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"Walk a Crooked Mile"

By White Queen

Littlejohn moaned. He opened his eyes and stared up at rough wooden rafters. The smell of rotting hay filled his nostrils, and he thought he was at home, that his head ached because he had slipped on old fodder while shoveling out the barn.

Then reality returned. He was in France, not Nebraska. And he hadn't been cleaning the barn, he'd been in a running firefight. Littlejohn sat up slowly. "Sarge?"

A stranger's voice said, "That didn't take long. They just brought you in." A man crouched next to Littlejohn, a noncom, but not Saunders. "I'm Sergeant Platt."

"Littlejohn."

Sgt. Platt smiled. His facial muscles twitched, as if smiling wasn't something he did very often. "How do you feel?" Lines around his mouth and on his forehead, and a sprinkling of grey in his brown hair made Littlejohn guess he was pushing forty. Certainly older than most of the sergeants Littlejohn had met.

Littlejohn gingerly touched the base of his skull. "I feel like I got hit by a hay bale." He looked around them. "Where are we?" The dark building didn't smell of livestock. Might have been a storage shed for feed. Three other men sat along one wall.

"I can't give you an exact location, but we're somewhere behind the German lines."

Littlejohn pushed himself to his feet. "Where's the rest of my squad?"

Platt rose with him. "You're the only one they've brought in today."

The firefight hadn't been going all that well for the squad – what had happened to Billy? Saunders? Kirby and Cajé? And Doc? Surely they hadn't killed Doc. "I've got to get out of here!"

Platt barked a short, humorless laugh. "Don't we all."

"Do they hold prisoners anywhere else?" They couldn't all be dead.

"This is it." Platt jerked his head toward the other soldiers. "Let me introduce you to my men." He pointed to a tall, gawky soldier, so young he made Billy Nelson seem grown-up. "That's Owens. Over there's Muncie." A short man with unruly black hair. "And that's Newton." A large fellow that reminded Littlejohn of their old platoon runner, Braddock. While the second two watched Littlejohn in resigned silence, Owens waved and attempted to smile.

"How long have you been here?" Littlejohn asked. "What's their drill?"

"We got here yesterday," Platt said. "So far they've left us alone."

"No questioning?"

"Not so far. But these are regular German Army – it could be they're calling in someone else."

"SS?"

"Or Gestapo."

"How many guards?"

Platt shook his head. "Don't you think we've considered all that already?"

"How far behind the lines are we?"

Platt stood. "Who knows? Where the lines were yesterday, ten or fifteen miles."

They couldn't make it on foot that far undetected, even if they did break out. But how else would he ever find out what had happened to his own squad? "There has to be a way," he said. "I've broken out of prison camps before. There's always a way."

"Not this time, Private." Platt walked away and sat down along the wall opposite his men.

Littlejohn looked around their prison more thoroughly. It wasn't much. One window set high in the back wall, an empty hole that let in a little light and a glimpse of the sky. One door opposite, with hinges on the outside, so it was no good hiding behind it. And in a corner under the window lay a pile of old hay, timothy by the smell of it. Good fodder once upon a time, but now a heap of moldering refuse. It looked like the other men had slept in it, but Littlejohn would rather sleep on the hard floor. That hay had once been lovingly sown, harvested, bundled, brought here to feed farm animals through the winter. Just the smell of it made him homesick – the feel might make him despair.

So Littlejohn sat down next to Owens, near the door and as far from the hay as he could get. "Where're you from?"

"The 361st, Charlie Company." Owens' smile returned, a little stronger this time.

"Yeah? I'm from the 361st too. King Company."

"What a coincidence." Owens laughed softly. "Or maybe not, I guess. I mean, two squads in the same division running into the same bunch of Krauts – it's bound to happen, I suppose."

"Sure." Littlejohn leaned back. "Where'd you come from back in the States?"

"Oh, you mean, where's my home? Bird City, Kansas. It's a little town, just south of Nebraska."

"I know where it is," Littlejohn said.

"You're kidding! No one's heard of Bird City." Owens' dark eyes widened.

