

# SHADES OF GRAY

By: Repple Depple Rosie



*Fan Fiction Elements taken from "Counting the Cost" by Mel.  
Beta'd by the remarkable Jester and based on an old challenge that would not leave my  
head by Stanley.*

*Dedicated to all the remarkable squaddies on the Combat! boards... and particularly  
Bayo who got me started and DII who keeps it going...*

Saunders looked over the smiling man standing before him, finding it hard to believe that he had actually been through the same relentless shelling and infantry offensive that the rest of the platoon had experienced. The captain's uniform was relatively clean; his helmet gleaming cockily on his head and, most amazing of all, there was still the evidence of creases on his sleeves and pants. If it hadn't been for Hanley himself bringing this poster boy of military pulchritude over, Saunders would have believed that the War Department itself had shown up to make one of those shorties before the main movie feature. One of those ones starring Errol Flynn or that other guy... Jimmy Stewart... yeah, that was it....

"Sergeant! Sergeant Saunders.... " The image in front of him dissolved from one of bald eagles and brass bands back into that of the new captain squinting with obvious concern. "Sergeant, are you okay?"

Saunders shook his head to clear it, then rubbed his face vigorously with the palms of both hands. He had no doubt that he was merely redistributing dirt and mud, but at least for the moment he felt relief from the dry, caking, and cracking feeling on his face. God, he hurt! This last offensive had cost him two men, but at the moment he couldn't recall their names. Young, damn, they were young....

"Yeah, Captain... I'm sorry, sir...."

"Fox, Sergeant. Captain Fox. I'll be sharing command of this platoon with Hanley. Personally, I like to be in the field with my men as much as possible. Hanley says yours is one of his crack squads, and it certainly looked like it today."

The captain's earnest voice and obvious pride in his position reinforced Saunders immediate mistrust, as did the war reporter standing to the side taking down every word. Desperately wishing that the young captain would just disappear, the sergeant gave a quick nod, indicating nothing but hopefully conveying the proper amount of respect for his indirect dismissal. "Sir, I'm going to get my men out of the sun and over to those trees. Let the corpsmen do their job."

The captain's face young face wrinkled with what appeared to be embarrassment. "Of course, Sergeant. How many did you lose?"

"Two, sir. Crocker and Prichard." The names would mean nothing to the captain, but Saunders was pleased that suddenly he could recall them. Forgetting the dead was becoming frighteningly easy lately.

The captain was talking to him again, but the words were running together. "Sir?"

This time a hint of impatience colored the earnest voice. "Was one of them the soldier who took out that Tiger?"

The question caught Saunders off guard. "Huh, Caje?" What in the world did this young captain care about who was gone? If he still did, at his level, he had a lot to learn. "No, sir. He just had his clock cleaned and a crease. Doc is tending to him now."

The captain's eyes darted eagerly around the foxholes until they fastened on the medic's distinctive helmet and the inert form beside him. "I would like a word with that man, Sergeant." The tone indicated that this was not a question.

The sun baking Saunders' helmet was clearly cooking his brains. Of that the sergeant was sure. There was no reason he could see for this overeager beaver to show an interest in his squad unless... oh, lord—surely he wasn't still into medals? Good God, wouldn't Caje have a laugh at that. Like anyone other than the slack jaws in supply chain still gave a fart in hell about fruit salad.

"Well, sir, like I said, he got knocked pretty good. Littlejohn, " Saunders nodded his head in the direction of the group of soldiers huddled in the foxhole nearby, "said that Caje wasn't making too much sense right now. If you have something you want me to tell him...."

The captain's young face looked frighteningly sincere as he broke into Saunders' stumbling attempt at dissuasion. "An inspiration, Sergeant. I pointed his action out to my men. That's the type of bold, courageous acts that will win us this war. Isn't it, Bennet?"

"Yes, sir." The deep voice with its melodious inflection caught Saunders' attention, and he focused for the first time beyond the stuffed shirt captain and the reporter to the soldier behind them. Saunders couldn't help it, his eyes widened in surprise. The uniform was unremarkable, the lieutenant bars prominent on the helmet, but a dime a dozen out here. But the broad nose, full lips, and wide-spaced brown eyes staring implacably back at him were that of... a... Negro.

Saunders had seen many Negro truck drivers and heard rumors of Negro outfits, but this was the first honest-to-God Negro officer he had ever seen. The momentary adrenaline rush of surprise, though, gave quickly away to the bone-melting heat and exhaustion. The whole war was full of novelties, and only those that involved immediate death garnered much of his attention these days.

Saunders drew his attention back to the captain. "Sir, with your permission, I'll get my men moving. Lieutenant Hanley indicated that the Krauts have pulled back for the moment. It's my understanding that our platoon will be moving back to the village within the hour. I would like my men to have some rest before then." Saunders paused and then added, "Sir."

The captain stared at him for a moment, clearly unsure of how to take the tacked on designation. But Saunders kept his expression as neutral and blank as that of the Negro lieutenant.

"Of course, of course, Sergeant. But it looks as though your man is coming round. Move your men out while I have a word. Keep in mind we may be moving out sooner."

The captain strode passed Saunders, his broad shoulders missing the sergeant by a hair's breath and his patronizing dialogue to his trailing entourage crisp in Saunders' ears. "This type of action is what I have been telling you we need. The type where we can get word of our squad into the papers...."

Saunders looked from his remaining ambulatory squad to the medic and his now clearly struggling-to-be-up patient and then back again. Deciding quickly on the most likely area of conflict—something he had become quite good at on and off the battlefield—he barked, "Littlejohn, move the squad over to those fallen logs. Eat what rations you have. I'll be there with Doc and Cajé in a minute."

Littlejohn scrambled up, his actions an unspoken affirmative. Satisfied, Saunders spun and followed Captain War Poster and his sideshow.

Before he reached the potential conflagration, though, Hanley was at his elbow, having finished his radio contact with HQ. The deep voice rumbled with a mixture of regret and, Saunders thought suspiciously, laughter. "I didn't get a chance to give you fair warning, Sergeant."

Saunders shook his head, immediately regretting the action. "I don't know what type of warning would explain **that**."

Hanley paused in mid-stride and grabbed Saunders' elbow. "Which part, Sergeant?" The question was asked without accusation.

Saunders pulled his helmet from his aching head and ran his fingers through his slick, sweat-soaked hair. The gesture was as unconscious as his honest answer. "I don't know. The captain, I think. The other...." Saunders shrugged his shoulders and replaced his helmet. "Fighting is fighting. If a man can use his weapon and follow orders, that's all that matters."

Saunders felt rather than saw Hanley's eyes probing for more, as the lieutenant

asked softly, "What about taking orders from Lieutenant Bennet, Sergeant?"

Looking around to make sure no one was within earshot, Saunders maintained a straight face, but his eyes danced as he said softly, "I take orders from you... sir."

Hanley momentarily looked taken aback, then a slow grin slid across his face and his eyes met those of Saunders in a rare frank acknowledgement of a shared friendship before *the landing*. Before the death, the screaming, the hunger, the sleeplessness, the guilt and exhilaration.... The grin slipped away as quickly as it appeared, and the lieutenant's familiar determined and slightly haunted expression returned. "I need to know, Saunders."

The exhausted sergeant started to probe, started to ask the questions that once, a world away, would have been natural. But this was war and there was no norm beyond death and orders. The two were intertwined and beyond them all else paled, even this new, novel lieutenant.

