new to the squad and probably isn’t comfortable with us yet. Give him some time.”

“Cajé is right,” Doc agreed. “Maybe there’s something bothering him, and he might let us know in time. Maybe you should do what the Sarge does, Kirby, and not ask personal questions.” Doc’s advice was given without sting or barb.

“Annggh,” Kirby muttered his trade mark phrase and left it at that. He still couldn’t fathom exactly what had been said that had turned Michael pale and caused him to leave.

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With his head pounding as hard as his heart, Michael tried to slow his forced retreat from the squad. He knew he looked ridiculous and was acting like a lunatic, but he couldn’t help it. He wondered what Matt would have said about his actions and immediately felt shame as he pushed aside the twinge of conscience.

Finally taking a bearing check, Michael realized he didn’t know what part of the French town he was in. He was still by the river, but he had no indication of how far or how long he had gone. Spotting a lone tree spreading its shade on the river bank, Michael turned his steps to the welcome shelter.

As he sat with his back secure against the tree trunk, once again his conscience issued a blast of reproach. This time Michael couldn’t shake off the accusations. He knew he had been trying to put off the showdown with the haunting demons of the past. Part of him wanted to face them, but the great majority of his feelings told him it was safer to run, to hide, to bury. Unrealized tears welled in his eyes as his insides twisted in turmoil.

Reaching for the pack on his belt, Michael withdrew a syrette with trembling fingers. For a long intermission he gazed at the small device in his hand, and then he gently put it aside so he could roll his sleeve up. After baring his left arm, Michael untangled a leather cord from the dog tags around his neck. Making sure the medallion that hung on the cord was out of the way, he looped it around his arm and tied a quick knot, then pulled the end tight with his teeth. While waiting for the vein to become pronounced, Michael readied the needle. As he balled his fist, Michael guided the needle and gently inserted the tip into his forearm. The familiar prick of the bevel piercing his skin went unnoticed. Slowly he squeezed the tube, emptying the morphine into his body.

Michael leaned his head against the tree and inhaled deeply. For a brief moment, he closed his eyes. He felt safe now. Then he shook himself up; he couldn’t give in to the full effects of the drug yet. With a tug, he pulled the cord loose and it fell into his lap. Removing his bayonet from its sheath, Michael dug a shallow hole and buried the used syrette. This task complete, Michael cleaned the dirt off his blade and put it away.

Now he could relax. He could feel the inner tumult slip away as the twisted knots untied. Meanwhile, the sun warmed the air around him and he was comfortable beneath the shade of the tree. He could still hear the mental murmurings of his conscience, but the beating voice had been regulated to a background hum.

A fly’s drone buzzed in his ear, and Michael raised a lazy hand to fend it off. Dropping his arm into his lap, he felt the smooth texture of the leather cord. He played his fingers around its supple length; it actually had been a shoe string his mother fashioned into a necklace. The medallion itself was a small eighteenth century coin that a distant grandfather brought to the new country when he emigrated from England. Michael recalled waking up in the middle of the night to find his mother working over the necklaces; Matt had been given one as well. Knowing the simple charms were intended to remind them of home, Michael could feel his mother’s love whenever he touched the worn metal. Suddenly his hand contracted into a fist, crushing the

string and medallion against his calloused palm. Matt's charm had been lost when the bullets that claimed his life severed the cord.

It had happened so quickly. Their squad was pinned down under ruthless enemy fire and cover was low. Not heeding the requiem wailing bullets, Medic Matthew Colton raced through the raging choir to tend the wounded men. After one particularly harrowing run, Matt leapt for cover and landed in a blown out crater where Michael and squad leader Corporal Allen Reeves were huddled. Barely high enough to offer decent cover, the shell hole was directly in the German's main target area and subject to withering fire. Michael and Reeves could barely snap off a shot before being pounded by the Deutch weaponry.

Matt informed his brother and the corporal that First Squad--and their machine gun--had been wiped out. Sergeant Pickering and what was left of Third Squad was also under fire; Matt was on his way over to their positions when he dropped into the crater.

With startling clarity, Michael recalled the long look and last words his brother had spoken. The medic asked how Fourth Squad was holding, and Reeves had replied that they were well for the moment, though Charlie Hangar and Pete Kidd had been killed. Matt turned his attention to his younger brother, slapped him on the leg, and told him to hang on.

"Matt, I..." Michael suddenly couldn't speak through his constricted vocal cords. He knew he had to make reparations for the morning's misunderstanding before the battle went one single step forward.

But Matt had sparked his familiar grin that traveled from his mouth to his blue eyes in one quick movement. "You keep your head on straight and we'll talk when we get out of this mess." His features tightened back into grim lines as the possibility of their escaping ran through his mind.

Michael nodded and swallowed back the words he desperately needed to say. He had always done what Matt instructed him to do--until recently. Just then the air was split with a roar that demanded, "Medic!" Matt held a firm grip on his rucksack and made to jump out of the crater when Corporal Reeves barred the way.

"Are you crazy?" he shouted, "You'll get killed out there!"

Again the cry for medic came, though it was nearly drowned out by the shriek of flying bullets. Matt shook his head and pushed past the noncom. "Keep an eye on Michael and make sure he doesn't do anything stupid!" Matt flipped the words over his shoulder and then dove out in the maelstrom of lead.

He almost made it to the crater where the wounded soldier lay. Even though his arm band and helmet were prominently marked with the crimson cross, the running figure caught the attention of the German marksmen. Helpless, Michael watched as his worse nightmare unfolded before his eyes. His brother had been running pell-mell and then his body was jerked erect as if by the harsh tug of a puppet's string. Slowly, Matt crumpled forward and lay still.

The next eternity lingered in Michael's mind making him a remote witness of a stranger's tragedy. The sound of the battle ceased, as if a water spout had been turned off by an unseen hand. All Michael could see was his brother's body lying under the harsh sun, stray bullets continuing to strike the medic's flesh. Though Michael's legs and arms were moving frantically, he couldn't make any headway to Matt. Something was holding him back, but the strength of Corporal Reeves' arms didn't register with Michael. All he knew was he couldn't reach his brother, his only friend.