"I've got a cousin with a farm just outside Wheeler."

"That's right up the road!"

"Do your folks farm?"

Owens nodded. "We have a hundred acres of the prettiest Kansas prairie you ever saw. My little brother and sister are still there, but me and my older brother both joined up." He elbowed the man to his left. "You hear that, Muncie? His cousin's practically neighbors with my folks!"

"I heard. So what?"

"Well, when's the last time you met up with somebody over here who knew where you lived?"

"Who cares?" Muncie shoved himself to his feet, walked over to the other side of the barn, and seated himself a few feet away from Sgt. Platt.

Owens turned back to Littlejohn with an apologetic smile. "Don't mind Muncie, he's always like this. Ornery as a feeder pig after a long night. So are you from Kansas too?"

"Nebraska."

"I went to Nebraska once."

"Once?" Littlejohn raised his eyebrows. "Your farm can't be thirty miles from the border."

"Yeah." Owens laughed his soft, nervous laugh. "We didn't travel around much. Always something to do, you know? This is the farthest I've ever been from home." He laughed again. "France. Who'd have thought an Owens from Bird City would ever go to France?"

"How long have you been out here?"

Owens pushed his wispy dark hair back from his forehead. "Three days."

"Three days?"

"Yeah, me and another guy were replacements for Sgt. Platt's squad. The other guy got it yesterday. Stepped on a mine." Owens' hands began to shake, and he drew up his knees and clasped his arms around them. He gripped his elbows so tightly, the knuckles on his long, bony fingers went white. "And now, here I am. Three days in France and I'm already a prisoner." He took a deep breath, then said in a low voice, "Think they'll interrogate us?"

"I don't know. They might just hold us here until they can send us to a real camp."

"You think so?"

"They haven't questioned you yet."

Over by the other wall, Sgt. Platt stirred. "Hey, you," he said. "Don't give the kid any false hope."

Littlejohn frowned. He wanted to argue that it might not be false, and to ask what harm it would do to calm the kid down, but this wasn't his squad.

Owens fidgeted, brushing his hair away again. "So how long have you been over here?"

"Since Omaha Beach."

"Wow. Newton came in at Omaha too, didn't you, Newton?"

Newton said, "D-Day plus one. Since you know so much about being a prisoner, big guy, when're they gonna feed us? We ain't eaten since dawn."

Littlejohn said, "How should I know?"

Newton gave a raucous, obscene laugh. "He don't know. Come on, big guy, I thought you knew everything."

"I didn't say that." Littlejohn kept his voice even. He didn't know what Newton's problem was, other than a hearty appetite and an empty belly, and he didn't care to find out.



Footsteps sounded outside and someone unbarred the door. All five men got to their feet. The door swung outward, and in came three Krauts with rifles at the ready. A fourth Kraut grabbed Muncie, who stood nearest the door. "*Gehen Sie.*" He pushed Muncie toward the door. "*Raus!*" The other three Krauts covered the men inside as they backed out, then slammed shut and barred the door once more.

"So much for your hopes," Sgt. Platt said. He walked over to the pile of hay. "I'm going to get some sleep," he announced. "Wake me if they bring chow." With that, he lay down on his back on the decaying hay and put one arm over his eyes.

Owens whispered, "You said you'd been captured before?"

Littlejohn nodded.

"Were you... interrogated?"

"Yeah."

"Was it bad?"

"It wasn't good." Littlejohn lowered himself back onto the floor. "Sit down, kid." Owens sank down beside him, while Newton began pacing in front of the door.

Littlejohn asked, "How old are you, Owens?"

Owens swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his skinny neck. "Seventeen," he whispered so quietly Littlejohn almost didn't hear him. His hands began shaking again, and he crossed his arms and shoved his hands into his armpits. "Sure is cold in here."

Littlejohn said, "Drafty." Seventeen. Owens' parents would have had to give their permission for him to sign up, and now here he was, in a situation that scared experienced soldiers twice his age.