"I'll take orders from any man in this Army that outranks me, sir. I'll follow orders from those who know what they're doing." The words were spoken without challenge and without fear of consequences. Hanley sighed and acknowledged with a nod. For a brief moment, the two men stood quietly side by side, scanning the field of today's battle, taking a respite from thinking about tomorrow's.



Finally Hanley broke their reverie saying, "I personally don't know if war is the time for experiments or not, Saunders."

The sergeant waited a moment to reply, his tired mind processing the import of the lieutenant's comment. "Maybe not. But why not? There's nothing else out here that's normal." He paused a moment then amended, "Or like it is back home, anyway."

"Yeah," Hanley agreed. "But then again, maybe that's why we cling to whatever we can to make it seem like home: our superstitions, our rivalries, our religion...." He left the obvious unsaid. *Our hatreds, our prejudices....*

As he thought about the lieutenant's words, Saunders nodded silently in agreement. Yep, it never ceased to amaze him, the incessant, trivial bickering that could break out at the most unexpected moment. *Goddam carpetbagger! Stupid mick! Speak English, you frog!* And then the thud of incoming artillery, bodies covering each other whether in protection or death, divisive words forgotten... sometimes, but not always.

A commotion from the tree line drew the attention of Saunders to the present, where another squad was approaching his. Hanley spoke up quickly. "Sergeant, I'll go acquaint the men with the situation, you go over there and see if Doc's ready to get Cajé moving. We really need to get back to the village before nightfall. Command wants us rested up before we begin a big push forward."

"When?"

Hanley shrugged, noncommittal. "Not sure. But soon, very soon. And it's going to be all out. They're just waiting for the artillery and armor to meet up. Let's get going." The lieutenant slapped Saunders on the shoulder and strode off toward the squads.

Saunders' eyes followed the retreating form, then focused beyond on the unmistakable dark faces of the emerging squad. He stood and watched in fascination as the two squads started sizing each other up, then decided that in this case, the lieutenant's rank allowed him to pick his battles. But this one was not going to be easy.

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Turning his attention in the opposite direction, Saunders could discern his own trouble from the hand-on-the-hips posture of the captain and the squatting but clearly challenging form of his medic. Saunders shook his head and a brief shade of amusement brushed across his lips. No one got between Doc and a wounded squad member. Nobody. Not even Saunders.

Squaring his shoulders, the sergeant approached what was obviously an escalating argument. Individual words floated out across the field, spinning a story for the non-com before he actually reached the conflagration.

"Concussion."

"French?!"

"Confused."

"American?"

"*Merde!*"

Saunders didn't speak French, but he'd learned enough to know that his scout was at least conscious and... pissed off. His medic was in full guard dog mode. *Another hour, another conflict...*

Sidling up to Yankee Doodle Dandy, Saunders softly queried, "Is there a problem here, Captain?"

Without turning to Saunders, the red-faced captain continued to stare at the two forms on the ground in front of him. "Your medic, Sergeant, is interfering with my conversation with your private, whom I can't understand anyway as it appears he speaks only French."

"Yes, sir." Saunders squatted down to have a better look at his scout, whose normally dark skin appeared abnormally pale. The only obvious injury was where the bright white and red bandage striped across the soldier's right bicep. Glancing up, the sergeant's eyes met those of his medic across the prone man. Doc's drawn brows and tight lips conveyed continued concern about the soldier as well as annoyance at the unwelcome intrusion by the captain on recovery time.

"Yes, sir?" The captain's tone betrayed his exacerbation.

Saunders squinted up at the disgruntled officer but did not address him. Instead he inquired of the man who had gained his respect so quietly and gradually over the past weeks.

"Doc?"

"He's got quite a knock on the head, Sarge, but doesn't want to go back to the aid tent. I'd feel better if someone who knew more about these kinds of things took a look. The arm wound ain't bad, though."

The captain cleared his throat, obviously annoyed at being left out of the conversation. Saunders bobbed his head in acknowledgement of the captain's displeasure and said, "Sir, I'm sorry you didn't find what you're looking for here. My private here is Cajun." A snort from the young lieutenant's direction drew Saunders' attention, but the impassive face gave away nothing so he continued, "And French is his native language. Doc here is still worried about him. Maybe if you'd wait 'til we pull back you can have whatever conversation you were looking for." He paused and added, "In English."

Captain Fox nodded. "Fine, Sergeant. But I hope that in battle situations language is not an issue. This is an *American* unit, right Bennet?"

The irony of the captain's about-face in attitude toward the scout that only minutes earlier he had wanted to use as some type of morale booster was not lost on Saunders. The headache that had been threatening since the engagement ended was now blossoming. *And somehow it's only going to get worse.*

And it did as the lieutenant's deep, "Yes, sir," brought the prone man before

Saunders bolt upright, his head connecting directly with Saunders' nose. The distinct click of a camera reached ears at the same time.

"Caje!"

"Goddammit!"

"*Qui sont-ils?*"

Saunders watched through watery eyes a rapid fire exchange in French between his now-sitting scout and the Negro lieutenant. The reporter had lowered his camera and swiveled his head from side to side in an obviously futile attempt to follow the conversation. The injured man on the ground spoke quickly; both pleasure and confusion clear on his expressive face. The lieutenant answered hesitantly but with intensity. Saunders saw Bennet's carefully schooled blank expression soften momentarily as he appeared to ask a question.

Suddenly, the captain broke in, oblivious or uncaring about his interruption. "Bennet, you speak French?" The upturn on the last word of the question brought Fox's voice to nearly a squeak, his astonishment overriding his dignity.

The ongoing conversation stopped, and the lieutenant's face returned to its previous impassiveness. "Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you tell anyone? Does anyone else know this?"

The lieutenant remained quiet for a moment, then his deep, liquid voice filled the uncomfortable void. "Usually, sir, a colored man is just asked if he can read."

"*Que des cretins,*" the soldier on the ground muttered. The meaning, if not the exact words, were understood by all.

The captain turned toward the reporter, the look on his face clearly conveying the consequences of recording the events of the past few minutes. "Yes, well, if your man is ready, Sergeant, we need to be pulling out." The captain turned in almost a parade about-face and walked stiffly back toward the woods and the waiting squads. He did not look back to see if his second or the reporter followed.

The lieutenant waited a moment, his dark eyes locked with the equally dark eyes of the injured man. No word passed, but Saunders could sense an unvoiced agreement meet between the two. Then with a cold, polite, "Sergeant," the Negro took his leave.

Once the lieutenant was out of earshot, Doc turned to Saunders, his bright blue eyes shining with wonder. "What was that all about?" Saunders shook his head and in unison they both looked at the soldier sprawled between them.

"*C'est une histoire compliquee.*" The private shrugged and bonelessly slid back to the ground, throwing his arm over his eyes, wordlessly conveying his reluctance to speak on the matter.

Saunders pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to forestall the full scale assault on his head. Avoiding Doc's questioning glance, he barked, "Stop the French shit, Caje, or I'm going to let Doc take you on back to first aid." Reaching out his hand he pulled Doc up and then extended the same hand to his private.

