

Between Worlds

By ER & B
ssnquick@yahoo.com



This started as a simple Halloween short, working title "Spooky", that developed a life of its own, and also became our first collaborative effort as husband and wife duo.

Thanks go out to Doc for catching all of our mistakes and offering ongoing support to two newbie authors.

"How much farther is it to this farm where we're settin' up the OP, Sarge? My foot's killin' me." Kirby stomped down and shook his boot awkwardly for the hundredth time as he walked along the dirt road.

Littlejohn looked back to where Kirby was lagging behind the rest of his squad mates in line, debating whether he should respond to the comment. If he did, he knew they'd never hear the end of it, but the last few hours had been filled with little to distract him.

After talking non-stop for the first half hour about everything and nothing, Billy had lapsed into an unnatural silence except for making small grunting noises as he shifted the weight of the heavy radio on his back. His steps were heavy now, and his brow furrowed deep in thought as he marched forward, eyes fixed on the ground.

Doc, as usual, traveled in silence, at one with his own inner monologue. Not for the first time, Littlejohn wondered what went through the medic's mind in the squad's down time. Whether his thoughts were filled with brooding over past lives' lost, upcoming battles, or the simple life he left back in Arkansas.

Littlejohn sighed and decided to accept the bait Kirby offered. "What is it this time, ya Goldbrick? If I had a franc for every blister you complained about, I'd be rich."

Kirby snorted. "Hah, hah. I got a rock in my boot about the size a that hole in your head, ya big moose." He made a dramatic show of limping along for a few feet. "Hey, Nelson..."

"Don't even start about my 'old lady', Kirby." Billy rolled his shoulders slowly. "And no, I still don't have any foot powder. Ask Doc...."

Saunders lifted the strap of his Thompson higher on his shoulder and smiled to himself as he listened to the familiar banter of his squad. He reached inside his jacket to pull out the hand-made map he'd prepared during his discussion with Lieutenant Hanley this morning and flipped it over, studying the penciled lines and circles that only he would understand. He glanced up as he caught sight of Caje trotting back toward them from his recon up ahead.

The scout shouldered in line with Saunders and glanced down at the map. He swiped at the sheen of perspiration beading across his forehead, ignoring the smear of dirt he knew his hand would leave behind, and nodded toward the road. "There's a town just over this hill, Sarge. I think it's deserted. It looks pretty bombed-out."

Saunders checked his watch and then studied the map again. "It'll take too long to go around. We'll make a quick sweep through to make sure nothing's gonna come out and bite us in the ass, and then get on our way again. We only have a few hours of daylight left."

"What's so special about this farm, anyway, Sarge?"

"The whole area's changed hands several times, and the farm was spotted a few weeks ago on a withdrawal. It sits up on a hill and has a good view of the valley and the eastern front."

The squad stood listening to the rapid-fire exchange between the Cajun scout and the local they'd found near the town well. The old man had seemed reticent to talk to them at first, but a few cigarettes and a chocolate bar had loosened up his tongue and now the two men were chattering away in French.



“He says he’s the only one left, Sarge. Everyone else is gone, but he’s been here his whole life and refused to leave.”

Kirby barked out a short laugh and scratched at the side of his neck as he looked around at the destruction. “Quite the resort area—I hear the dancin’ girls are somethin’ to see, too.”

Saunders glared warningly at Kirby over his shoulder before turning his full attention back to Cajé. “Ask him if the farmhouse west of town is still empty.” The old man’s eyes grew wide as Cajé relayed the question from the sergeant. He quickly shook his head and pulled back from the soldiers, waving his hand in the air as if he were trying to bat away unwanted thoughts. “Non, non, non.”

Cajé grabbed the old man’s arm, trying to still his flight. “Wait! Attendez, s’il vous plait, monsieur.”

“What’s the matter, Cajé?”

“Just a minute, Sarge.”

The two men started babbling away again. More than once, Cajé had to stop and ask the old man to slow down and repeat what he’d said. Even with the shift in speed, he still found himself having to interrupt the stream of words with a question or comment every so often as he tried to analyze the disjointed conversation.

Saunders shuffled from one foot to the other, rubbing the bridge of his nose as the dialogue stretched on. Behind him, he could hear the men strike up another easy-going banter-session as they lost interest in the old man and whatever trivial bit of life frightened him at the moment. Day in and day out, they saw men, women and children who were all starving and frightened. How was this one any different?

Finally impatient, Saunders prompted the Cajun. “What’s he saying, Cajé?”

“I don’t know, Sarge. He keeps going on about the place being haunted or something. No one’s been out there for years.”

Silence descended on the squad at Cajé’s soft declaration.

Billy balanced his M1 across his knees and dug out his canteen as he watched Doc hunker down lower in the ditch next to him along the road. The medic was splitting his attention between watching the woods off to the east, and keeping close watch on the movements of the squad as they made their way to the farmhouse.