"Yeah." Owens glanced over at the door. "What do they think we know, anyway? We're just privates. Why didn't they take Sgt. Platt?" Owens licked his lips. "I don't even know what we were doing out there today. Sarge said, 'let's go,' and we went. What can they get from us?"

"Depends on what they're after," Littlejohn said.

Owens took a shaky breath. "Name, rank, serial number, right? That's all we have to tell them?"

"That's right." Littlejohn decided to try to get the kid's mind off what might happen. "Tell me about your farm. What do you raise?"

Owens smiled. "Oh, the usual. Corn and wheat, beef cattle, hogs. My mother keeps chickens...."

An hour later, the door reopened. Every man was on his feet before any Krauts entered the room, even Sgt. Platt, who seconds before had been snoring. The three gun-pointing Krauts came in first and covered the Americans while another guard entered with a bucket, a loaf of brown bread, and a cast-iron stewpot. He set them on the ground, then stepped aside. Two more Krauts dragged Muncie in by his arms. They dropped him next to the food. Muncie never moved.

Newton stared at the motionless body on the ground. "Muncie?" His voice lost some of its bravado. He glared at the soldiers who had brought Muncie in. "You filthy rats – if you've killed Muncie–"

One of the same Krauts grabbed Newton by the arm and pulled him toward the

door.

"Hey!" Newton tried to pull away, but another Kraut grabbed his other arm, and the two of them half shoved, half dragged him through the door. "Where're you taking me?" Newton yelled. "Sarge, they can't do this! Sarge? You crummy Krauts – let me go!"

The Krauts closed the door without a word, and Newton's protestations trailed off into the distance, leaving the barn in silence. As soon as the door had closed, Sgt. Platt, Littlejohn, and Owens gathered around Muncie. Platt knelt beside Muncie and turned him onto his back.

Muncie's face was one large bruise. Both eyes were black, his nose was broken, and the rest of his face was so battered it hardly looked human. Sgt. Platt felt for a pulse, then pried open the less swollen of Muncie's eyes. "He's alive," he declared, "but he's out cold. Could have a concussion." He examined the rest of Muncie's face and frowned. "And I think his jaw's broken."

Owens tried to back away, but his legs buckled. Littlejohn caught him under the arms and lowered him to his hands and knees. Owens retched, and what little he'd eaten that morning landed on the dirt floor. He retched again and again, dry heaves that left him trembling. Littlejohn held his shoulders until he'd finished, then eased him back into a sitting position.

Owens wiped his mouth on his sleeve, still shaking.

Platt unbuttoned Muncie's bloodied shirt. "He probably has some broken ribs." Bruises darkened his abdomen. "Could be internal bleeding, who knows what else."

Owens leaned forward and retched again.

Sgt. Platt said, "Owens!"

Owens flinched. He sat up, wiped his mouth again, and turned to his squad leader. "Yeah, Sarge?"

"Take Muncie over to the straw and make him comfortable."

Littlejohn opened his mouth to protest that the injured man probably shouldn't be moved, and anyway, it was hay, not straw.

"You have something to say, Private?" Platt glared at Littlejohn.

"No."

"Good. Owens?"

Owens glanced at Muncie, then squeezed his eyes shut. "Please, Sarge." His voice cracked twice.

Littlejohn stood up. "I'll do it."

"You will not." Platt rose too. "I gave Owens an order." He glared up at Littlejohn, as if unaware of the six-inch height difference, or of the thirty-odd pounds Littlejohn probably had on him.

Owens struggled to his feet. He stumbled a little, reminding Littlejohn of a newborn calf. Or a dying one. He bent down, grabbed Muncie under the arms, and pulled him off to the hay.

Platt watched Littlejohn while Owens was busy, and Littlejohn returned his gaze. He felt like the sergeant was both sizing him up and trying to intimidate him. Well, Littlejohn hadn't heard of any rule that said you couldn't look a superior officer in the eye. So he kept his gaze locked with Platt's until Owens came back and the sergeant had an excuse to turn away.

"All done, Sarge."

Without a word, Platt crouched next to the pot of soup and began to eat, tearing off chunks of the bread to make improvised spoons.