Shifting his elbow slightly, Caje let one eye show. "Okay, Sarge." The mellifluous French intonation remained, but the English was faultless as the Cajun continued, "But I keep telling you that you might find it useful to learn a few phrases. Helps with *les dames* and repels the officers and reporters." With a cheeky grin, the private accepted the sergeant's hand and allowed himself to be hauled upright. Immediately, though, the grin faded and the soldier swayed. Four hands reached out and steadied the scout.

"I don't know..." Doc's concern was brushed aside along with the helping hands.

"I'm fine!" The dark-haired Cajun staggered toward the tree line, his M1, shirt, and field jacket left forgotten on the ground behind him. Saunders looked at the medic, who in turn looked down at the objects on the ground and shook his head.



Saunders chuckled mirthlessly. "He's fine, Doc. I'm fine, you're fine, we're all fine." As Doc focused his attention back on Saunders, the sergeant realized that his sarcasm may have been lost on the earnest medic. "Hand me some aspirin, will you Doc?"

"Are you...?"

"I'm fine, Doc. Just a headache. But I have a feeling it's going to get a lot worse."

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The fire danced merrily in the stone-rimmed hole Saunders' squad had created. The shadows of the men erratically darkened the half-tumbled stone walls that defined the group's home for the evening. "Home" would be a stretch for any soldier, Saunders thought, but the occasional crackle of the fire and the surprising downturn in temperature from the afternoon might engender a few memories of autumn stateside. The imagery was reinforced by the coffee on the fire and the gentle hum of Billy and Littlejohn's incessant conversation with the new kid up from repple depple. A tantalizing image of two boys seated next to a similar fire on Lake Michigan just ten years ago or so flitted across the sergeant's mind, and a warm feeling of comfort surged through him as he remembered the dark figure of his father keeping watch from the shadows as he himself was doing now.

"More coffee, Sarge?"

The image dissolved, along with the momentary reprieve from responsibility. *Damn, I must be tired to let my guard down that much.*

"No thanks, Doc. I need to get some sleep tonight." The words were out of his mouth before he could take them back.

Even in the uncertain light, Saunders could see Doc's careful scrutiny. "I ain't never known a cup of joe to interfere with your sleep, Sarge."

"Well, it's not going to start now." Saunders raised his voice. "I suggest you all get out your rolls and catch some shuteye while you can. We're not sure yet when we're moving out, but you can bet it will be at o'dark hundred."

The conversation stopped and the squad looked at the sergeant expectantly. He knew they all were waiting for him to address the big, dark elephant sitting with them by the fire. He wasn't sure what Hanley had said, but whatever it was, it certainly hadn't settled any issues left lingering since that Civil War. The men had marched back together into town as a group, but the squads remained separated along racial lines. Nary a word was spoken between the men, even among their own squad, and Fox and Bennet's squad studiously avoided eye contact with the men of King company.

Not so, though, with Saunders' men. Billy stared with outright fascination at the Negroes in uniform carrying weapons. It had to have been, Saunders thought, much the same look the young man had had during Saturday serials, staring at Buck Rogers for the first time.

Littlejohn's ogling was more furtive, but the resulting tripping and stumbling were obvious to all. Doc was largely focused on helping Cajé, who still seemed slightly disoriented, but Kirby's snide remarks were clear and pointed. But after a while of being ignored by both squads, even the BAR man grew silent.

Until now.

"So, you guys think we'll be able to see that other part o' the platoon if the brass decides to push out 'fore sun up?" Kirby nodded his head in the general direction of Fox's squad to ensure that his point was made. There had not even been a semblance of creating one camp when the two squads had finally reached the small village where

Saunders' squad slept the night before.

Conversation ceased, and Saunders again became aware of the night sounds that had once colored youthful dreams of adventure. None of the scenarios played out in his sleeping bag between Chris and their father had even come close to this. How could it?

"Kirby, you are an idiot!" Caje had apparently not been quite as asleep as Saunders thought.

"Who are you calling an idiot, Frenchie? I thought you Southern boys knew how to deal with coloreds. Now I don't know about the rest of you, but Momma Kirby wouldn't trust no darkie to watch her boy's back."

Saunders watched as the squad turned in unison from the smart-mouthed Irishman back to the Cajun, who was now sitting up on his already opened bedroll, dark eyes flashing in the firelight.

"*Ca, c'est le comble!*" Caje clearly struggled for a moment, perhaps deciding, Saunders thought, just how far to take the argument. The scout's fists were clenching and unclenching, but his wan face and the dark circles beneath his eyes betrayed his exhaustion. "My *mere* would certainly be worried if she knew I had some loudmouthed Irish goldbrick covering my ass."

The budding friendship between the Irishman and the Cajun was disintegrating right before the sergeant's eyes. *And this was probably only the beginning of the dissension....*

"Enough!" Saunders stepped forward into the dim light of the fire. "That's enough from both of you."

"But Sarge...."

"I said **enough**, Kirby! Now get some shut-eye, and that's an order."

Kirby stared at him, clearly not ready to drop the issue. But it was Billy's uncertain voice that broke the silence with the question Saunders had been dreading.

"Sarge, how do you feel about fighting 'longside... uh... them?"

"Billy, I said...." Saunders bit back his impatience, realizing that a night's rest would only delay tackling the issue. The problem was, he wasn't sure himself how he felt about fighting alongside Captain Fox's men.

Littlejohn's deep voice rumbled through the silence like a locomotive on the plains of his home state. "Billy, I think it's like Caje said. Whoda' thought any of us would have anyone like some of them joes we've met so far fightin' alongside? I mean, I never met a Southerner," he nodded in Doc's direction, "a Cajun or, Aunt Sally knows, **anyone** like Braddock before I got to training."

Saunders thought about enforcing his order of a moment ago, but decided to let the conversation continue for a moment. This discussion needed to take place, and it was probably more crucial to the terminally sleep-deprived soldiers than another half hour of shut-eye.

Doc's soft twang continued the discourse. "Littlejohn's right, all of you. I'm sure none of us ever thought about bein' here, and I reckon they can bleed and die same as us."

"I ain't worried 'bout how they die, I'm worried about how they fight," Kirby muttered to no one in particular.

"With guns."

All eyes turned toward the new kid, who for a moment looked defiant, then dropped his head and mumbled some unintelligible apology.

"Frankel's right." Saunders gave the new kid a tight smile that did not reach his eyes. "They fight with guns, right alongside. They held the right flank today together with Dog Company. And I didn't see any Krauts breakin' through from over there, and I



didn't hear any complaints from the men over there." Just for a breath, Saunders thought the subject was tied up, at least for the evening, but Kirby—*of course Kirby!*—wasn't ready to let it go.

"Well, then, why don't they just stay over there with the Dog grunts? Huh? Why's the brass movin' 'em around if they're doing so hunky dory? Mebbe they don't wanna' fight 'longside 'em neither."

Saunders walked purposefully toward the fire, better to get in the face of his resident troublemaker. But before he could get close enough to Kirby, who was sliding as far back on his log as he could without actually moving his ass, to give full vent to his frustration, Billy broke in again with his boyish curiosity.

"Caje, you growed up with 'em, didn't you?" He continued on in hurry, clearly anxious not to offend, but not willing, either, to give up the subject. "I mean, you being from New Orleans and all. Don't they have a lot of 'em down there?"

The Cajun was silent, the reflected firelight dancing in his dark eyes. When the scout finally focused his attention on Billy, Saunders could see an unexpected twinkle of amusement accompanied by a slight twitching of the lips. The sergeant wasn't sure where this was going, but he trusted his second's judgment in most things. As much as he trusted anyone's....