Billy really admired Doc for the way he handled the pressure of his job. It couldn’t be easy to hang back and watch the action from the sidelines, hoping you didn’t have a bird’s eye view of your friends getting slaughtered. Back in town, as they’d listened to the old man’s tale, the medic had seemed more curious than anything else. Billy, on the other hand, was sure that apprehension had been clearly written all over his own face. He’d outgrown haunted houses when he’d outgrown Halloween...hadn’t he? But there was something about an old man in a deserted, bombed out village in France, talking about an old haunted farm that made his skin crawl.

Billy rehung his canteen and cleared his throat. “Doc, not that I believe in ghosts or anything, but that old man in town seemed really scared.”

The medic looked at Billy and then his eyes drifted slowly back to the farmhouse on the hill as he considered the conversation in town.

“I never seen anything myself.” He spoke low and easy, his voice full of natural Arkansas drawl, as if talking to a friend on a late summer evening. “But my pap used to tell us ghost stories about spirits that were caught between worlds...like they just couldn’t let go.”

Saunders edged the leaves aside to clear his field of vision and started making a slow arc with the field glasses.

The dilapidated stone structure sat apparently abandoned between a scattering of huge oaks and bent pines. A thick mass of green ivy crawled up one of the rough exterior fieldstone walls like a natural earthen blanket. Elsewhere, pockets of moss shot out from the crumbling mortar and grew along the decaying wooden shingle roof. Weeds, long neglected, were now waist high around the house, although the outline of mounds of dirt and withered plants of a garden were still visible to one side. Near the garden, an old wooden bucket sat atop the crumbled remains of a circular rock wall that had probably been the old well. At the far right, next to a hedgerow, an axe handle protruded above the thickly tangled overgrowth, blade buried deeply in a large stump barely visible through the vegetation.



A heavy wooden door was flanked by two windows with matching wood shutters. One set was still closed and latched securely across the window, even though the wood was cracked and the knots had fallen out, leaving holes. At the window on the far right side of the door, one shutter clung askew to the stones by its corner, while the second had fallen to rest battered and broken against the side of the house.

Saunders swung the binoculars back over his head. "We need to check the perimeter. Cajé, take Littlejohn and head behind the house. I don't want anyone sneaking up on us from the other side."

"Right, Sarge." Cajé and Littlejohn moved stealthily away, keeping to the edge of the tree line as they made a wide swing around the boundary of the farm.

Saunders pulled his Thompson from his shoulder and glanced at the remaining member of his squad. Kirby had already rocked his heavy rifle forward, anticipating action. "You're on me, Kirby."

The two men rose from their crouch and Saunders headed slowly up the light rubble-strewn slope, eyes narrowed, trying to see every detail of the landscape. Behind him he knew that Kirby was in the same state of hyper-vigilance.

Time seemed to crawl as the soldiers snaked back and forth toward the house, making use of trees and hedgerows to block their approach. Several hundred feet out, beyond a crumbling hand stacked stone fence, a no man's land of dry waist-high weeds halted their forward momentum. If there were Krauts inside, all hell would break loose when they'd try to run across that open space without any cover.

"Ready?" Saunders noted the tense set of Kirby's jaw as they crouched next to the wall.

Kirby had pulled the magazine from the receiver of his rifle to check the ammo. Satisfied, he slammed it home and pulled back the bolt to rack the chamber. "As I'll ever be, Sarge."

"Good, I'll cover you." Kirby made quick eye contact with Saunders before scrabbling around the corner toward the house. Almost at the same instant, Sarge popped over the top with his Thompson. As soon as Kirby reached the safety of the side of the house, Saunders followed him at breakneck speed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something dart by the window on the right.

"Kirby! Window!" Saunders slammed up against the house and winced as his helmet impacted and rolled forward. He shoved it back and then let his gaze dart quickly around the surrounding tree line to make sure that Cajé and Littlejohn hadn't appeared again to walk into a gunfight.

"Krauts, Sarge?"

"I don't know. I thought I saw something."

Taking positions on either side of the heavy wooden front door, Saunders turned the handle and nosed it open with his Thompson. He nodded almost imperceptibly to Kirby and then kicked the door open, weapon raised.

As fading evening sunlight poured into the open doorway, the two men scanned the interior, letting their eyes adjust to the near darkness. Dust floated weightlessly through the shafts of daylight as their eyes continued to become accustomed to the change in lighting. Cobwebs filled every corner and were almost thick enough to obscure some of the smaller objects in the room, clearly indicating that no one had entered the house for a long while. The left side of the room was sparsely decorated with a sofa, still partially covered in spots by a rough textured fabric, the pattern unrecognizable through the dirt. A chair of the same material, with wisps of stuffing pulled out by vermin, and a hand-crafted rocking chair surrounded a pot belly stove.

A rustic wooden table sat against the right hand wall near a closed door, a chair at the head of the table overturned. Four place settings, a ladle, and a rusty iron pot gave the impression that a meal had been interrupted. The horsehair plaster walls were decorated with a few paintings and sconces with half melted candles. Another window in back was also shuttered tightly.

Kirby moved quietly to the closed door on the right and strained to listen past it. Hearing nothing but his own breathing, he looked back at Saunders and shook his head.

The sergeant walked over to the table and noticed an old iron ring attached to a trapdoor in the floor. Saunders caught Kirby's eye and pointed down, then grabbed the armchair and pulled it over the edge of the trapdoor, locking it down, then he joined Kirby next to the closed door on the right side of the room.