Owens went and sat back down by the wall. He pulled his knees to his chest again and hugged them.

Littlejohn walked around their prison and scanned the walls until he spotted a loose board in the back wall. He pried it out enough to get his fingers around it, then pulled it down with a quick shriek of the nails. Littlejohn used the end of the board to push Owens' mess into the corner. Then he went over to the moldering hay and pushed the board under it along the wall. There were other boards missing from the walls, he reasoned, so the Krauts might not notice another one. And if they'd already checked through this hay for possible weapons, they might not check it again. Littlejohn sat down next to Owens.

Platt said, "If they find that, I'll tell them it's yours. You're not getting me or my men in trouble because you've got a weapon."

Littlejohn said nothing. He'd started to wonder just whose side Platt was on, anyway.

Platt jumped to his feet. "Did you hear me, Private?"

"I heard you." He kept his voice calm. No sense giving Platt any reason to jump down his throat.

Platt started to say more, but the Krauts unbarred the door and two of them entered, rifles pointed at the prisoners. A third removed the stewpot, but left the water bucket. A fourth guard pointed to Littlejohn. "*Kommen Sie hier,*" he commanded.

Littlejohn rose to his feet, careful not to betray a hint of fear, not so much for the Krauts' benefit as for Owens'. He strode forward, his head high and his shoulders back, trying to appear unafraid.

The fourth guard pushed him outside. "*Mach schnell,*" he ordered.

Littlejohn hastened his pace a fraction and blinked in the sudden sunlight. The three other Krauts came out, and one of them barred the door. They escorted Littlejohn to a whitewashed two-story farmhouse north of the barn. An outhouse stood off to the west, but other than that, the land was bare dirt. No cover to speak of until a woods half a mile to the east.

The farmhouse's front door opened from within, and Littlejohn had to duck to avoid hitting his head on the lintel. Inside, they turned left and entered what must have been the master bedroom. All furniture except for two chairs had been removed. One, a wooden chair, stood in the center of the room. Several dark stains marred the floor around it. The other chair stood between that one and the door. Unlike the straight-backed, wooden chair in the center of the room, this was a padded easy chair upholstered in dark green cloth with tiny sprigs of pink and white flowers.

The Krauts pushed Littlejohn down into the wooden chair, and one of them pulled his arms behind the chair's back and tied his wrists. They left without a word.

Two other men entered. Both wore grey jodhpurs and crisp white shirts buttoned to the neck and wrist. No jackets, no insignia of any kind to tell Littlejohn what branch of the German military they belonged to. Neither carried a weapon. These men, Littlejohn decided, were careful.

The first German walked to the comfy chair and settled down in it, like a man just

finished with supper, ready for his pipe and paper. He smiled at Littlejohn, his brown hair combed to the side in a precise line, his teeth even and pristinely white. "Good afternoon." His English had a mere trace of an accent. "I trust you have eaten well?" The crisp words echoed in the empty space.

Littlejohn said nothing.

The German smiled again. "I had an excellent roast duck. You should meet my cook – he does amazing things with the local fowl."

Littlejohn still made no reply.

"Before we begin, allow me to introduce Erich." He pointed to the other Kraut, who stood beside the chair. Erich had spiky blond hair that pointed every direction. He had unnaturally long arms; his hands reached halfway between his waist and his knees, as if Erich had been bred to hit things. Maybe he had. Littlejohn eyed those hands. They were large, with protruding knuckles and coarse, blond hair.

The German in charge continued, "Erich has been with me since he was a boy. I am like a father to him. What I tell Erich to do, he does, without question. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Littlejohn had grown up with little brothers; he'd been in his share of fights with them and the other farm boys. He knew what a well-landed punch felt like, and he wasn't looking forward to what Erich could deliver. The sight of Muncie's bloodied face flashed through Littlejohn's memory, and he clenched his fists behind his back.

The German in the chair smiled. "Then we can begin. Of course, you are eager to give me your name, rank, and serial number. These I can ask for as a matter of course, yes?"

Littlejohn took a deep breath. "Yes," he said.