"*Oui*, Billy. I've had Negroes covering my backside since I was in nappies. Literally." Caje smiled, a gentle, soft smile at obviously pleasant, private memories. "They eat, they drink, they love... just like you 'n me."

Kirby sat up a little straighter on the log on which he was parked. "Yeah, that's fine and all. You had 'em helping you. It ain't like you was best buddies or anything. It ain't the same."

Caje drew a cigarette from a crumpled pack in his shirt pocket. He took his time lighting it, allowing the tension to build around Kirby's observation. Finally, after exhaling a clearly satisfying puff of smoke, the Cajun addressed Kirby directly. "You know those stories I've told sometimes about me 'n my friend Eduard?"

Saunders saw Kirby's eyes grow round and Billy's mouth drop open. They had all spent hours—few and far between—exchanging stories of growing up. Stories that reminded them of gentler times, of friendships not built with the potential of loss.... And Caje's occasional contributions had usually revolved around a seemingly endless amount of trouble discovered by himself and his friend Eduard.

"Are you telling me...?"

"Yeah, Kirby, Eduard was—and still is—a negro."

Kirby spluttered for a moment, then grew silent and scratched his bristly pate. Billy's excitement was palpable, and he looked about to burst with questions. But before he could settle on just one, Kirby came up with the evening's grand finale.

"Yeah, but would you let your sister marry one?"

Six voices starting speaking at once. Saunders heard several "*Kirby, I wouldn't let my sister marry you!*"s. He waited, listening, a minute before deciding that nothing was going to be resolved tonight. Not tonight, not tomorrow night... nothing along this line of questioning was going to be settled in the ETO.

"Kirby!" His voice didn't have to be louder than everyone else's when he took this tone. The silence was immediate. He allowed it, making sure all eyes were trained on him and him alone.

"No one's sister is here to get married. No one's dog is here to tie tin cans on." With this, he looked directly at Caje, a suspicion starting to take root. "The only things here are men, wearing the same uniforms, carrying the same weapons. And that's all you need to worry about, any of you. Who's wearing U.S. Army green and who's wearing Kraut gray. Is that clear?"

Six heads nodded as one. But it was Kirby's *sotto voce* comment that floated through the darkness some time later that kept Saunders awake despite his exhaustion. "As clear as mud, Sarge. As clear as mud."

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The dreaded before dawn pull out never occurred. Saunders and his men rose long after daybreak to the rumbling of the promised tanks through the village. Though the road through the main part of the village was several hundred yards from their bombed out bivouac, there was no sleeping once the Shermans rolled into town. No matter how tired....

The uninterrupted rest, though, seemed to go a long way toward repairing the disaccord of the previous evening. Saunders' men bickered, argued, laughed, and even engaged in an impromptu game of football with some of the armor guys, one of whom apparently carried a pigskin around in his tank.

The day passed as any other off the front line time. The sources of last night's friction were not to be seen, keeping to their own bivouac in a caretaker's cottage near the town cemetery. Saunders briefly wondered who had seen fit to place the captain's squad nearly out of town, and wasn't sure if it was separation for separation's sake, or separation for safety's sake.

Two incidents, though, reinforced the sergeant's fear that largely out of sight was still eventually going to drive him out of mind.

Shortly after coming out of Hanley's temporary HQ and going over some new recon maps in anticipation of the new push, the sergeant ran smack—literally—into Lieutenant Bennet rounding a corner on the town's one and only main road. Saunders took the brunt of the impact from the bigger man, and only Bennet's large, outstretched hand kept the noncom from sprawling on his backside. Neither man apologized, though, but merely stood sizing the other one up, their clasped hands momentarily forgotten.

Then, without a trace of embarrassment, the lieutenant withdrew his hand. "Sergeant."

"Lieutenant."

The pause was awkward, pregnant with Saunders' unasked questions and the lieutenant's obvious unease. Finally, Bennet broke the silence. "Your men ready?"

"Always, sir."

White teeth smiled mirthlessly in the smooth dark face. "Going out with Captain Fox will not be like anything you or your men have experienced yet, Sergeant."

Saunders took up the challenge. "I have already figured that out, sir."

"It's not my men you need to worry about, Sergeant. Let them do their job, and your men will be fine."

"I don't have any doubt of that."

The lieutenant looked at him sharply. "Yes, you probably do. Or at least your men do. But what you need to fear is the people out with something to prove. And my men don't need to prove anything. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"I believe so, sir." Now Saunders was ready for this uncomfortable exchange to end.

"I don't know if you do. Not yet. But you will, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

They turned and walked several yards their separate ways before Saunders heard the strong voice, the certainty somewhat diminished, ask behind him, "And how is your man, LeMay?"

Saunders turned, his previous suspicion strengthening into surety. "He's fine..."

Eduard."

The Negro lieutenant did not confirm nor deny Saunders' assumption, nor did he acknowledge Saunders' impertinence. He added, as though the name had not been spoken, "Good soldier?"

Saunders nodded. "The best."

"Keep an eye on him, Sergeant. He can get himself into a lot of trouble."

Caje's stories told around various campfires flitted through Saunders' head. "I've heard you're pretty good at getting him out of it, sir. He needs friends like that."

Saunders' comment brought a slow, bitter smile to the Negro's face. "I'm just a colored man, Sergeant. Ask the Army. I was and am nobody's friend. Just hired help, Sergeant. Just like I was then."

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The second incident occurred at noon chow. The idea of not eating rations had all the squads forming a line at the hastily constructed mess tent before the meal was even ready. The soldiers from the armored units seemed less enamored with a hot meal than the infantry grunts, and lounged off to the side of the queue, catcalling and generally trying to create a little interesting friction.

"Ya'll must be desperate ta' be lining up for this shit!"

"Yeah, we had it yesterday, and the day before. And," a beefy redhead looked around at his sprawling cohorts for effect before continuing, "it'll get ya' afore any Kraut will."

A wave of chuckles rolled through the men, as Kirby piped up and countered, "We've had it before, and it's just fine for us foot soldiers. I bet for you guys, though, it ain't the food but the resultin' gas in them little bitty tin cans that's the problem."

A chorus of "The scrawny dog face is right about that, Red!", and "Boy, he musta' already been downwind of you, Red!" floated through the dusty, fetid noon air. The wafting aroma of grease, potatoes, and some type of frying meat did quell the appetite of most of the infantry as time continued to pass and the mess tent did not open. A few of the original group wandered off, silently coming to believe that left-over rations might be better than the wait, the company, and the building odor.

Standing off to the side with several other sergeants from the company, Saunders watched his men shifting impatiently from foot to foot. Their original excitement had definitely dimmed, as indicated by the slumped shoulders and increasing silence. The jibes exchanged with the armored personnel were fewer and further between. Saunders watched Caje finally turn and walk back toward the camp just as the fat mess sergeant stuck his perspiring face out the flap again and announce that it would be a few more minutes.

"Uh, oh. Here comes trouble," Meadows from Dog muttered as the silence in the foreground became even more pronounced.

Saunders pivoted and saw the eight colored soldiers, led by their sergeant, whose name he had forgotten, coming across the field. Instinctively he started to head over toward his squad, unsure of where this situation was headed. But a hand reached out and held fast on his shirt sleeve.

"Let them figure it out," Meadows muttered. "That's what their captain told us."