Sound was reintroduced with a vengeance when artillery shells began to fall. Whether the shells were American or German didn't matter as they wrecked havoc and death to both sides. Michael attempted to struggle towards Matt once again, but Reeves hung on with tenacious determination. A cry of retreat vibrated in his ear but he didn't listen to the corporal's order. Unbeknownst to himself Michael was screaming himself hoarse as he struggled against Reeves. Then Matt's body appeared to grow smaller through the dust and raining debris and Michael was moving, but not on his own accord. Corporal Reeves had picked him and was

struggling away from the bombardment and battlefield. However he didn't get very far and the last thing Michael truly recalled was Matt's huddled body becoming obscured by a cloud of dust before the noise escalated to a climax and the scene exploded into darkness.

But it wasn't truly dark, and Michael opened his eyes to admit the searing sunlight. No longer filtered by the overhead green leaves and branches, the sun had shifted west. Gasping for breath, he tugged at the stubborn straps that kept his canteen lashed to his belt. With a shudder, Michael realized he was no longer a week in the past and lay still.



The events after the battle massacre were vague and unimportant. Michael was only in the hospital for a couple days, and when he was released he found Baker Company had been reformed. Michael and one other member of Fourth Squad were the sole survivors, and Michael was the only one not seriously injured. Corporal Reeves had been killed by flying shrapnel, but his body had shielded Michael. With the new recruits filling the ranks of Baker, Michael found himself a member of the replacement pool.

Things had happened so fast once Michael returned from the field. He moved in a daze since Matt's death and hadn't really come to until the morning's shower. Now that he was

reassigned and billeted with complete strangers, he felt his absolute isolation. The only comfort available was the tiny syrettes--but the supply was dwindling quickly.

It was time to end the reminiscing. Michael knew he had put off returning to his new squad long enough. Replacing the coin charm around his neck, the soldier stood. The change in altitude made his head whirl slightly and brought the beginning twinge of a headache. Further putting off his return journey, Michael attempted to quench his parched mouth and throat with the stale water in his canteen. Eventually he ran out of stalling tactics and started back to the billet.

When Michael arrived, the men were just leaving to get their hot rations from the chow line. Doc invited Michael to come with them and he did. No one said anything about his startling disappearance, but each seemed to be in accord to ignore the strange occurrence.

The men received their rations and dispersed to eat and visit with the members of the platoon. The lieutenant whom Michael briefly met that morning appeared and began talking with Saunders. The two officers' eyes settled on Michael for a moment, and the private felt his shoulders automatically start to hunch up in an attempt to remain small and unnoticed. Then he caught himself with a silent rebuke. There was no way the two could know about the morphine. He was just feeling edgy.

Prying his own guilty gaze away from the pair, he looked around for the squad members. Caje and Kirby were joking with soldiers Michael was not familiar with. Doc and then Littlejohn silently opted to sit with Michael while they ate. Suddenly glad for their company, Michael determined to forget the memories he had endured and tried to hold onto the last shred of the calming morphine.

Even though the prospect of hot chow was appealing, Michael found himself picking at the food. He swallowed a few mouthfuls, but it was all he could do to keep the contents in his stomach. Pushing the greasy food around with his utensil, Michael realized he did not have a large appetite to begin with. Matter of fact, he truly hadn't been hungry for days and just ate out of force of habit. Feeling his stomach clench and give a warning heave, Michael put down his mess kit.

"You alright?" Doc asked, concerned at Michael's flushed features.

“Not so hungry anymore,” Michael knew it was a lame excuse, but it was true.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I’ll take what’s left,” came Littlejohn’s helpful, hungry offer. The large man’s mess plate was empty.

Pushing the unwanted plateful of food over to Littlejohn, Michael gratefully replied, “Help yourself.” He then retrieved his canteen from his belt and took a slow sip of the tepid water. Grimacing at the brackish taste, he poured out the offending liquid and then stood. “I’m going to get some fresh water,” he announced, and felt foolish. He wasn’t required to explain every move he made, but the transition to new squad mates was still awkward.

“Think he’s alright?” Littlejohn asked Doc in between mouthfuls of his second dinner.

The medic watched Michael’s retreating back. “I don’t know, Littlejohn,” Sensing someone was behind him, Doc turned his head and saw Saunders. Having finished his chat with Hanley, the Sarge walked over to Doc and Littlejohn’s picnic spot.

Not sure where to begin, but feeling the need to express his doubts, Doc spoke. “Sarge, I’m kinda worried about Colton.”

“How so?” Saunders asked, his blue eyes cool and expressionless.

*In for a penny, in for a pound*, Doc mused. “I don’t think he’s fully recovered. When he came back to the squad his pupils looked dilated and he didn’t touch a bit of food.”

“He let me eat all of it,” Littlejohn interposed.

Saunders removed his helmet and ran a hand through his already ruffled blond hair. Attempting to hide a half hearted smile at Littlejohn’s helpful comment, he replaced the camo covered head gear. “Well, Doc, skipping a meal is no cause to send him back to the hospital. Unless you’re saying he’s unfit for duty, in which case Lt. Hanley will have to look into the matter.”

Doc nodded. “I just feel there’s more than meets the eye, but I know they wouldn’t have released him unless he had recovered.”

“If he feels ready to talk, I’m sure he will.” Saunders reiterated Doc’s own advice from the afternoon.

“I know, Sarge.” Doc nodded. He wasn’t sure if he had done the right thing in alerting Saunders, but he silently promised to keep a watchful eye on Michael Colton.



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Ever so slowly, the long summer day yielded to the advent of night. Men returned to their assigned lodging and soon lost all of the day’s care as they fell asleep. Crickets and various night creatures emerged, some engaging in song while others silently acted according to species’ dictations.