Kirby stood there, grasping the worn handle with his free hand as he balanced the heavy BAR on his hip. He cursed silently at the stuffy, heavy air inside the house and tried to slow his breathing. Not a touch of the cooler air from the outside seemed to be making it through the open front door. *Feel like someone's tryin' to smother me with a god damned wool blanket.* A glance at Saunders told him that the sergeant wasn't doing much better. His face was flushed and sweat was dripping down into the collar of his uniform shirt.

Kirby swung the door open and let the BAR lead him into the room. The exterior shutter that had still been attached to the window banged against the side of the house and clattered to the ground. "Holy cripes!" Kirby barely managed to keep himself from swinging around and pulling the trigger.

"Easy, Kirby," Saunders called from the doorway.

The private straightened from his half-crouch and shook his head. Even in the shadowed, partial darkness, it seemed obvious that the filthy stark furniture in the bedroom had not been touched in ages.

"Sarge, you must be imaginin' things. Ain't nothin' but dust in here."

Saunders looked at the wooden planks on the floor. He could see the outline of Kirby's Army issued combat boots in the thick dust, but nothing else disturbing the filth.

"Kirby, go get Doc and Billy. There's a trapdoor back there I want checked out. You can take Billy down with you."

Saunders swung his Thompson up onto his shoulder and stepped over to the window. A layer of dust and dirt coated the decaying windowsill and the hazy glass panes. Behind him, an old chipped armoire stood with all of its doors and drawers hanging open, the bed next to it collapsed onto the floor, its wooden frame broken. A large cloth bag was sitting next to it. He picked it up and dumped the contents on one of the two smaller beds that were shoved against the far wall. Waving the cloud of dust aside, he sifted through what looked like women's clothes, hastily thrown in.

A nightstand sat next to one of the two small beds, the remnants of a single candle and a bible the only objects on the little table. Saunders knew that families frequently had to leave their homes in a hurry, but a bible was the last thing he imagined would be left behind.

Trunks at the foot of each bed had been thrown open. Clearly, the family had a young boy and a small girl by the looks and sizes of the clothing scattered inside.

A strange sensation tugged the hairs on the back of his neck moments before Saunders felt the touch on his skin. He spun, drawing his Thompson, waving the weapon back and forth in the empty room. *Why do I feel like I'm being watched?* Frustrated, Saunders pulled his helmet off and dragged his fingers through his unruly blond hair, letting his hand trail away across his sweaty forehead. He slid his camo helmet back on and returned to the window to open it and allow the evening breeze to clear the stagnant, heavy air in the room. He gripped the rail and fought against the warped casing until the sash jerked free and slid up. Saunders leaned on the sill, breathing deeply, feeling the cool air rush along his sweaty skin. Reluctantly, he pulled away and headed back into the main room of the house to repeat the action with the window at the rear of the house.

Before him, the ground sloped gently downward, emptying in the valley they were to observe for German activity, the final fingers of sunlight casting a dark bronze glow across the tree tops.

Behind him, Billy walked in and shrugged out of the radio harness, setting the heavy contraption on the table. While the young soldier glanced around the room, taking in everything with an almost childlike eagerness, Doc entered the house, slipped his rucksack onto the kitchen table and parked himself on one of the benches, calmly awaiting the sergeant's orders.

Saunders slid the Thompson from his shoulder and picked up the radio handset, extending the antenna in one fluid motion.

"Checkmate King Two, this is White Rook, over. Checkmate King Two, this is White Rook, over."

After a few seconds of static and crackling in the earpiece, Lt. Hanley responded, "White Rook, this is King Two, have you secured your primary objective? Over."

As Saunders reported in, Kirby and Billy moved over to the cellar door in the floor.

Billy held the lantern up to reveal the wooden steps leading down to the floor of the cellar. Cobwebs stretched from one side to the other, all the way to the bottom.

"Billy, did you notice another way into the cellar from outside?"

"Not that I saw. Doesn't look like anyone has been down these stairs in a long time."

Nodding to Billy, Kirby slowly slipped down the creaking steps, clearing the cobwebs with his BAR. Shadows moved eerily on the walls as Billy followed closely with the lantern. A sparsely filled wine rack, some cobweb filled shelves, and a few crates lined the wall facing them.

Suddenly, Billy held the lantern aloft. "Did you hear that?"

"It's probably rats."

"It didn't sound like rats."

"Well, what did it sound like?"

The lantern flame flickered in its glass globe and died down to a slim red line along the wick before dying.

"Dammit, Nelson, don't you know how to work that thing."

Billy could hear Kirby shifting his heavy rifle around and then a match flame sparked to life in the darkness as he lifted the glass globe, advanced the wick and relit the lantern.

“Here, gimme that thing.” Kirby swung the BAR over his head and across his shoulders then took the lantern from Billy before heading over to the wine rack. He moved from shelf to shelf, picking up various bottles to squint at the labels in the dim lantern light.

Billy shook his head. “Kirby, we’re supposed to be searching the cellar, not picking out wine to go with our c-rations.”