"Which 'them'?" Saunders countered.

"All of them. There's some fights we're not trained to lead in."

"I reckon that's so. But there's some we can help prevent." Saunders moved forward to join his squad, but the Negro group closed in on the queue ahead of him. The armored soldiers formed a semicircle around the group, and the sergeant heard bets

being hastily placed on the outcome of this potential conflict.

"Hey, I ain't eatin' with no..."

Before the sentence could be finished, Saunders heard a voice rise above the others. It was an accented voice he half expected, but had hoped had cleared the conflagration before the soldier could be in position to champion another underdog. *Widows, orphans, nuns... couldn't he for once leave bad enough alone!* Saunders shoved harder at the intermingled backs and shoulders blocking his way, not caring any longer who he offended. He could not, though, it seemed, make his voice heard above the shouting.

"If they can fight wi' us, then they can certainly eat with us."

"What do you know about fighting, Frenchie?"

"Hey, ain't he the guy who took out that Tiger today?"

"So, I still ain't eatin' next to no..."

Suddenly someone was beating what sounded like a pot with an iron utensil of some sort. Nearing the front of the throng, finally, Saunders heard and then saw the red, sweaty faced mess hall sergeant, now standing arms akimbo in front of the tent on a hastily overturned potato crate.

"Ain't nobody going to eat iffen' ya' don't stop this hullabaloo!" Having garnered the attention of all the soldiers, black and white, infantry and armored, the beefy provisions noncom continued, "We gonna' do it just like we do back home: white in the front, Negroes come up the back and get served after we're done." Pleased with himself, he started to dismount, when that voice Saunders was starting to dread erupted again.

"Back home we don't allow, much less ask, our Negroes to fight."

Saunders slapped his hand on his forehead, where the headache was resuming its relentless assault on his temples. Mentally he prepared to break up the inevitable fracas while his fingers reached to his sidearm. A couple shots in the air, he figured, may stall things long enough for him grab a certain squad member from certain death, saving the actual dismemberment of said squad member for a time and a place of his, Saunders', own choosing.

Then another voice rose again, another voice that caused Saunders' to stop fumbling for his .45, and reach around for the Tommy on his back. It was going to take more than a sidearm to get both Caje *and* Kirby out of this one.

"Well I reckon that the guys with the **guns**, not the **ladles**, should make that decision."

The statement was greeted with snickers, and then actual guffaws as the portly mess hall noncom fell trying to get back on his potato box.

"The scrawny guy has a point there, porky!"

Several other encouraging statements were thrown out, causing the now apoplectic mess sergeant to yell at Kirby, "So what do you propose, Private? You want to make the decision on this one, you go right ahead!"

Saunders was tempted to push the last steps forward through the final line of bodies blocking his way, but hesitated, curious as to what his often surprising resident troublemaker would suggest. Already he had turned the sides of the argument from black and white to front and rear echelon. And Saunders had to admit, it was pretty clever. But now....

"They came last, they eat last. Same as everyone else. But not at the rear of the tent. They ain't at the rear. They's at the front and that's that."

As muttered approval traveled through the crowd, Kirby suddenly appeared in front of Saunders, dragging a protesting Caje by his shirt lapel. Kirby's dark eyes flashed with a rare, true anger that Saunders had never seen as he handed his best

friend over to the sergeant. "Get him outta' here, Sarge. If he wants to get himself killed that's one thing, but..." The rest was lost as Kirby turned back toward the front of the crowd, suddenly the affable Irishman and every grunt's best friend.

"Ya' know, I've been telling them for awhile that if only ol' Patton would have listened to me..."

The sound of Kirby's bluster died away in Saunders' ears as he pulled Cajé out of the crowd and back toward town. After a few moments, the private gently but firmly withdrew his elbow from Saunders' firm grip and stopped.

Saunders' anger finally abated enough to allow him to talk, albeit he could not look directly at the soldier now standing in front of him without the desire to throttle him returning. "Do you have a death wish or something, soldier? 'Cause if you do, we can take care of that for you." When there was no reply

Saunders continued, warming up to his subject, "Oh, wait, I forgot, you do try to take care of it on your own. Running out in front of tanks, adopting every little Nazi sympathizing orphan, baby, or nun who comes along. It's all well and good if you want to prove something to yourself, make up for something, or you're just plain tired of this shit and want a quick way out. But you're not taking anyone else with you—do you understand? You're not taking Kirby, Littlejohn, Doc, Billy, or whatever that new kid's name is with you."

"I do not wish to die." The words were spoken softly.

"Then why, Cajé, why? We've got enough fights. These aren't your fights."

"Then whose are they, Sarge? Sometimes..."

"Sometimes what?"

Cajé took a deep breath and exploded, "Sometimes doing the right thing every now n' again is the only thing that keeps me sane. Keeps us sane. Reminds us that we're better than they are." When Saunders said nothing, Cajé asked, "We are, aren't we Sarge? Better than they are?"

Thinking for a moment about what he had just seen, Saunders hesitated before answering. "Yeah, we're better than they are, Cajé." As Kirby's unexpected turnabout played in his mind, he reiterated more forcefully, "We're better than they are."

Putting his arm around the surprised private, he pulled him along with him, back toward camp and hopefully an afternoon and evening's rest before the big push forward.

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Saunders took a moment to survey the terrain. The open rolling hills should have offered decent cover, but the sergeant knew the area had seen combat recently. In fact, his own squad had beat feet across here several days ago, not stopping to inspect the crazy patchwork of foxholes, both Kraut and GI, that plowed through former fields and grazing lands. The bloated corpses of dead cows still lay alongside GI's and Krauts—largely GI's, though, as the Krauts had retaken the area with a vengeance. It was a desolate scene, and the black mood of the combined squad could almost be felt even

from the crowded cover of an overturned burned out jeep. Saunders didn't want to think about what had happened to the former occupants.

But the current group sheltered behind the jeep was nearly as much a concern to Saunders as the German grenadiers most likely concealed in the dense green woods to the east. The Germans were delivering intermittent artillery barrages that had been pretty effective in stalling out the armored move forward, especially at the bridge about a half mile back. The American artillery had had trouble zeroing in on the source of the problems as they had not yet made it across the bridge when the shelling became intolerable. The inability to get a firm fix on the source of the shelling lead the brass to suspect that they might be up against half-track mounted converted light AA or mortars.

To Saunders' confounded amazement and anger, after listening to Company chatter about the situation, Captain Fox had radioed in and offered to move his combined platoon forward and see if they could take out the guns with the bazookas packed by two of Bennet's men.

Saunders found command's quick acquiesce to the plan suspect, especially given the make-up of the platoon volunteering and the presence of the reporter with the group. Said reporter was next to Saunders now, occasionally pausing to nervously wipe his spectacles with his shirt as he jotted notes in a small pad.

Set up, Saunders pondered? Nah, there was no way this particular situation could have been planned. But Saunders harbored no doubt that Fox had been looking for just such a situation, just such an opportunity. Was it for himself, or his men? Saunders wasn't sure, nor did he care.

So at this juncture, out at least a quarter of a mile ahead of the Allied lines, the sergeant figured his main problem—aside from a motley, mixed mistrusting squad, a suicidal officer, and an impossible mission—was getting close enough to the wood line across the open field to get a sighting of the half-tracks. Oh, yeah, and take them out with two bazookas. *I wonder if odds can be negative....*

"We're never going to get everyone across that field." *Did I say that out loud?*

"Excuse me, Sergeant?"