Littlejohn came to on the barn's dirt floor once again. He lay face down this time, his head turned to the left and his arms at his sides. With great effort, he opened his eyes, blinked a few times, and experimented with moving his arms. He found he could, although his abdominal stomach muscles screamed when he pulled his arms under him and pushed himself over onto his back.

He turned his face and found Sgt. Platt staring at him. Littlejohn swallowed and realized his mouth tasted of blood. He explored it with his tongue. A couple teeth wiggled, but none had come out. Then he licked his lips and decided never to do that again. Both corners of his mouth had split. He managed a scratchy, "Water?"

Sgt. Platt got to his feet, brought over the water bucket, and cupped his hand into it. He let the water dribble out into Littlejohn's open mouth, then repeated the process twice.

"Thanks." Littlejohn started to feel human again.



Sgt. Platt sat back. "What happened in there?"

"What do you think?"

"You're conscious already. And you're alive.

"What do you mean, alive?"

"Muncie's dead."

"Dead?" Littlejohn realized the rest of the barn was empty. "Where's Owens?"

"They took him when they brought you back. And Muncie's body. They haven't brought Newton back at all."

"No!" Littlejohn raised his head, then painfully pushed himself into a sitting position. At least nothing inside felt bad enough to be busted. Maybe a cracked rib or two. "Not Owens," he said, more to himself than to Sgt. Platt.

"What's wrong, Private? Afraid they'll hurt him?"

"Aren't you?" Littlejohn glared at Platt. He was through pussyfooting around this guy. "He's just a kid."

Before Platt could reply, two Krauts came through the door with guns. A third pushed Owens into the barn. Owens had a few bruises, but he was still on his feet. The guard pushed him, and Owens fell to his knees. The three Krauts left without a word.

Platt stood and scowled at Owens.

Owens got up too. "Sarge, I'm sorry." He was near tears. "I couldn't help it."

"Couldn't help what?" Platt stalked toward Owens, fists clenched.

Littlejohn started pushing himself to his feet, his legs unsteady underneath him.

Owens' lower lip trembled. "I was so scared."

"What did you do?"

Owens' voice quavered. "I talked." Tears spilled down his cheeks. "Honest, Sarge, they would've killed me like Muncie. They said if I didn't tell them what they wanted to know, they'd—"

Platt slapped Owens across the face. Owens reeled back with a whimper. Platt roared, "You coward!" He slapped Owens again, harder. The boy put his arms up to cover his face.

Littlejohn made it to his feet. "Platt, stop it!" he rasped. He tried to walk, but his legs didn't cooperate, and he fell to one knee.

Platt ignored him. He shoved Owens hard, so that he sprawled on his rear in the dirt. "Get up!" Platt shouted. "The Krauts didn't kill you, but I might!" He pulled back his leg and kicked Owens in the side, his boot thudding against the boy's ribcage.

Littlejohn finally made it to his feet, and he reached Platt's side in two long strides. He grabbed the sergeant's shoulder and spun him around. The pain receded as adrenaline rushed through him. "What are you doing?"

"Stay out of this – it's none of your business." Platt twisted in Littlejohn's grip. "He's a filthy coward, and he's gonna get what's coming to him!"

"You touch him again and I'll flatten you," Littlejohn warned.

Platt wrenched himself out of Littlejohn's grasp and aimed his boot at Owens, who had gotten to his hands and knees.

Littlejohn launched a left jab at Platt's jaw and felt it connect solidly. Platt's head whipped to the side, and he stumbled, but stayed on his feet.

Littlejohn said, "I told you to stop." He was a little surprised the sergeant was still standing. Littlejohn had never been quick enough to dodge more than a few blows in a

scuffle, so he'd learned to make the first couple he landed count.

Platt wiped blood from the corner of his mouth. "You struck an officer. You'll be shot for this."

"You said we can't escape from here." Although he spoke bravely, Littlejohn felt a sudden chill. He'd just broken half the rules in the book – if he ever got out of here, he'd wind up spending the rest of the war in an American prison instead. Or dead. But he didn't let his worry show.