“There ain’t nothin’ down here, Billy, cept us and these bottles.” Kirby sniffed and rubbed his nose as the dust from the shelves swirled in the air.

Billy stared at Kirby’s back for a moment, shook his head, and then moved off alone. The soles of his boots made a faint echo off the walls as he walked into the darkness, away from the circle of light cast by the lantern. Dim shapes huddled together at the edges of his vision, forming into old chairs and assorted boxes as his eyes became accustomed to the pitch-black cellar. Then the room started to get cold.

Billy shivered as the hair along his forearms and the back of his neck started tingling. Taking a breath, he stepped further away from Kirby and the stairs, trying to listen for the same noise he’d heard when they’d first come down through the trap door.

Somewhere across the room, his eyes were drawn to something against the wall that his mind struggled to explain, a flatness, not quite a shadow, but something that seemed almost like the absence of light. He felt himself being pulled toward it, felt his boots slipping on the uneven ground. The light from the lantern was being pulled toward the thing in front of him too, stretching past him through the darkness in strange tendrils, twitching like the legs of a dying spider. As all of the air rushed from the room and his diaphragm contracted against the effort to draw in a gasping breath, reality snapped, and a shock of electricity jolted along his entire body sending his rifle clattering to the ground from numbed fingers. When his body finally released from the spasm, the lantern was coming bobbing toward him.

“Wassa matter?”

Billy was breathing hard. He picked up the Garand with shaking hands. “There was something here...it—it.”

Kirby narrowed his eyes as Billy stuttered and then he swung the lantern around in an arc. “I don’t see anything—oh, wait a minute.” He bent down to pick something up and shoved it toward Billy. “Look, it’s just a doll.”

Billy held it out at arms length, willing his hands to stop shaking, unnerved by the blank glassy stare of the doll’s lidless eyes. The doll may at one time have been a proper toy, but now, its blue dress was filthy and torn, its hair was matted and tangled and part of its ceramic mouth had chipped away.

“I don’t know, Kirby, something’s wrong down here. Let’s go back upstairs.” Billy was angry at himself for letting the fear and physical responses of his body overcome his sense of duty.

“Look, nothin’s here but that stinkin’ doll,” Kirby told him, swinging the lantern around again. “Quit messin’ around before you make me nervous.”

Billy’s eyes were darting wildly at the shadows dancing on the walls. Keeping one eye on his squad mate, he walked quickly over to one of the crates and dropped the doll on top, then he followed Kirby closely back to the wine rack, tripping the BAR man as he stepped on the heel of his boot. Kirby gave him a dirty look and pushed him to the side.

“Kirby? Do you hear that noise again?”

Kirby didn’t even bother to turn from his appraisal of the wine bottles. “Nope.”



“Hand me the lantern.” Billy grabbed it and walked two or three steps away, just far enough so that the flickering light illuminated the other half of the cellar. The doll was in the middle of the floor again, tiny, lidless eyes staring blankly at him.

“I’m gettin’ out of here.”

“Billy!” Kirby barely managed to snag the lantern as Billy rushed past him toward the stairs.

Saunders turned at the sound of booted feet running up the cellar stairs and turned to see Billy stumble out followed more slowly by Kirby.

“Problem?”

“N-no, Sarge.”

Littlejohn followed cautiously behind Caje in the growing darkness as they finished their sweep, appreciating the almost cat-like movements of the scout. He realized what a pair they must make to the casual observer. Caje was the epitome of grace as he seemed to glide effortlessly across the terrain, whereas Littlejohn usually lumbered around like a man with two left feet. They worked as a team though, stopping often to listen and watch.

The sounds of chipmunks rooting for acorns in the dry leaves, the fluttering wings of chickadees moving through the brush, and a woodpecker tapping out his cadence in search of insects were all reassuring signs that everything was in order this evening. As they completed their loop, the farmhouse became visible once more as a looming shape through the darkening forest.

As Caje stopped to observe the rear of the structure, an uneasy feeling came over him. Ahead, he could hear the steady, rhythmic sound of a tree branch groaning, as if it were bending back and forth with a gentle wind. But there was no breeze to break up the stillness of the night air. The breeze had disappeared earlier that evening, as soon as darkness had fallen and the clouds had obscured the moonlight.

Caje closed his eyes, tuning into the sound. He could easily visualize the old swing hanging from the bent tree behind his childhood home in Louisiana. He could hear the ropes groaning as the gnarled branch resisted his weight, his small body straining to get higher and higher with each arc.

When he opened his eyes, Littlejohn was heading toward a large oak near the corner of the farmhouse. He was looking up at the tree, at a dark, shadowy form moving slowly through the branches, swinging heavily from a creaking limb.

Caje finally convinced his feet to respond, quickly closing the gap to Littlejohn. When his feet skidded to a halt in the tall grass beside the tree, he focused up into the branches, not knowing what he expected to see. Twisted, leaf-covered branches stretched up into the sky, disappearing into the blackness beyond the limit of his vision. The tree was as still as the night air, the shadow gone. The two men stood looking at each other for a few moments before either of them spoke.