However for some, the depths of sleep were unattainable. Michael attempted to curb his restless tossing and turning on the thin cot. The early afternoon’s doze and induced nap left him wide eyed and restless. Listening to the squads’ peaceful snores rising around him only made Michael more agitated that his movement might disturb the men.

Finally he could stand the inactivity no longer. Rising as silently as possible, Michael slipped outside. Once the confining walls were removed, he breathed deeply and shut his eyes. The cool night air was a welcome relief from the oppressive heat of the day and the stuffy atmosphere indoors. Only one more thing was needed to accomplish perfect relaxation, and Michael’s hand caressed the morphine laden pouch.

Without aid of a light, Michael's practiced fingers slid the shot deep into his arm. He transferred the empty ampoule back into the pouch, promising to dispose of it later. On their accord, his feet wandered across the street to a bench that overlooked the river. Slumping onto the worn boards, Michael listened to the cricket chorus accompanied by the river's whisper. Completely phased out, he didn't realize he had company until the rasp of a lighter's wheel grated a flame into existence.

Jumping off the bench, Michael whirled around to see Sergeant Saunders standing, calmly lighting a cigarette. The flare of light illuminated the sergeant's war weary face for an instant, and then the darkness reverted when Saunders snapped the lid down on the lighter. Michael's shaking hand searched for the bench's back and he steadied himself from the unexpected arrival.

"Didn't mean to startle you," the sergeant's voice mumbled around the Lucky Strike.

"That's alright." Michael sank down to the bench, rolling his shoulders to denote an innocuous stance and hide his fright-shaking knees. "Didn't expect anyone to be up."

Saunders drew a deep, satisfying breath on his cigarette. Extending his hand, he contemplated the ember glow at the tip of the thin white roll. "Heard you leave."

Now it was Michael's turn to apologize. "Sorry, didn't mean to wake you."

"I'm a light sleeper. Figured some fresh air would help."

Michael nodded and silence enveloped the soldiers once more. The nighttime sounds again reappeared, yet Michael wondered if the sergeant felt the tension that was stabbing down his back like an electric lance.

*Deep breath, let it out slow.* A whisper of confidence sounded in Michael's chaotic mind; it was Matt's voice. Complying with his brother's order, Michael briefly closed his eyes, gulped in a cool breeze, and slowly dispelled the remnant from his nostrils. For a brief, shining moment, Matt's face appeared with a smile but then the vestige vanished into the night vapor.

"Never saw a moon so red,"

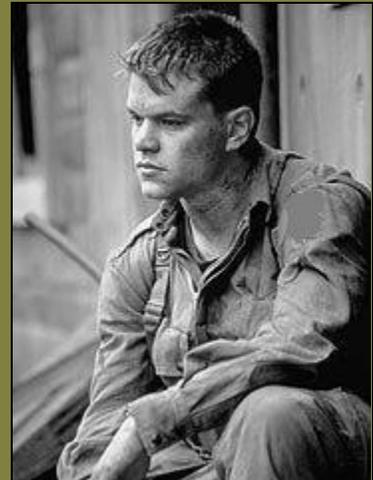
Saunders' low voice made Michael's dream disappear and the young man opened his eyes. Indeed, the full moon glowed with ochre brilliance, offset by the surrounding clouds. Seeing the beauty nature offered while so many slept brought forth memories to Michael's mind; apparently Saunders caught the mood as well.

"My brothers and I used to call that type of moon a blood moon." The sergeant stopped to inhale more smoke, "We pretended we were pirates hunting for buried treasure."

Michael was slightly surprised to hear his voice reply. "My brother and I liked watching the phases of the moon when we were kids. The blue moons were my favorites." He could feel his muscles relaxing although a distant ache remained.

"Joey liked the crescent moons; he always thought it looked like a sword from Arabian nights. Chris always called the full moon his "friendly moon"; I liked the new moons the best. If the light is right you can barely make out the edges." Perhaps it was the cool air, the sleepless night, or the haunted look on Colton's face that led Saunders to talk. He wasn't sure of the reason himself, but it felt good to converse about boyhood dreams when time was simple and life was based on moon phases.

Fingering his medallion, Michael nodded his head as Saunders' memories brought back similar boyhood fantasies. He spoke without realizing, yet the whisper was painful. "Matt's dead."



Saunders paused with his cigarette halfway to his mouth. His stomach threatened to rebel as he remembered the horrible day in years past, little Joey's body, and the helpless feeling that had engulfed the Saunders family.<sup>1</sup>

"Joey died when I was twelve. I've never stopped blaming myself for being unable to help him." Chip Saunders, the tough veteran sergeant, was opening his heart and he wasn't sure why. "If I've learned any thing in this war, it's your best is never enough. Friends, brothers die, no matter how hard we try to keep them safe." Saunders fidgeted with his smoke.

"Saying that doesn't always help."

"Words aren't everything. There are different ways of dealing with the loss. You can get angry, you can get scared, and you can lose your head, but no matter which way you choose, life keeps going." Saunders knew his words were devoid of emotion, but emotion complicated the battlefield and cost lives.

"There are other ways." Michael remembered the pin pricks of tiny needles and deep blankness that wrapped itself around one's mind.

Again Michael felt as if he were removed from his body, unable to control the flat words that fell from his numb lips. Was it the morphine talking? No, it was something else, a second feeble alarm of conscience. For an instant Michael felt disgusted with himself, but then the need to preserve his abysmal secret pushed aside all seeds of respect for the sergeant and the wisdom of his words. The panic Michael dispelled earlier suddenly rose anew and threatened to choke him. Had the sergeant seen the injection Michael took moments after leaving the barracks?

*Don't lose your head, act natural.* Another voice inside his head warned him. *Just get away.* Michael stood up, trying to control his actions yet feeling the tremor of his taunt muscles. "Night Sarge," he muttered. Fighting the urge to run, he walked jerkily back to the barracks. He didn't turn his head to catch the sergeant's reaction, but went inside and found his cot.