Platt clenched his own fists and swung at Littlejohn's head.

Littlejohn leaned back and Platt's fist sailed past his chin. Littlejohn sank a straight right into the sergeant's midsection. He realized he'd pulled his first punch a little – he'd never hit an officer before, and he had instinctively held back. But this time he gave Platt everything he had.

Platt doubled over and staggered backwards. But he stayed on his feet once more, and after a few seconds he straightened up a little and came at Littlejohn again. His balance and timing were off – he was hunched over and still trying to catch a good breath. Littlejohn let him have another left jab to the jaw, and this time Platt's eyes rolled back and he collapsed like a punctured balloon.

Littlejohn turned to Owens. The kid was looking up at him like he'd just sprouted wings and a halo.

Owens managed a wobbly smile. "You okay?"

"I could use a drink." And a hot meal, a shot of morphine, and a kiss from Betty Grable, while they were giving out presents.

"You bet." Owens made a wide circle around the fallen sergeant to reach the water. He brought the bucket back and handed it to Littlejohn.

Littlejohn didn't bother with niceties like cupping his hands in the water – he put the worn wooden rim to his mouth and drank straight from it. Then he handed the bucket back to Owens and wiped his mouth with his sleeve, leaving a pinkish smear on his coat. Littlejohn staggered over to the wall where he'd awakened and sank down in the corner. He'd have liked to sleep, but wasn't sure he should. Who knew how long Platt would be out, or what he'd do when he came to.

Owens sat down next to Littlejohn. "Why'd you do it?"

"He had no right," Littlejohn said.

"But I deserved it," Owens said. "I talked." He buried his face in his hands. "God help me." His words were muffled, desperate. "Sarge is right, I'm a coward."

Littlejohn leaned his head back against the wall. "Sgt. Platt calling you a coward doesn't make you one."

Owens sniffled a few times, scrubbed his face with the heels of his hands, and looked up. "They said they'd kill me." His hair fell over his forehead again, and he pushed it away.

"Was what you told them worth dying for?"

"I don't know."

"What did you tell them?"

"What outfit I'm with, how long I'd been on the front, stuff like that. Where we were two days ago."

Littlejohn thought those were things the Krauts would have known already, for the most part. In fact, Littlejohn wondered why they'd bothered with a kid like Owens at

all. Owens had said it earlier – why didn't the Krauts take Platt? He was the most likely to know something worth learning. "None of that sounds very important."

"You think so?"

Littlejohn sighed. "You made a choice. It might not have been the best choice, but I don't think you're any more of a coward than your sergeant." After all, any man who would try to beat up a scared kid wasn't much of a man at all. "When you make a decision, you'd better be prepared to live with it. Are you?"

Owens swallowed hard. "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

Littlejohn leaned his head back and closed his eyes. If he went to sleep, maybe he'd wake up and find out this had been just another bad dream.

Littlejohn must have dozed off at last, because a noise awakened him at dawn, a noise that didn't belong in the calm, quiet order of this temporary prison camp.

Someone was singing. And not very well, either. Littlejohn couldn't make out the individual words, but the scraps he caught sounded more English than German. He didn't recognize the tune, either, but it was getting louder. Outside, the sentry stopped pacing.

Then a far-away voice said, "*Ergeben Sie! Sie sind umgeben.*" Bursts of gunfire drowned out anything else.

Owens woke with a jerk. "What's going on?" He started to get up, but Littlejohn grabbed his arm and pulled him back to the ground.

"Lie down," Littlejohn hissed. "You wanna catch a stray bullet?" He saw Platt had regained consciousness. The noncom lay flat on his stomach, glaring at them, but he made no move.

Once he knew Owens wasn't going to do something stupid like stand up, Littlejohn crawled over to the hay pile. He pulled out the board he'd hidden there and dragged it back with him. Outside, boots pounded the ground, soldiers yelled in German, and gunfire echoed off the sides of the buildings.

Littlejohn whispered to Owens, "Stay in the corner. If I tell you to run, you run. Don't wait for me." Then he crawled over next to the door and crouched there, clutching his board and waiting.