“Littlejohn, why did you run over here?”

Littlejohn shook his head and shrugged, the tightness around his eyes betraying a sense of fear. “Must’ve been my imagination. Why did you?”

“Thought I heard something.”

“Yeah.” Littlejohn’s reply was low and quiet as he turned his head back to the forest.

“That’s another thing. I don’t even hear crickets anymore. There’s nothin’.”

Caje had to agree. The forest, usually full of sounds of life, had suddenly become almost like a dead thing. Looking at the ground, Caje took a quick step back. An old boot lay on the ground next to the tree, and something else, too... a length of decaying brown rope. It wasn't until he lifted it from the ground that they both saw the hangman's knot.

The dark night was suddenly lit by a white flash, blinding the two soldiers...

A rope flew up into the tree and wrapped itself about a high branch, pulling taut. Slowly, it jerked across the wide branch, drawing the noose tight about the man's neck. As his feet began to lift off the ground, his back arched, his fingers clawing at the rope. His legs spasmed and kicked and one of his boots flew off his foot and tumbled to the ground.

"Caje! Caje!"

Caje sucked in a breath and forced himself to focus on Littlejohn's worried face. With a start, he realized he had one hand fisted in the big private's uniform shirt and his other arm was pulled back to strike.

Littlejohn's voice was a harsh whisper in the darkness. "Caje, did you see it...?"

Caje squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and slowly let his fingers unclench from Littlejohn's shirt. His shoulder muscles were so tense, he had to will them to relax.

"No, I didn't see anything," he lied. "C'mon, Sarge'll be waiting."

The squad was gathered around the table in the kitchen when Caje and Littlejohn entered the house. Saunders spared them a glance, trusting them to report without prompting as he studied his map under the flickering glow of the lantern.

"Sarge..." Littlejohn faltered, stepping uneasily toward the table.

Saunders looked up and turned, instantly cued by the tone in his private's voice. "What's the problem?"

"Sarge, there's something..."

Caje cut him off. "Just drop it, Littlejohn."

"But you were there, Caje," Littlejohn whispered aside.

Small furrows of confusion appeared on Saunders' brow as he looked back and forth between his two men. Before he could open his mouth to ask for a straight answer, Caje grabbed Littlejohn's sleeve and started to push him toward the table to join the meeting. "It's nothin', Sarge. The perimeter was clear."

Saunders silently watched Caje and Littlejohn settle themselves at the table, unsure of what to say. With a fleeting thought, he hoped the old man's tale about haunted houses wasn't starting to spook the men. "We'll be taking two hour shifts on watch outside and inside on the radio. Everyone else can sack out in the bedroom. Kirby, you're first outside, then Littlejohn, Caje, Billy, and me. I'll take first shift on the radio.

Billy awoke to the sound of whispering and sat up. Everything was quiet in the room. Littlejohn was in the other small bed, long legs hanging comically out over the end, Caje had



claimed the mattress that lay on the floor. Doc had found several blankets in the trunks and after shaking the dust from them, had arranged them on the floor between the two small beds. Everyone was sound asleep. He rubbed his eyes and settled back down.

Something touched his shoulder.

“Huh, wha...” Billy turned over and saw the black glassy eyes of the broken doll from the basement staring back at him. He let out a little squeak and sat up. Heart racing, he looked around suspiciously, expecting to see Kirby sitting there laughing at him, but everything was still quiet in the room. He thought about the old fool back in town and what happened in the basement and then stopped himself with a shake of the head. He must be coming down with something. With a chuckle, he put the doll on the nightstand and lay back down.

His body and mind relaxed totally once more and then he heard the softest whisper right next to his ear in a tiny childlike voice. “*J’ai peur.*” His eyes shot open and the shiny doll eyes were staring back at him once more—tiny dead eyes.

He backpedaled off the bed and landed heavily, hearing a loud “Oof!” in the darkness. A terrible pain shot across his wrist and up his arm and he gasped.

“What the...! Billy!” Doc tried to scoot out from under Billy, but the boy’s grasp held him steady. “You all right?”

“It’s my wrist!”

“Just hold it still. Can we get some light in here?”

The stubby candle on the night table soon flickered to life and swept around the end of the bed in Cajé’s hand. Almost at the same instant, Littlejohn’s face peeked over the edge of his bed as he rolled over.

“What happened?” the big private asked.

Doc grunted and tried to shift Billy’s elbow away from his hip. “Billy fell and hurt his wrist.”

He could hear Littlejohn start chuckling. “Do we need to find you a crib next time, kid, so you don’t fall out?”

Billy moaned weakly. “Cut it out, Littlejohn, this really hurts.”

“Okay, sorry.” Littlejohn swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Gimme your good arm.”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!” Billy let out a string of verbal objections to the maneuver as his friend extricated him from the medic and wrestled him to his feet as gently as he could.

Doc popped up next to him and grabbed the candle from Cajé. “Better let Sarge know.”

“He’s gonna kill me,” Billy whined as Cajé opened the door and called out softly.

In a moment, Saunders appeared at the doorway. “What happened?”

“Billy hurt his wrist, Sarge. I’m checkin’ it out now.”