Lying down, Michael tried to sort through the pounding thoughts so sleep would return. He couldn't go home, he couldn't stay. He was caught in a Mexican standoff with no escape. He couldn't return to his mother without Matt, nor could he find a readily available supply of morphine stateside. Yet on the Continent with his fellow soldiers, he faced detection of his habit and the consequences if caught stealing more morphine. The thought of dying bordered the back of his mind, but survival in a twisted world was preeminent.

Michael held his breath when Saunders reentered the barracks. The faint trace of smoke from the extinguished cigarette lingered on the sergeant's clothes. Hearing the Sarge's cot squeak when he laid down, Michael began to breathe again in short, shallow breaths. Soon the weariness of the day caught up with the soldier, and he fell into a drug laced sleep.

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The next morning came too early as several thumps and boisterous complaints assaulted Michael's shoulder and ears. The thumps came from Littlejohn who was waking everyone up while the complaints rose from Kirby. Not resisting an opportunity to tease his friend, Cajé joined into the morning rumpus.

"C'mon Kirby," the Cajun accent was thick, "Enjoy life, the sunshine, the birds, the breeze!"

"Take your sunshine and shove it. I swear I'll pop your sweet little birds if I lay eye on one of them." Kirby's reply was muffled yet vehement.

"How can you shoot little birds if your head is still under your pillow?" Cajé grinned and winked at Littlejohn.

"Just let a guy sleep--eaeahh!," Kirby's last word drew out into a yelp as Cajé and Littlejohn flipped his cot over, dumping the B.A.R. man to the ground.

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<sup>1</sup> "Joey" by Kyng Tygr

Unfortunately Michael had chosen the cot that was next to Kirby's. As the wiry soldier tumbled to the floor his body hit Michael's cot which promptly collapsed. With the broken cot resting on Kirby, Michael in turn was flipped onto the floor where he landed heavily on his side. The clink of broken glass was lost on the melee that surrounded the turned cots and Kirby, yet Michael felt his precious pouch give way.

The noise factor increased dramatically as late shouts of warning from Cajé and Littlejohn overrode Kirby's bluster. Strong hands from above rapidly hauled Michael and Kirby to their feet followed by shoulder thumping and gestures of indignation. Michael heard the profuse apologies from Cajé and Littlejohn, but he shrugged them off and exited the building as quickly as possible. While the others attempted to cajole and smooth Kirby's ruffled feathers, Michael rounded the corner and cut down an alley. Safe for the moment from prying eyes, he carefully opened his pouch, yet the damage was complete. His two remaining doses of morphine were smashed beyond recovery.

Trying to regain the half grain doses was futile as the liquid quickly soaked into the fabric pouch. Even if he had been able to recover a small fragment of the morphine, he had no way to inject it into his veins. Too helpless to feel panicked, Michael knew he had to get another supply of the syrettes before the end of the day. But from where? His only option was Doc's bag, which he had seen once while inside the barracks. Resigned to follow his single choice, Michael walked back to the billet intent on pilfering the morphine at the first available chance.

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Stealing the morphine from Doc's bag proved easier than Michael thought it would be. Right before the squad returned to the chow tent to breakfast, Michael slipped away from the group and entered the barracks. Doc left his medic rucksack on top of his neatly made cot where it was readily accessible for emergencies.

Ears attuned to the slightest sound outside, Michael opened the cloth cover and delved into the shoulder bag. While there were a few minute differences, he was surprised to find Doc packed his bag in a manner similar to Matt's method. Easily finding two pouches of morphine syrettes, Michael transferred three doses to his pouch. Then he carefully replaced the bag on Doc's cot and left the room.

At breakfast, Michael was finally able to eat, though it was only half a serving of greasy eggs, hard bread, and burnt coffee. Whether refreshed from last night's deep sleep or elated his crime spree escaped notice, Michael nearly felt normal. Following breakfast, First Squad collected their gear and a radio to begin their morning patrol. Saunders gave a concise briefing and led the stalking mission for the tanks.

The road to Avongne was uneventful, almost like a quiet Sunday stroll. Even Kirby, who was still ruffled from his rude awakening, kept silent. Pausing for a brief break on the outskirts of the village, Cajé scouted ahead while the sergeant made a last verification sighting on the map.

"No cigarettes," Saunders warned in case intelligence was right and the tanks and crew were located in the town. Presently, Cajé glided back to the spread out group and gave Saunders his report.

"Not a sign of activity, though there are tread marks in the street. They've been here, at least." Cajé crouched down next to the sergeant, who made his decision.

"We're going to search through the village, slow and steady. I want every house and hole checked. Our orders were to verify if tanks have been through Avongne, and that's what we'll do. If we spot the enemy, do not engage and withdraw. Understood?"

The five man squad, including Doc, nodded their comprehension. Splitting into groups of three, the American soldiers went forward to their objective. Within an hour, the men determined that the town was uninhabited except for small rodents. Reporting to Hanley on their radio, the officer and the noncom conferred and decided the squad's next course of action. Moments later,

the group of soldiers left Avongne on a circuitous route that would eventually take them back to camp.

The rest of the patrol garnered the same information Avongne yielded--nothing. The men stayed silent for most of the trip. Though the day had been long and hot, Michael could not wait to reach camp. The effects of the last night's morphine had long since vanished and Michael craved his next fix with unrelenting passion. Finally as the daylight drew to an end, the squad arrived at the command post and Saunders went to make his report to Hanley. Stowing his gear in his bunk, Michael also left the group and headed towards the river.

"Something with that guy ain't right," Kirby commented as they stood in line for chow.

"C'mon Kirby, he's just different from you, but that doesn't mean anything," Doc countered.

Littlejohn surprised the group when he spoke. "I think Kirby's right. Colton seems off."

Doc was about to speak again when Caje's somber voice cut him off. The scout spoke quietly, yet his deep timbre caught everyone's attention. "Colton recently lost someone, a brother, a friend."

Deadly serious, Caje caught each soldier's gaze. Some looked quizzical, others nodded in agreement. Before Kirby could ask his invariable question, Caje continued, "You'll see it when you look at his eyes. I felt the same way when Theo got it."