Platt watched Littlejohn, but didn't speak.

Someone fumbled with the board that held the door shut. Littlejohn tensed. A voice outside said, "Here, let me." The door crashed open, and Platt hollered, "Don't shoot! We're Americans!"

An American soldier peered inside, rifle trained toward Platt's voice. He said, "Prisoners, huh?" He beckoned for them to come outside. "We've got 'em on the run, come on." He turned and followed his comrades.

Platt said, "You two stay where I can see you, got it?" He ran outside and grabbed a rifle that lay on the ground just beyond a dead Kraut's outstretched hand. Littlejohn found a rifle and pistol. He handed the pistol to Owens, and they joined the last few soldiers running into the woods that bordered the farmyard.

As they entered the woods, bullets whizzed around them, and an American soldier ahead of them jerked several times and dropped without a sound. Littlejohn and Platt

flung themselves to the ground, but Owens screamed and toppled sideways.

Littlejohn crawled to Owens' side. The boy soldier lay so still, Littlejohn thought he was dead until he saw that the bullet had hit Owens' leg. "Owens? Answer me, Owens." Littlejohn stripped off his own shirt to make a bandage.

Owens moaned. His face had gone colorless, and his eyes were closed. Blood had already soaked through the lower part of his left trouser leg.

Platt crawled over. "Is it bad?" His tone was noncommittal, as if he wanted to know how Littlejohn liked the weather.

Littlejohn ripped open Owens' pant leg. The bullet had smashed his leg just below the knee. "It's bad," Littlejohn said. Platt's seeming indifference angered him, but he didn't have time to worry about the sergeant. Littlejohn pressed his shirt against the wound, but he knew that wouldn't stop so much bleeding. He rolled onto his side and unbuckled his belt, then pulled it out and looped it around Owens' leg above the knee.

"What're you doing?" Platt hissed. "He's finished. Let's go." The other soldiers had all left them behind, the noise of their gunfire dwindling quickly in the dense woods.

"If I can stop the bleeding, he's got a chance." He tightened the belt, then glanced around for a sturdy stick.

"He'll never make it," Platt insisted. "We need to go – we have no idea where we are. If we don't catch up with the others, we're sunk." He rose to his knees for a moment, scanned the woods around them, then lay down again. "I can't see anyone. We have to go while we can still at least hear them."

"Go ahead." The sooner the sergeant left, the better. Littlejohn spotted a good-sized stick a few feet away and crawled to it. He broke off a section about a foot long and brought it back, then stuck that through the belt and twisted it tight. Owens whimpered.

Platt said, "Sure, I leave you here, and soon as my back is turned, you shoot me. No one else is around – your troubles will be over."

The suggestion caught Littlejohn off guard. "What?" Such an idea hadn't even occurred to him, though he'd considered decking Platt again so he'd shut up and let Littlejohn concentrate on saving Owens.

Platt said, "You know what'll happen to you when I press charges. Assaulting an officer? And insubordination? If you're lucky, you'll get a few years in prison and a dishonorable discharge. If you're not lucky, you'll get shot. But with me dead, you're free." Platt shook his head. "I'm not that dumb. We both go."

Littlejohn clenched his jaw, so angered by Platt's insinuations he was tempted to do exactly what Platt described. "I'm not leaving Owens."

"We'll send someone back for him."

"By then, he'll be dead. If I stay, I might be able to save him."

"He doesn't have a chance."

Littlejohn didn't answer. He knew that could be true. But he wouldn't leave the kid to die alone.

Platt got to his knees and looked toward where the other soldiers had disappeared. The noise of battle had faded almost entirely. "If you come with me, I won't press charges."

"You really think I'd shoot you in the back?" He felt a sudden glimmer of pity for Platt, for the kind of man who trusted others so little.

"You'd think I deserved it."

"I'm not leaving," Littlejohn reiterated. "But if you go, I give you my word I won't shoot you."

The last sounds of the firefight died away. Platt stared at Littlejohn for a minute, then stood up and walked away sideways. He kept his rifle aimed at Littlejohn. "This isn't over," he said.