"I said, sir, we're never going to get everyone across that field. We went across it a couple of days ago. Even though the fox holes offer some decent protection from incoming, the ground between them is pretty much completely visible from that knoll." Saunders nodded toward the tree line. "We'll never even get close enough to get off a decent shot."

Fox's lips thinned, but he did not refute Saunders' assessment. Rather, he turned and ordered the reporter to get Billy to take him back to the lines as soon as they moved out.

*Uh-oh, Saunders thought, he doesn't care.*

"Well, Sergeant, unless you have a better suggestion on taking out those guns, which is why we are here, I believe we are just going to have to take that chance."

Saunders looked at Bennet, wondering if the lieutenant had long ago resigned himself and his men to death by forced- and media-covered glory, but the lieutenant's face remained unreadable.

*Well, then, Saunders decided, guess I'm alone on sanity duty today.*

"Sir, perhaps if we sent four men—two bazookas and two to cover—over there." Saunders was grasping at vague memories from that pell-mell retreat several days ago. "If I remember correctly, there's a dry creek bed. It's not deep, but if a few men aren't jumping in and out of the foxholes, they may get further forward without giving the Krauts much to focus on."

Fox never even turned his head toward Saunders, but kept moving his binoculars across the field, as though trying to choosing the best spot for his final resting place.



Saunders rushed on, unsure if he was being heard but unwilling to take a chance on not seeking a way for at least some of the men to make it through this mission. And take out the half-tracks, of course. He didn't see a snowball's chance of that in Fox's scenario. "The rest of the men move out across the foxholes. There's no way they're not going to see those guys, but they're just the diversion. The holes should offer enough coverage if they focus the shelling on the field."

Saunders prayed the latter statement was true as he held his breath and waited for the captain to respond. Turning his head to look back at his men spread several foxholes back, he caught Bennet's eye, and for the first time, saw a hint of approbation.

And it was the lieutenant who unexpectedly spoke first. He hadn't uttered a word the entire move out, allowing Fox to jabber incessantly at the reporter, order the squad about, and generally strut like the ninety-day wonder Saunders figured him to be. But now the lieutenant's voice rumbled with a note of authority that Saunders had not heard before.

"The Sergeant's right, sir. If we even hope to take out those half-tracks, it's going to have to be by stealth and not front on."

Fox finally turned, and it was quite apparent from the wonderment on his face that he truly had not believed that the mission could be accomplished. Jerking his head back, he scabbled without waiting for the others back to the hedgerow behind which the rest of the squad waited. Making sure that he had the reporter's attention, he looked directly at Bennet's squad, still standing apart from Saunders', drew himself up to his full height, and took a deep breath, pausing just a moment for effect. "I need you men to think beyond yourselves and think of the good of the Army—and of your race. I need four volunteers, men who are willing to make what may be the ultimate sacrifice, but one which I assure you will not be forgotten."

Eight dark faces started implacably back at their captain. Neither fear nor loathing showed on their faces. They stood unmoving as Fox started squirming, looking from the reporter to his squad and back again.

The captain waited a moment longer, then blurted, "This is the chance you have been waiting for. The chance to prove once and for all that you belong side by side with the white soldiers in this Army."

When again no one stepped forward, the reporter, looking extremely uncomfortable, nervously muttered, "I think I have all that I need, Captain. If you want to have that man get me back to where...."

"With all due respect, *sir*," Saunders looked in surprise as his black counterpart opened his mouth for the first time and continued, "it don't sound like we're standing side by side as we's most likely gonna end up dead."

Captain Fox's face turned red as he spluttered, "That's why I'm asking for volunteers, Sergeant. But if I don't get volunteers, I suppose...."

Saunders saw the two men already toting the bazookas look at each other. One shrugged his shoulders, then both stepped forward. Saunders knew them only as Martin and Bonner or Bernard, *something like that*. The Negro sergeant shook his head and reluctantly moved up to join his "volunteers." Bennet started to take a step forward when a voice rang out from Saunders' squad.

"I'll go." Cajé was looking directly at Bennet. The Cajun moved over among the ranks of "volunteers," ignoring Kirby's outstretched hand and Billy's muffled gasp.

Saunders sighed. "Cajé...."

Cajé continued quickly, "I know the territory. I scouted it out before we went across and brought our squad across it later. I know the way the creek runs and how it goes into the tree line." The firm set of the Cajun's jaw dared Saunders to say anything.

And Saunders had no doubt everything the scout said was true. Besides having

the annoying habit of placing himself and those around him in impossible situations, Cajé also had a near photographic memory when it came to terrain. But...

"Very well, private. Keeland," Fox looked at the reporter, "please make note of the make up of this volunteer group. A group to be proud of. This is what the folks back home..."

"COVER UP!" Kirby's voice drowned out that of the captain's for only a second before a couple of screaming meemies echoed over their position. The shells exploded with a flash of light followed by the distinctive whizzing of hundreds of pieces of small, hot shrapnel.

As the mixed squad dove for cover, Saunders realized that the shells were going to hit at least twenty yards behind them. He screamed to be heard above the next round: "Move out and up—they don't have a fix on us yet. Find a place and dig in!"

To his horror as he peered above his trench, he could see the group of "volunteers" moving off to the right toward the creek bed and Fox's head peering above his own shelter admonishing them to move faster. Realizing that at this point there was nothing he could do about Cajé's inclusion in what was certainly a suicide mission, Saunders turned his attention toward the remainder of the squad.

"Move up! Move up!" He grabbed the blubbering reporter by the collar of his shirt and literally hauled him out of the hedgerow and forward into a relatively deep foxhole. They landed on the rotting corpse of some unfortunate Kraut. Saunders tugged the body aside to take advantage of the better shelter toward the front of the hole. He could see the reporter watching him with repulsion, but the man did nothing to lend a hand with the gruesome deed.

Each detonation shook the earth, raining down dirt, tree limbs, and of course, the deadly shrapnel. When the shelling would begin to let up, the captain would yell for the men to move forward to keep the Krauts' attention focused on them and away from the bazooka team. At first there were a few halfhearted attempts to scuttle forward from foxhole to foxhole. Saunders saw Kirby and Bennet vault out of a shared hole and throw themselves into another some ten or fifteen yards forward. But by and large the unit remained where it first took shelter, the men's eyes throbbing in their sockets, their chests compressed from each blast, and their ears ringing until nothing more could be heard distinctly.

After nearly fifteen minutes it stopped. In the sudden silence Saunders heard someone yelling for a medic, and a moment later saw Doc cautiously creep out of hole to his right, dragging his rucksack behind him. Checking to make sure that the reporter was okay, Saunders quickly followed in the direction he thought he'd heard earlier screams from. It had been hard to tell.

He practically fell in the large foxhole, sliding down an enlargement so recently made that it was still smoking. Doc already had bandages out and was liberally applying sulfa to the bloody, pulpy remains of Fox's hand.

Without looking up, Doc answered Saunders unasked question. "He'll live, Sarge. As long as we can get him back right quickly. Billy got a nick, but I think that's the sum of it." Though the medic could not see the gesture, Saunders nodded curtly and squeezed his way to the front of the foxhole. He reached for Fox's binoculars, lying right on the side of the foxhole, but his hand fell away as he realized that they would no longer be of use.