Now confronted by the uncomfortable ghosts of so many friends that he and his squad mates had lost, Kirby dropped the subject. Saunders rejoined the squad just as Caje made his prediction, and now a word from the Sarge cemented the guess.

"It was his brother."

With the discussion about the newest squad member sufficiently derailed, each man became focused on the slow moving food line. After the tasteless Army food had been eaten, the group filtered back to their barracks. Colton was still missing. Saunders informed the squad that they would continue tank hunting in the morning. Each man began to prepare their gear for tomorrow's excursion. Checking packed equipment and cleaning a rifle often seem superfluous activities, but completing these tasks often affected their very lives upon the battlefield. Thankfully the morning's patrol did not require Doc to open his rucksack; nevertheless the medic unpacked its contents and took a quick inventory. As he replaced each item, he paused. He could have sworn...

Doc methodically and slowly went through the rucksack again, carefully laying each bandage, drug packet, and pouch on the cot. A third inspection revealed the same problem; he was missing one particular package. A moment of indecision passed before Doc went outside to find Saunders. Bringing the sergeant back inside, Doc explained what was wrong.

"I think I'm missing three doses of morphine."

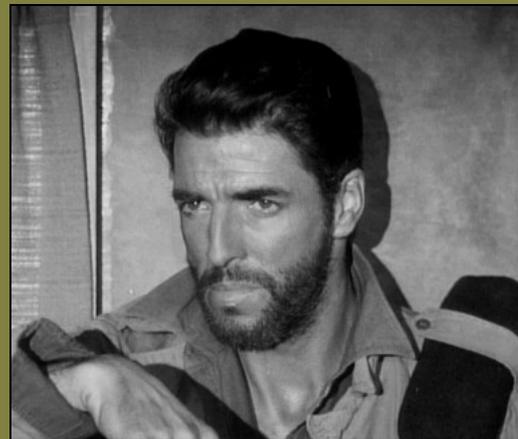
Saunders' expression was unreadable. "You're not sure?"

Agitated that he couldn't be certain, Doc shook his head. "That's the thing, I'm not sure. This pouch," he held up the unopened packet, "I got this two days ago but haven't used it. I have an opened pouch and I only gave one dose. There should be four left, but now there is only one."

Saunders surveyed the proffered pieces of evidence. "You only used one dose?"

"Yes, last week when Stewart was wounded. It was just one dose. I've gone through my bag inside and out but the missing syrettes aren't there. What do you think, Sarge?"

Giving a moment for contemplation, Saunders finally voiced his thought. "Who would take them?"



"I don't know," Doc hated to think of the implications of such a deed. In the middle of war, petty thievery was the least of your worries. "Maybe they fell out when I dosing Stewart, or maybe there was only two in there to begin with. I just don't know."



Saunders didn't like to see his medic second guessing himself, but it was a difficult situation. "Keep a close eye on your bag for now, Doc. Maybe you did misplace the doses. But if they were stolen, the thief might be back for more."

"Alright, Sarge," Doc agreed.

After replacing his supplies, Doc rejoined the squad outside. As soon as he stepped out, Doc immediately noticed that Colton had reappeared. A thought flew across his mind but suddenly ashamed, Doc tried to squelch it. He had no solid proof to suspect Colton as the thief. Merely being the replacement and having a tendency to keep to himself should not sentence a man

before the trial was even broached. Shaking his head to clear it, Doc went back inside to check his rucksack one more time before going to sleep.

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Whether Saunders mentioned the missing morphine syrettes to anyone, Doc did not know. The medic did not talk about the incident, yet kept the rucksack with him at all times. Meanwhile Michael hoarded and sustained himself with the three stolen shots, stayed out of trouble and all conversation. The squad continued to search for the illusive tanks, but for two days had the same run of bad luck. Reports of the illusive Sturmgeschutz tanks continued to filter in, and while Second Squad also joined the endeavor, the Germans managed to slip away before Allied troops drew near.

As the third day dawned, Michael woke with the sun. Having taken the last shot the day before, his stomach crawled with anticipation and need for another dose. However he didn't have a chance to get near the bag. Throughout the last two days his need for the morphine had grown stronger. Michael also seemed to forget the most basic elements of living; he barely ate, washed, or cared. He avoided his squad mates and they returned the favor. Once a comfort, even the morphine was turning against him. His sleep was plagued with nightmares and near hallucinations and his waking hours became studded with grief and guilt. But now the pounding that filled his body demanded more of the deadly drug and Michael only had one goal in mind. One way or another, he was going to fulfill the unstoppable hunger.

And now the squad was about to set out on a third search for the tanks. Perhaps during the patrol Michael would find a way to get at Doc's treasured bag. However, this particular day would be increasingly difficult. Instead of sending First Squad alone, Hanley ordered the rest of the platoon into action as well. Leading Second Squad, Hanley conferred with Saunders, Fourth Squad's Sergeant McElroy, and Corporal Anderson of Third Squad.

Gathering the noncoms around the table, Hanley referenced the map while outlining the day's plan. "Resistance members say it's very possible the tanks are in this area," he motioned to an area about two miles square. "And these intelligence photographs confirm their activity and possible camouflage nets. Also it's a heavily patrolled area and a good place for refueling. When we get to the meadow where the tanks should be, Anderson, you'll head to the right flank. There's a drainage ditch that runs parallel to the meadow and will be ideal for your .30 caliber.

"Saunders and Mac, your squads will be flanking to the left. There probably will be a machine gun nest or two along this line," the Lieutenant drew with his finger, "so bring plenty of

grenades and coordinate your movements. I'll take Second Squad straight to the tanks' position and we'll use our bazooka to take care of that problem. Questions?"

"Just a small one," spoke the sergeant of Fourth Squad. Hanley mentally sighed; McElroy was an excellent leader and trustworthy man, but he liked to voice his opinion on every tiny detail. "How are we going to get there in the first place?"