“How’d it happen?” Saunders was looking back and forth between his men. None of them were meeting his gaze.

Billy was hunched over, holding onto his left arm. He was glancing wildly at the nightstand and at the floor, along the edge of the bed. “Where’d it go?”

“Doc, how’d it happen?” Saunders repeated, his low, steady tone demanding a response.

“He fell off the side of the bed, Sarge.”

Saunders shook his head. “All right, Cajé, Littlejohn, give ‘im a hand. Then I wanna see you out here, Doc.”

“How is he, Doc?”

“The wrist is broken, Sarge.”

“And?”

"I dunno. He's goin' on and on about some doll."

"Hallucinating?"

"Well, broken bones can be painful, but he's not out of his mind with it. No reason he should be seein' things."

They could hear Billy's anxious voice in the other room and Littlejohn's deep baritone calmly answering.

Saunders and Doc walked back into the bedroom. Billy was sitting up in bed, holding his wrist and forearm against his side, Littlejohn perched on the edge of the bed next to him.

At Saunders' entrance, Billy sat forward and winced as pain shot through his wrist, his forehead and wisps of hair around his face damp with sweat.

Through gritted teeth, Billy said, "Sarge, where's Kirby?"

"Kirby's been on watch for the past two hours. Why don't you get some rest?"

"Uh-uh." Billy shook his head.

The front door unlatched and Kirby walked inside, calling out toward the bedroom. "Hey, Littlejohn, you're on..."

"Kirby, I'm gonna kill you." Billy started to swing off the bed and Littlejohn pushed him back down. Billy groaned and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Settle down, Billy," Littlejohn whispered. "We talked about this."

"But the doll?" Billy pleaded in a small voice.

Saunders and Doc looked at each other.

"Hey, what's going on in here?" Kirby's loose walk into the bedroom ground to a halt as he noticed the way Billy was glaring at him. "Wha'd I do?" He held a hand to his chest, the picture of Irish innocence.

"This, you jerk." Billy flapped his arm up and down like a wing and then realized what a mistake it was. He turned white as a sheet.

Saunders sighed, growing irritated. This mission had definitely taken a turn for the worse. "What's this about a doll?"

Billy glared at Kirby. "There was a broken doll in the basement and somehow it ended up on the bed. Kirby's the only one that knew about it."

"You're nuts, Nelson. I bin outside for the last two hours!"

"Where is it?" Saunders low voice made everyone turn.

Billy looked confused for a moment, then stricken.

"Where's the doll?"

The young soldier started peering over the side of the bed and around the floor like a child afraid of monsters under his bed. "It was here..."

"Demon dolls." Kirby snorted dismissively, but couldn't keep himself from scanning the perimeter of the floor either.

All of the men looked decidedly uneasy. Saunders resisted the shiver that tried to work its way up his back. Somehow, he felt himself being drawn in to the group gestalt. It was as if an electrical charge were building in the room making his skin crawl and the hair on his arms stand on end. Dammit if they all didn't seem to be losing it.

Doc motioned quietly to Saunders to follow him out of the room, but the sergeant paused, watching the two men on the bed. "Littlejohn, it's your turn on watch."

The big private looked up. "Right, Sarge."



After Saunders and Doc left the room, Littlejohn patted his friend awkwardly on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Billy, you'll be just fine. Doc'll patch you up in no time." He gathered his rifle and helmet and walked toward the door. As he passed Cajé, he shuffled to a stop and their eyes met. "Cajé, what happened to us outside...d'ya think?"

The scout shook his head quickly. Littlejohn had tried to speak quietly, but Cajé could see Billy anxiously gazing their way, straining to hear. "I told you to forget about it. There's nothing out there."

Littlejohn looked unconvinced. His gaze dropped to the floor and he left the room.

Doc frowned as he watched Littlejohn leave the house. His body language was all wrong. Like all of the men, the PFC seemed tense and jumpy. He was holding his M1 in a death grip, curling and uncurling his fingers around the weapon as he paused in the doorway.

Finally, Littlejohn took a deep breath and walked out slowly into the night, but when he turned to reach for the door and caught Doc's eyes on him, the worried look on his face was quickly replaced with a half-hearted smile. Doc was sure it would only last until the door closed.

"Doc, what about Billy?" Saunders asked.

The medic scooted a plate to the side and rested his elbows on the table. "Sarge, I think he just needs some rest. He's a little worked up right now. Once I get a splint on that arm, and maybe get some morphine in him, he'll settle down. He's right on the edge."

Saunders reached inside his jacket and groped around for a cigarette in the top pockets of the shirt underneath. While Billy was still very young, he'd never known the kid to crack under pressure. Saunders hoped he wouldn't have to have a talk with Hanley about this when they got back. "I'm going to send the two of you back tomorrow morning. If the drugs won't affect his mobility. . ." He kept switching from pocket to pocket in his search for a nicotine fix until he managed to pull out a single cigarette, then stared at it for a moment before tearing it in half and jamming it in his mouth. "Ah, forget it, just shut him up, will ya? Before I have to fill out a Section 8 on all of us."