Suddenly Bennet was beside him. Saunders waited a moment for the lieutenant to say something, but when it appeared nothing was forthcoming, he asked, "So what now, sir?"

When no answer was provided, Saunders pressed, "Could you tell if they made it?"

Bennet continued scanning the horizon for a moment before he turned to Saunders and replied, "I couldn't tell a damn thing, Sergeant."

Saunders caught his bottom lip between his teeth and then let it go with a resounding "pop." He asked again, "So what now?"

Bennet looked back at Fox, whose eyes were shut in pain. It was clear that the captain was no longer in charge. What should have been clear from the bars on the lieutenant's helmet and the stripes on Saunders' shoulders was who would decide what happened next. Two men, faces striped equally with dirt and sweat, stared at each other.

The lieutenant spoke softly at first, but his voice gathered authority as he continued. "Have the men lay down a round of fire toward the tree line. See if we can't at least annoy them enough to get an answer. That'll tell us what next."

"Yes, sir." Saunders started to turn, then paused and added, "And our men out there?"

"Tell your men... the men... to concentrate fire to the left. Let's see if we can give 'em a chance to get back."

Saunders slithered out of the foxhole and moved across the occupied area communicating the order. After he reached the last hole—Kirby's—he held up his hand and gave the signal. The firing commenced. For several minutes the men lay down a withering but generally short volley. Fire was returned, but it was sporadic and did not include any of the artillery that had stopped so suddenly only a few minutes ago.

As silence again descended on the field, Saunders returned to the foxhole containing Fox and Bennet to find the lieutenant on the radio and the reporter now huddled next to Doc. After several exchanges, Bennet signed off and turned to Saunders. "We gotta pull back right now. They're moving the artillery across that bridge, then gonna lay down some right here as they get that armor across. We've only got a few minutes. HQ says we're behind as it is."

As he spoke, the lieutenant would not meet Saunders' eyes. It didn't matter the color of the face under the bars, Saunders would not allow any man to get away with such an order without acknowledging the consequences.

"And our men out there, sir?" Again Saunders asked the question. But this time the answer was less to his liking.

"God help them, Sergeant, if they're still alive."

"God help them?!" Saunders couldn't help the angry exclamation that was torn from his lips. Bennet was now looking at him, his eyes challenging. They could both feel the import of this moment. Bennet had the orders, had conveyed them to the (white) sergeant now technically under him. But no one—no one!—would know if the squad took several extra minutes to try to find their missing counterparts. Yes, it could mean that they would become trapped in the oncoming artillery. But among even the most hardened front line troops there still remained an expectation that heroism still meant something, that camaraderie was not pointless, that even among screaming shells, raining bullets, or rampaging tanks they would not be completely abandoned by men they may have just met, but with whom they shared their misery, cigarettes, and perhaps a few brief moments of laughter.

"Are you going to follow my orders, Sergeant?" It was a loaded question.

Saunders was suddenly aware of the reporter staring at the two of them, the roundness of his eyes even more pronounced behind his thick glasses, his pencil poised above his pad waiting to record the sergeant's answer. For an indeterminable amount of time, they all stood frozen in this tableaux—the black lieutenant who was supposed to be an example for his race, the white battle-hardened sergeant who was himself torn about what to do, the anxious medic who had a patient to get back but worried about others

who might need him, and the reporter, scared but determined to capture this critical moment in an evolving story.

Neither Saunders nor Bennet broke eye contact. Saunders' earlier conversation with Hanley replayed in his head,

*"I need to know, Saunders."*

*"I'll take orders from any man in this Army that outranks me, sir. I'll follow orders from those who know what their doing."*

"Yes... sir."

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The reaction from the men as Saunders conveyed the orders had been predictable... the disbelief, the muttered protests, the sullen stares. The pace back to their own lines was quick, but slowed enough by Doc and Littlejohn carrying the wounded captain for the men to have breath for *sotto voce* comments.

*"That's why you don't volunteer in this man's army."*

*"Don't fall behind. Ya' might get left behind."*

*"Guess friendship don't mean as much to **some** people as it does to others."*

This last comment caused a scuffle between Kirby, the originator of most of the grumbling, and the other squad's own BAR man. The entire group drew to a halt as what had been pushing turned into all out shoving. Saunders realized tempers were at a breaking point as he turned back from the front of the line and threw himself between the two men.

"Enough!"

As Kirby thrust forward again, Saunders threw out his hand and grabbed the scrawny loudmouth by the front of his shirt. "Enough, I said!" Two other soldiers held the Negro BAR man.

"Everybody left somebody out there. Them... us. Everybody! Okay? It's the same for everyone."

Kirby stared at him, his dark eyes accusing, hurt. *Hurt?* "Sarge, I don't give a damn 'bout it bein' fair. It ain't right! Those guys just gave the whole company a chance, and we didn't even give them five more minutes, much less go look for them. It ain't right!"

Saunders swiveled and saw the same expression on all the faces now turned toward him. Black, white... unified in their anger and sense of injustice. They were orders, they were logical... *they were not right.*

*"We are, aren't we Sarge? Better than they are?"*

A crashing through the undergrowth behind the squad broke the tense stand off. Men reached for their weapons and dove for cover. Suddenly the black sergeant broke through the bushes, his helmet and weapon missing, his uniform torn, blood bright on his cheek and on his side. He tripped and sprawled in the grass and, with a groan, remained down.

Saunders ran forward, turning the man gently over as he was joined by Doc and Lieutenant Bennet. The rest of the men formed a circle around the group.

"Colman, where are the others?" Bennet's voice was gentle but urgent.

"I tried, sir. I tried. Martin and Bernard, they're gone. Weren't nothing I could do. We took out the one. They got it right away." The wounded man paused for breath, then continued, "LeMay, he picked up one of the bazookas. I was already hit. We crawled over and got a shot off at the other one, but they was onto us. Shit! Machine guns, grenades..." The voice trailed off.

Bennet shook the man, a little harder than necessary. Doc grabbed the

lieutenant's hand and pulled it away as the medic started tending to the sergeant's side wound. "What about LeMay, Sergeant?"

Saunders held his breath.

The Negro sergeant—*Colman*, Saunders corrected himself—opened his eyes. "I'm sorry, Eduard. I'm sorry."

"Eduard!" Kirby's angry exclamation rang out. Doc turned unbelieving eyes on Saunders across the lieutenant's bowed head.

"You mean...." Doc never got to finish his question as Kirby bowled into the lieutenant, knocking Saunders to his rear in the process.

The enraged private shook Bennet by his lapels, banging his head on the ground in the process. "You're Eduard? You're his best friend? You're 'tied-tin-cans-on-Huey Long's-dog Eduard?' The guy he tol' me 'bout over 'n over? What kind of friend are you?"

Bennet spat out angrily, "I was never his friend! I was his paid boy. And I was beaten for Mayor Long's dog, soldier."

Something flashed, and Saunders turned away from the fracas to see the enraptured face of the reporter as he dropped his camera and resumed his incessant scribbling, looking for all the world like he had just shat a Pulitzer. *Not*, Saunders thought, *if I can help it*. He made a mental note to kill the reporter later—or at least confiscate his film.