Hanley smiled, but his expression held little warmth. "That's the fun part. Division is sending a welcoming committee ahead of us. We're advancing right behind an artillery attack."

"Are they nuts?" Corporal Anderson exclaimed then added, "Sir?"

"Those are the orders." Hanley folded the map, indicating the conference was over. "Get your men ready to move out. Remember, we all have to hit our targets and knock them out for this mission to be successful. One man's slip could bring the whole thing crashing down on us."

Leaving the gathering, Saunders found his squad not far from Hanley's office. Under the pale dawn, the men looked tired and worn, but ready to go. The only exception was Michael. His hands belied a faint tremor, his face horribly pale and marked with blood shot eyes whose pupils were pinpricks of blackness.

Saunders' scrutiny made Michael uncomfortable, but the words that the sergeant spoke shocked the addicted man.

"You're staying here," the Sarge turned away, not expecting further discussion on the matter.

Michael shot to his feet, unaware how he had done so. If he stayed, it was guaranteed he wouldn't get near the medic bag and the morphine. He'd go crazy if he was left behind.

"Sarge, you can't. I'm not staying behind." Michael's vehement, insistent words flooded over his dry lips.

Saunders merely turned and looked at the desperate man.

"I have to come." Having never pleaded for anything before, Michael was figuratively on his knees. "Please."

Saunders didn't know why, and later he couldn't exactly explain his reasoning for letting Michael go. Every instinct told him allowing Michael to come was a bad idea. Instead, he said flatly, "You have two minutes to look decent and get your gear in order."

Michael never moved faster in his life. His hands were still shaking and in a nearly comical fashion he splashed more water on the ground than upon his dirty face. His rifle mustered a quick inspection and luckily all of his spare M1 clips were loaded with ammunition. The platoon was starting down the road out of town when Michael pounded after them to rejoin First Squad.

Hanley kept the platoon marching at a ground eating pace. Soon they reached the specified coordinates and halted. Consulting his watch, Hanley told his men to get ready for the artillery bombardment. The barrage was supposed to fall to their right and left while the rest of King Company mounted a surging push forward into the German lines. The plan was to construct a temporary safety corridor for the platoon to move through. Movement had to be precise and quick, for shells were scheduled to fall in the soldier's wake to prevent German stragglers from taking refuge in the safety corridor.

Anxious seconds ticked away as the men strained and waited for the first sound of shellfire. Having worked his way up during the march, Michael was directly behind Doc. From time to time Doc glanced at the soldier, well aware of Michael's silent scrutiny. Finally, to break the tension Doc asked,

"Colton, are you alright?"

Barely containing an incredulous stare, Michael bit back the retort he wanted to give and sufficed with a strained, "I'm fine."

Instead of being fine, Michael felt every cell of his being screaming at Doc, "I'm not fine! I'd kill you the first chance I'd get if I could just get inside that bag of yours." Digging his fingers into the wood stock of his M1, Michael fought to retain power over his fragmenting mind as his

addiction continued to torment him. Gasping shallowly for air, he didn't notice the sheen of sweat that covered his skin. If something didn't happen soon, he was going to lose control completely.

Just at the moment when his nerves were strung highest and control was starting to crack, the onslaught of shellfire started. The first shells fell in rapid sequence and Hanley rose, thrusting his arm in the air with a bellowing, "Let's go!"

The platoon left their cover and surged forward. Running through the curtains of exploding ordinance was horrifying and exhilarating at the same time. Smoke, dirt, and debris rose and fell amid the bone shaking concussions of noise. Third Squad, the rear guard, picked up their pace as the chaser shells started to pound home.

Soon, the platoon reached the end of the corridor and they fanned out into the woods to regroup and recover any casualties. Incredibly not one man in the platoon had been fatally wounded. A half dozen were scratched from shrapnel, but none of the cuts were serious. Though their ears still rang from the explosions, the men could hear the battle beginning as the rest of King Company engaged the Germans on the platoon's flanks.

"We've got less than a mile to go, so move out!" Hanley's instructions were passed down to the men and the platoon started forward. They could only hope the tanks were still waiting in the field where they were last seen.



Every so often, a soldier gets what he wishes for. When the platoon arrived at their targeted destination they saw everything laid out as the Intelligence photos had reported. The drainage ditch cut over the right line of the meadow and across the rolling space was a grove of trees. The trees provided the basis of cover for the StuGs and support area, each clothed with camouflage nets. Using hand signals, Hanley directed the squads into position and signaled the onslaught.

With choreographed precision, the squads diverged and swept toward their targets. Gunfire, shouts, and grenades erupted as men scrambled for position. Heavy German machine gun fire opened up, most of which was directed at Saunders' First and McElroy's Fourth Squad. Two nests were well positioned to cover the meadow and they did so with cutting accuracy. Fanning out, the squads worked in tandem as each man leap-frogged closer.

Over the noise of the battle melee, the tank engines grumbled. The StuG III's had been idling, warming up as their crews and ground troops prepared to join the force engaging King Company's advance. Now the machines were suddenly mustered to defend their base. Hanley's Second Squad soon had their hands full.

Nevertheless, Hanley's team made some headway when they knocked the first tank out with the trusty bazooka. Anderson's team dashed to the drainage ditch, took care of the token guards the Germans stationed, and assembled the M1919A4 machine gun on its tripod mount. Within seconds the .30 caliber rounds began pounding the tanks.

Meanwhile across the meadow, the fray between the Germans and First and Fourth Squad was heavy and pitched. With agonizing slowness, the Americans pushed forward. Grenades arched through the clear blue sky and then showered the air with dirt, metal, and flesh. Cries of pain emanated. While keeping as low as possible,



Doc scurried to his wounded comrades to administer care. Oblivious to the battle around him, Michael stayed as close to Doc as he was able. Still clutching his rifle, he never fired. He was only mindful of one goal.

Seemingly unaware of the shadow job Michael was performing, Doc ran to his next casualty. It was a private from Fourth Squad who had a bad wound to his leg with possible fractures. The man was still coherent while straining to reach his dropped Garand.