Doc looked down at Nelson, who lay curled protectively around his arm and wrist. To avoid any more mishaps, they'd moved him to the safety of the mattress on the floor before putting him to bed. Kirby had tried to help Doc and Cajé as they worked on Billy, but the kid would have none of it. Even after Doc had given him half a dose of Morphine, he still kept slurring for Kirby to keep his creepy doll away. Kirby wanted to give Billy a bottle of wine as a peace offering, but Doc put the kibosh on that, saying that it was obvious that Billy could hardly handle a half dose of morphine, much less alcohol on top of it.

Finally, Kirby gave up and crawled onto Littlejohn's bed. He cracked open "Billy's" bottle of wine and stared off into the corner, eyes unfocused, the tip of his cigarette glowing and fading with each drag in the dim light as he alternated with long swigs from the wine bottle.

Cajé stood leaning against the wall, blending into the shadows as he stared at Billy.

Something was bothering the Cajun, and Doc thought he knew what it was. "Billy asked you somethin' before we set his wrist."

Cajé looked up, his eyes dark and unreadable. "He asked me what 'J'ai peur' meant, Doc."

"Yeah, and what was it...you said it meant 'I'm afraid'. Where would he get that from?"

"I don't know."

Caje was sure he had just let his head rest on the table next to the radio for a few moments when the whispering began. Then the loud banging. He jumped and lifted his head as a man he didn't recognize walked from the bedroom to the front door, his steps strange and halting as if time itself had slowed down.

"Öffnen Sie die Tür!" *Open the door!*

The shout in German from beyond the door accompanied more loud banging, and then the room flashed a brilliant white, blinding him.

Caje startled awake and sat up, rubbing his eyes and blinking against the bright spots that still danced on his retinas. As the dark room came back into focus, he could see Kirby standing at the front door talking in a low voice.

"Je vous dis la vérité." The BAR man swayed slightly.

Caje shook his head, wondering if he was still dreaming. He moved slowly to Kirby's side. His friend's face was shaded in darkness, his eyes half-closed. "Kirby?"

Kirby was shaking his head, his breathing quickening. "Je ne suis pas Maquis!"

Caje's eyes shot fully open. Kirby, the one person who always managed to mangle the local language so badly, was speaking French! Insisting that he wasn't lying, that he wasn't a member of the Maquis. Caje could only believe that somewhere along the way, subconsciously, Kirby had picked up enough of the language to be saying these things.

He reached out and touched Kirby's shoulder gently, afraid that his friend was sleepwalking.

The hair on the back of Caje's neck stood up. The room behind him seemed to be getting colder. *What the hell was happening?*

The shoulder beneath his hand was shaking. Had Kirby started crying? "Ma famille ne pas ici!" his friend pleaded between breaths, each exhalation and each word turning into white vapors of condensation as they met the temperature drop of the atmosphere.

Caje grabbed Kirby by the shoulder and swung him around. "Your family is safe at home, Kirby. In Chicago."

The cold was almost like a physical force now, bleeding its way out the front door, flattening the flame of the lantern on the table.

Kirby's eyes were wild. He started bucking in Caje's grasp. "No! Leave them alone! They're just children!"

Caje pulled back and slapped Kirby across the face, and was almost knocked off his feet as something unseen impacted against his own cheek, snapping his head around. As he rubbed a hand across his abraded jaw, the cold began to recede and the lantern was sputtering to life, trying to banish the shadow-things back into the corners.

Kirby was shaking uncontrollably. Caje glanced toward the heavy wooden door to the bedroom and thought about fetching Doc, but then grabbed his friend by the shoulders again and pulled him outside, away from the lingering cold.

Caje sat him down against the side of the house, knelt down in front of him and touched his face. Heat was coming off of him in waves, but Kirby continued to shiver. *What the hell! Cold and hot?* He looked pale and drawn. And scared.

"I don't feel so good, Caje. I think I'm gonna be sick." Suddenly Kirby darted away to the corner of the house. All the scout could do was support him as he threw up into the weeds.



From somewhere at the back of his mind, Kirby could hear voices, but he could not understand the words. He recognized Caje's voice, talking to him. He felt his friend's hand on his back and his side holding him up. Then he felt more hands and voices. Saunders was there...and Doc. A cool hand touched his forehead and he leaned into it. The last thing he felt were the hands grabbing him as he passed out.

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Doc woke alone in the bedroom. Next to the bible, a large candle flickered on the nightstand. The armoire, now brightly polished and clear of dust and dirt, stood next to the bed. Somehow, the bed's wooden frame had been repaired, and a brightly colored patchwork quilt was neatly tucked down between the mattress and the oak side rails. The heaviness of the air was gone.

He rose silently from the small bed and walked to the door. It ghosted open in front of him without sound.

The wall sconces in the main room glowed, illuminating the white walls and the flowered design on the sofa and chair, casting elongated flickering shadows.

Doc froze at the sight of four German soldiers standing in the room. Before them on the floor, a woman and a young boy lay crumpled, bodies covered with blood. A man who he could only guess was the husband, was down on his knees next to them, tears streaming down his face as he ran a hand through his wife's hair.

"Hold him, Corporal."