The flash had caused Kirby to hesitate, surprise still evident in his mobile features as Saunders turned his attention back to his primary problem. Using the momentary abatement in the assault, he grabbed Kirby's shoulders and threw the smaller man off the unresisting lieutenant. But he couldn't shut the incensed private up as he started his tirade yet again.

"Well, Uncle Sam pays me to cover his ass, too! And yours," Kirby stretched out his arm, pointed to the astounded faces surrounding him, "and his, an' his, an' his. So what? But you know what, I never knowed 'til the other night that you was a... you was black. You know that? Most people woulda' said something 'bout it. You know? 'bout their best childhood friend being colored? But not him! Never said a word 'til I opened my big, stupid mouth and said something 'bout not fightin' with darkies. Well, he mighta' been right 'bout fighten' with ya', but I certainly ain't gonna make no friends with ya'. What kind of man leaves his friend behind? What kind of man are you? Huh?"

Bennet pushed himself up off the ground and drew himself up to his considerable full height. He walked several steps forward and towered over the enraged private. Slowly, precisely, deeply, enunciating each word carefully he said, "I... am... your... superior... officer... soldier."

For just a moment, Kirby appeared quelled. Then spitting the words out, he replied, "You may be an officer, **sir**, but after what you've done you're not this man's superior." Gesturing to the men standing around, Kirby added, "And you're not theirs."

"Sarge! Lieutenant!" Doc added the last hesitantly as he leaned over the wounded man and put his ear closer to the sergeant's mouth. "Colman wants to tell you something."

Into the tense silence, the Negro sergeant's surprisingly strong voice carried extra urgency. "He's still alive, Eduard. LeMay's still alive." Struggling to continue, the sergeant impatiently pushed Doc's restraining hand away and took a deep breath, looking apologetically at the disbelieving faces focused on him. "I drug him as far as I could. I jus' couldn't get him no further. I left him and tol' him I'd get help."

"Where?" "How bad's he hurt?" Saunders' and Doc's questions rang out simultaneously.

"Flash burns. The grenades. His eyes. Can't see nothin'."

"Where?" Saunders reiterated, leaning down closer as the wounded soldier's voice started to falter.

There was frustrating silence. Birds sang as though nothing had happened and the still heavy breathing of Kirby whistled annoyingly alongside an occasional moan from Captain Fox.

"Where?" Bennet reiterated.

"The hedgerow. I left him by the hedgerow... 'tol him someone'd come get 'im."

Saunders and Bennet exchanged horrified glances, both men clearly imagining the terror of facing artillery similar to what they had just encountered alone and in the dark.

Bennet spoke first, looking at his watch as he barked, "Sergeant, get the men together. We're already almost out of time. We've got to move out." At Saunders' hesitation, he added emphatically, "Now. Sergeant!"

Kirby's anguished howl rose up among the trees. Angrily, he stomped over to where he had dropped his BAR, reached down without breaking stride, slinging the weapon over his shoulder as he turned and headed back from where they had come.

"Kirby!" Saunders watched as the soldier continued his heated retreat. "Stop now, soldier!"

Kirby spun around, literally hopping up and down in his rage. "I'm going to get him, Sarge. I ain't leavin' him out there like that. It ain't right! It ain't right, Sarge, and you know it!"

Saunders drew a deep, shuddering breath. Kirby's words hit him hard, as though the private had physically punched him in the gut. "We have our orders, Private."

"You can take your orders and shove 'em, Sergeant. I'm going." But Kirby didn't move, a glimmer of indecisiveness shimmering across his sweaty face.

"No, soldier. You're not going," Bennet said.

Kirby literally appeared to collapse in on himself, weighted down by the combined orders of his sergeant, the lieutenant, and his own uncertainty.

"You're going with Saunders, Private." Bennet held up his hand as Kirby appeared to be about to raise a last, feeble objection. "Sergeant Colman, are you able to continue?"

"Yes, sir," the wounded man mumbled, staring accusingly at the lieutenant.

"Then move 'em out, Sergeant." The lieutenant's voice brooked no opposition.

Saunders stood unmoving and watched as the lieutenant shouldered his own Tommy and started toward Kirby. Kirby looked apprehensive as the large black man strode purposefully toward him, but his expression changed to one of confusion as Bennet brushed past him and started to disappear in the thick foliage.

"What are you doing, Lieutenant?" Saunders called out to the retreating form.

There was no reply.

"Damn!" breathed the reporter, Keeland. He put his camera to his face again, turning this way and that way, trying to determine where to focus. He pulled it down in confusion as his view suddenly was blocked. Saunders held out his hand.

"What?"

"Your film."

"What? You can't do that!" Keeland clutched his camera protectively to his chest.

"Yes, I can. Or we'll just wait out this barrage together."

The reporter turned, his terrified visage looking for support from the soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder in a small, unremarkable glen somewhere in France. Black and white faces stared resolutely back at him.

Moments later, with the film tucked safely in his pocket, Saunders started his



men back toward Allied lines just as the first shells whistled overhead. When they got back, he'd make sure he got the notebook, too.

*Sometimes the black and white details, like the sides on the battlefield, were just facts. The finer points—the actual moments—that truly counted and could change entire lives were often found in the shades of gray outlining and shadowing the men in the midst of the conflict.*

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The aid tent was nearly dark, the lamps turned down to encourage rest among the wounded. Saunders paused at the entrance, his eyes searching in the gloom for his quarry.

It was his ears, though, that located the men first. Soft, sibilant conversation in French emanated from a corner near the right. Squinting slightly, Saunders was just able to make out the broad form of Bennet sitting on a chair next to a soldier with stark, white bandages over his eyes. The wounded soldier was sitting up, a broad smile on his face as he reached out. Saunders saw Bennet take a swallow from a bottle of wine, then place it carefully into Caje's outstretched hand.

"Where is he, Sarge?"

Kirby's distinctive, penetrating twang broke Saunders' quiet observation. At Saunders' nod toward the corner, Kirby stumbled past him, tripping over his own feet. Often clumsy, heavy-handed, blustering, the scrappy Irishman usually came through when it counted. It never ceased to amaze the sergeant.

"You coming, Sarge?"

Kirby managed to stagger directly into an attractive nurse. Despite her obvious annoyance, he continued to hold onto her a moment longer than was necessary. Saunders started to suspect the slip and tried to restrain a grin. "In a minute, Kirby."

Kirby clearly saw the sergeant's twitching lips, and his face lit in an uninhibited grin of his own. "kay." Now whistling, the erstwhile troublemaker sidled up to his comrade-in-arms and general closest confidant. Pulling up a chair, Kirby gleefully announced, "I'm here."

The sergeant saw Caje's grin get wider, if possible. "I know, Kirby," the wounded man said drolly.

Bennet, now in possession of the wine, took a long swallow and again carefully placed it in Caje's hand. Pushing his chair back, he started to rise.

"Wait!" At the scraping sound of the chair, Caje's hand reached out without making contact with the lieutenant. "Where are you going?"

"Well..."

"Yeah, where are you going?" Kirby took the bottle from Caje and, looking deliberately at Bennet, took a long, deep swig. Wiping his mouth, he motioned for Saunders to join them. Loudly, the private asked, "You got to explain to me how if you two grew up together, Caje here can't speak a lick of English so as anyone can unnerstand while the lieutenant here talks like every other stick up his arse officer in this here Army."

As Bennet plopped back down in his chair, Saunders stopped, hesitating by the door, and walked quickly across the room. This was a story he couldn't miss.

end