"Easy now," Doc cautioned as he delved into his rucksack. Drawing out dressings, sulfa powder, and the pouch of morphine syrettes, he quickly began to patch up the wounded private. After applying a hasty dressing and bandage, Doc was reaching for the syrette when his world exploded.

Michael's opportunity arrived, and he took it at full speed. Ramming Doc from behind and sweeping the butt of his rifle into the back of the medic's helmet knocked the first aid man unconscious. The morphine pouch fell from Doc's loose fingers and Michael scooped it up. Pumping hard, he ran away from Doc's slumped figure. His head was pounding and his senses were reeling as if he had been on the receiving end of the blow he just delivered.

Falling to his knees some distance later, Michael's world narrowed away from the flashing bullets and battle cries. Like a starving savage, he ripped the cloth flap off the morphine pouch and yanked out a dose. Plunging the sharp needled through his shirt sleeve, he squeezed the syrette dry. Dumped into his system, the morphine began to spread its warmth through his craving body. Tears of relief ran down Michael's face yet he was unaware of them. He sank to the dry earth and lay there as the drug worked its potent charm.

The battle raged around Michael, but he was lost to it and beyond care. Heated moments passed, but soon the American platoon gained the upper hand. Between Second and Third Squads' effort, the three tanks were incapacitated. McElroy and Saunders faced the worse resistance, and Mac's squad amassed the highest casualty rate. Against the odds, the attack was highly successful.

While Hanley radioed headquarters with a report, the area was secured and the search for survivors began. Adrenaline was still pumping through Sergeant Saunders as he automatically performed a head count of his squad members. Kirby was fine, Littlejohn received a painful graze along his ribs, and Caje was already nursing a wounded arm. Doc was, no, neither Doc or Michael were in the Sarge's field of vision.

"Where's Doc?" Saunders exclaimed the exact instant Kirby posed the same question.

No one had seen the medic since the beginning of the battle, and Saunders hurriedly backtracked. Bodies littered the landscape, but none had the red crossed helmet and sleeve band. Then he saw two forms and broke out into a run. Doc was lying next to Smith, one of McElroy's men, and both were unconscious. Doc apparently was in the midst of caring for the wounded man, but when Saunders gently turned the medic over he saw no bullet wounds. As the Sarge eased the helmet off Doc's head, he saw the dent in the back and a swollen mass at the base of Doc's skull.

Kirby raced over in answer to Saunders' call for assistance. "Man, Doc, what happened to you?" the B.A.R. man wondered aloud.

After helping stabilize Doc, Kirby checked the wounded private. He pulled another bandage from Doc's bag and used it to reinforce the first one. Smith probably would be alright, if they got him to a hospital soon. Doc was starting to come to, and the medic groaned when he moved his head.

"It's alright Doc, the battle's over," Saunders told the medic.

Doc groaned again before opening his eyes and then squinted against the blinding glare of sunlight. "What happened to," his weak voice trailed off.

"Smith is fine Doc; he just passed out," Kirby answered Doc's question.

"Don't move, you got smashed on the head pretty hard."

“Okay,” Doc acknowledged his sergeant’s suggestion. “Kirby, give Smith some morphine. Sarge, what happened?”

“I don’t know. You were hit from behind. I’m not sure what it was, though.” Many unexplainable events happened on the battle front. Nonetheless, Saunders was concerned.

“Felt like an express train,” Doc muttered and tried to crack a grin, which caused more stabbing pain to pulse through his head.

“Easy there.” Saunders supported the medic as Doc threw up his breakfast.

Kirby knelt next to the pair and after Doc finished heaving, he asked, “Where’s the morphine pouch? I can’t find it in your bag.”

“I had it in my hand before I got knocked out,” Doc stated, “I was about to give Smith a dose.”

Shaking his head, Kirby gave a negative answer. “It’s nowhere near you or Smith.”

At that moment, Sergeant McElroy limped over. “Hey Doc,” he began and then saw the medic was down along with Private Smith. “What happened? Smithy, you okay?” With a grimace, Mac joined the men on the ground. His leg had caught a bullet and the wound bled profusely. Saunders bandaged the other sergeant while Kirby filled him in on Doc and Smith’s conditions.

“Doc, we’re going to look for the wounded now, but we’ll be back.” Saunders informed the medic.

“Not going anywhere,” Doc tried another feeble joke and was relieved his stomach didn’t react as strongly as it did the last time. Saunders administered a couple aspirin tablets and then he and Kirby moved on to the next body. It was Michael.

“Colton too?” Kirby said as they approached him.

Working together Saunders and Kirby carefully transferred Michael so he was lying on his back. A quick check found no wounds. Fingering open Michael’s eye lids, Saunders saw they were unresponsive yet the pupils were mere pin pricks of darkness.

“What’s this in his hand?” Kirby asked just as Saunders’ hard blue eyes saw the mutilated pouch of morphine lying next to Michael. Prying open Michael’s hand, Kirby extracted the used tube of morphine. “I don’t get it.”

“We found our thief.” Saunders’ voice was hard, angry.

“What?”

“Doc had some morphine stolen from his bag a couple of days ago.” Saunders nodded to the prone form on the ground. “Looks like it was Colton.”

“That would fill in a couple details,” Kirby looked down Michael with a new look of distaste. “Of all the crazy things,”

Unaware the battle ended, Michael was oblivious to his surroundings. He only started to regain awareness after he and the wounded had been carried to a patch of shade near the decimated German command post. Along with seven injured comrades and two casualties, there were five wounded Germans and over half a dozen prisoners. Coming out of his stupor, Michael noticed there were guards posted between the prisoners and the hurt Americans.

Lt. Hanley commended the platoon for the day’s work and informed the men that Captain Jampel instructed them to hold the position. King Company’s offensive was going well, and nightfall held the promise of medical assistance and relief. The long shot gamble had paid off and the day was a success.