One of the German enlisted men slipped a rope around the father's neck and stood behind him. He gripped the end and jerked on the rope and the distraught man fell back, clawing at his neck.

The German captain lunged behind the arm chair and dragged out a small girl. She screamed, crying as her tiny arm was completely enveloped by the captain's fierce grip, tears making tracks down her dirt-encrusted cheeks. She was probably not more than seven years old, tightly clutching a doll in a blue dress, her own dress filthy and torn.

The father reached forward toward the girl, gasping and choking as he worked to loosen the noose with his other hand.

"Give me the names of the Maquis!"

For the first time, Doc realized that the officer had been speaking German to his men and French to the father and that he'd understood every word of it. He'd never been exposed to other languages growing up in Arkansas, and in all the time he'd been in France he hadn't so much as even attempted to say *merci*.

The captain's jaw muscles rippled as he ground his teeth together. He slapped the doll from the child's hand and pulled his gun from its holster, pressing the barrel against her head.

Doc took a breath to cry out, but no sound would come. *Oh god! This is happening too fast!*

The father crawled along the floor. "Don't hurt my daughter! Please, I'm not lying to you! I'm not Maquis! I don't know anything!"

The captain nodded to his corporal and the soldier on the rope yanked it back viciously. The father choked and gagged again as the noose tightened.



Doc struggled to move, but his body was frozen. He looked down at his legs, willing them to take a step so he could do something...anything.

"Papa, I'm frightened." The girl's sobbing voice made him look back up.

"Take him outside to the tree. They will all serve as a message to the Maquis."

The German soldiers nodded to their captain and the three men grabbed onto the rope and yanked the father onto his side and pulled him toward the door. Even as he choked and failed to draw a breath through his collapsing windpipe, he still managed to grasp and claw at the doorjamb on his way out. Finally, his fingers were jerked free and he was dragged out into the night.

Doc stood stunned. Shivering, he watched the breath leave his mouth in frosty white puffs. He didn't know what caused him to look up. Cold fingers gripped his spine and made his heart race as he realized the German captain was looking right at him. The knuckles that gripped the pistol were pasty white as the blood was forced out of the flesh with the intensity of the hold on the weapon. He stared at Doc, steady and still and unblinking while the medic tried to control the tremors coursing through his body. Very slowly, the captain shifted his hand to the girl's head, snarling his long fingers tightly in her brown hair. He smiled a sick smile at Doc.

"No!"

Doc woke to the sound of the gunshot still ringing in his ears, frantically scrubbing at his uniform and the wetness on his face. He pulled his hands away, expecting to see the blood that he was sure must have splattered across his skin and stained the course material of his fatigues.

"Doc?" Cajé sat up on the small bed next to him, eyes wide, clothes and hair disheveled.

Next to Billy on the mattress on the floor, Kirby was a bit slower to push himself shakily up to a sitting position, startled out of a fitful sleep. Littlejohn was standing in the doorway, mouth open, the radio handset hanging loosely from one large hand.

Billy pushed up with his good arm, dazed and slurring, "Wha happ'nd?"

***** ***** *****

Saunders squinted at the horizon and rechecked his watch, wondering if he was imagining the faint glow touching the sky. It had been a quiet few hours on patrol, almost too quiet for his liking, but he had welcomed the chance to get away from the house and the squad. He didn't know why, but both were making him uneasy.

The sergeant scuffed at the dirt with his boot and turned back to the house, tucking his Thompson beneath his elbow. As soon as he passed the stone wall, the front door swung open and Littlejohn rushed out, shifting his M1 back and forth as he fought to pull the straps of the radio harness over each shoulder with one hand. Doc followed behind him supporting Billy. Then Cajé bolted from the house, carrying both his own Garand and the BAR criss-crossed on his back, steering Kirby along with a hand on his upper arm, his jaw decorated with a stunning bruise.

"What's with the cadet review?" Saunders rested the butt of his rifle on his thigh as he studied his men. "I think Doc can make it back alone with Billy and Kirby. So unless the rest of you are planning to get sick or fall off a bed, they don't need a two man escort."

"It's not that, Sarge," Littlejohn grunted as he finished shrugging into the harness.

"Lieutenant Hanley was just on the horn. The Krauts have overrun all forward positions and we've been ordered to pull back."

Strangely, at the mention of the Germans, Doc seemed to flinch. Saunders studied the medic for a moment. Usually the most level-headed of the bunch, Doc looked anxious and downright spooked. None of the others were faring much better. Littlejohn had a case of hotfoot and couldn't seem to stand still, his Cajun scout was as jumpy as a racehorse, Kirby was pale

and shaky...and Billy...well, Billy seemed fairly unconcerned, no doubt due to the lingering effect of the morphine.

“All right, let’s get outta here.”

Without wasting a moment, the squad hurried away as quickly as they could with the sick and wounded, leaving Saunders alone to stare back at the house. For some reason, he felt a sense of peace for the first time since their arrival at the farm. A feeling that obviously was lacking in his men. Curious, he shook his head and walked away.

Behind him, the breeze blew through the open window, whipping the dust into swirls of gray in the empty house.

The End