As for Michael, the morphine was beginning to wear off. He had sketchy memories of Lieutenant Hanley being rather livid, yet he couldn’t recall the words the officer spoke. What he did remember was the look of angry disappointment that Sergeant Saunders wore. It was hauntingly similar to the look of Matt’s face when he found out Michael’s obsession. A chill flit across Michael’s spine and the hunger for the drug began a slow burn.

Turning his head, Michael’s eyes looked for something, anything that would take his mind off Matt and the shameful act he committed against Doc. His wandering attention was

netted by the group of German prisoners. About five feet away, the prisoners were seated on the ground with their heads clasped firmly in their hands. Kirby and another platoon member were facing the group and keeping a weather eye for trouble. Michael's eyes roved over the captured enemies in a noncommittal fashion before zeroing back to one particular soldier. What he saw made his heart skip and speed to a thudding frenzy.

Having lost his rifle after absconding with the morphine pouch, Michael's hand automatically felt for a particular tool on his web belt. His fingers clenched around his trench knife and without a moment's hesitation he leapt forward. Billowing into Kirby, he cold cocked the knife's handle into the surprised B.A.R. man's jaw. The German prisoner saw him coming with equally astonishment, but he attempted to move. However Michael was on top of the man and knocked him to the ground, thrusting the knife forward as the two fell together.

The searing hot pain in his side did little to hamper the German's self defense effort. If anything, it added fuel to his burning desire to live, yet Michael was an insane adversary. Leaving the knife imbedded in the German, Michael's hands encompassed the man's throat as he squeezed, jerked, and pushed. Oblivious to the shouting in his ear and the strong arms yanking him away, Michael only saw the German's face.

A stunning knock on his own jaw and seemingly dozens of iron vises strained to detach Michael from the German. If anyone had seen Sergeant Saunder's right hook, no one was complaining. It took a total of four men to pry Michael off his victim. As Michael's arms were forced to part company with the German's throat, something was still clenched in his fist. A bevy of men flooded over, some shouting and brandishing weapons at the irate Germans, others watching in disbelief, and a couple running to assist the knifed man and unconscious Kirby.

Spitting out a few choice expletives, Lt. Hanley loosened his hold on Michael's forearm and demanded to know what happened. "You better have one good explanation, and make it fast!"

Breathing hard from his adrenaline fueled exertions, Michael didn't speak for tense seconds. Then when he opened his mouth, it was as if he was speaking to someone far removed.

"He had no right," another deep breath rattled his frame and the men holding him. "No right to wear it; it was Matt's."

"And who is Matt?" Hanley's tone could only be described as a snarl.

A look of deep pain passed over Michael's face, and he whispered, "My brother."

"Suppose you start from the beginning?" The Lieutenant's hard countenance didn't soften, but his tone modulated slightly.

Still speaking to someone who seemed to be standing behind Hanley's shoulder, Michael nearly rode over Hanley's words. "He found out the morning we left. He was so angry, he wouldn't speak to me. I tried to tell him, but we got surrounded and cut off. I wanted to stop, but I couldn't. He gave me my first shot when I was wounded after Normandy. I kept taking it out of his bag. I needed that morphine."

Michael paused and when he spoke again it was the only time he appeared aware of his present circumstances. "I wish I could have gotten it without hurting Doc."

A shudder shook his body again and he reverted to his previous monotone. "How am I going to go home without Matt? How am I going to face Ma the way I am?" His head fell to his chest and he looked at the object in his hand. The past, present, and future converged around him as he quietly repeated, "This was Matt's, he had no right. He had no right."

A small coin attached to a broken leather cord lay in Michael's hand.



“Sergeant Saunders,” Hanley’s low voice was formal and emotionless. “Take this man into custody.”

“Yes sir,” Saunders replied.

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The next afternoon saw the platoon rejoined with King Company. Having been a great success, the campaign was fully supported by the advance of the battalion. Hanley, Saunders, and the other platoon leaders completed their debriefing with Captain Jampel and dispersed. Now the Sergeant found himself walking along an unknown path to a familiar place, the mobile hospital unit. Inside he was pleased to see and hear the good reports concerning Cajé, Littlejohn, and Kirby. Thankfully Kirby’s jaw had not been broken, but he would have a lovely little scar and it was difficult for the boisterous man to talk.

“Are you kidding, Sarge?” Cajé laughingly replied to Saunders’ comment, “We’re going to enjoy having a silent Kirby on our hands!”

A rancorous muttering emanated from Kirby’s cot but was drowned out by Littlejohn’s guffaws. Sarge parted with several packs of cigarettes and walked over to Doc’s bed. The medic was recovering from the nasty concussion, but was having a serious case of doubt.

“Sarge, what’s going to happen to Michael?” Even after the way he had been treated, Doc was concerned for the young man’s welfare.

Pausing and wishing he was allowed to light a cigarette in the hospital, Saunders had to gather his thoughts without a pretext. “He’s facing a very serious court martial. He’ll be lucky to get off with a couple years imprisonment for malicious wounding.”

“But his addiction to morphine, how’s he going to survive that?” Doc shook his head with care. “You saw how he reacted last night and especially this morning. When a body’s built a dependence, you can’t cut the source off completely without side effects.”

“I don’t know Doc.” Saunders truly had no answers. “He’s brought this upon himself and if he’s strong enough he’ll make it. A couple of doctors are looking at his case and I’m sure they’ll be able to help.”

“I should have seen it coming; I should have tried harder to help him.”

“Doc, we all tried to help him. But some people just don’t want help, or they’re too far gone to care.”

“No Sarge, you’re never beyond help.” Doc held firm to his beliefs. “I just should have tried harder.”

“You did everything you could. The rest is up to Michael. He has to live with the ghosts he created and the penalty of his actions.” Though Saunders was trying to ease Doc’s conscience, he also wished he had made a larger effort to find out Michael’s problem before it was too late.

“No matter how you look at it, Sarge, it isn’t right. It isn’t human.” Doc spoke his final piece of the subject and settled down on his pillow.

“It never is, Doc. It never is.”

The End