Littlejohn watched until Platt vanished among the trees. Then he looked at Owens and saw the boy's eyes had opened. "You're gonna be okay," Littlejohn said.

Owens said faintly, "Why didn't you leave?"

Littlejohn repeated, "You'll be okay," but he knew their chances weren't good. Platt had been right, Littlejohn had no idea where they were. For all he knew, this was still enemy territory or no-man's-land. Most likely, he'd just doomed them both. And yet, he couldn't leave the kid to die alone. Besides, the bleeding had almost stopped. And like his father always said about sick livestock, where there was life, there was hope.

Littlejohn hopped down from the ambulance and started to grab the end of Owens' stretcher. A group of orderlies hurried over, and one of them tapped Littlejohn's arm. "Here, buddy, we got it, don't worry about it." The orderly gently shouldered Littlejohn out of the way while grabbing the stretcher himself. Two others hopped into the back of the ambulance and, before Littlejohn could say a word, they had Owens out and on his way into the brick building across the street.

The ambulance driver closed up the back doors, told Littlejohn, "Thanks for your help!" and drove off into the dusk.

Littlejohn stood alone in the middle of the street. Now what? He'd been plain lucky that the ambulance had broken down on the road near the farm, that the driver had gone searching for help, that Littlejohn had seen him wander through the deserted farmyard.

He should get back to King Company, find out what had happened to the rest of the squad. See if Platt had pressed charges yet. Littlejohn decided to head up the street where the ambulance had gone. He'd try to hitch a ride back to his outfit, take things from there. As he started walking, the doors of the dormitory-cum-hospital opened again, and a soldier exited through them. Littlejohn glanced toward the movement automatically. Then he stopped and blinked, stunned. The soldier heading the other way down the street looked an awful lot like Sgt. Saunders, though Littlejohn couldn't tell for sure in the waning light. Just in case, he called, "Hey, Sarge!" after the retreating figure.

The soldier turned, and Littlejohn saw that it was indeed Saunders, his right hand swathed in a white bandage. The sergeant waited until Littlejohn reached him, then said, "How'd you wind up here?" A brief smile brightened his face.

"Long story." Littlejohn pointed to the bandage that wrapped around the sergeant's palm and extended up his forearm under the sleeve, but left his fingers free. "That from the other day?"

"Yeah."

"Anybody else get hurt?"

"No. What happened to you?"

"I'm not sure. I think someone knocked me out." He rubbed the back of his head. The lump had gone, but the area was still tender. "I woke up in a barn with some other prisoners." He gazed off into the twilight for a minute, then said, "Sarge, I'm in trouble."

"Trouble?"

He looked Saunders in the eye. "I hit an officer. A sergeant named Platt."

"Want to tell me about it?" Saunders' voice was calm, almost soothing. He shook out a cigarette from the ever-present pack in his pocket, lit it with his good hand, and took a drag.

Littlejohn told his squad leader everything that had happened, ending with, "The kid talked, and his sergeant started beating him for it." Littlejohn paused and swallowed. He realized his hands were clenched inside his jacket pockets and tried relax them.

Saunders finished the story. "So you stopped him."

"Yeah." Littlejohn looked down. "I didn't just hit him once," he added softly.

"He said he was gonna kill Owens."

Saunders took a drag from his cigarette and exhaled a slow stream of smoke.

"It's bad, isn't it."

"It's not good." He took another drag, then said, "I'll talk to Lieutenant Hanley, have him find out who this Platt is, talk to his platoon leader. If you kept him from killing another soldier, that could make a big difference. I don't know."

Littlejohn nodded. "I had to do it, Sarge. I knew what could happen to me, but I had to do it."

Saunders took a last pull from his cigarette, then pinched it between his fingers and put the butt away in his coat pocket. "That's good enough for me," he said. "I'm catching a ride back up to King Company – let's see if they have room for you too."

Littlejohn followed his sergeant down the street. He tried not to worry about what would happen to him. Like he'd told Owens, when you made a decision, you had to be prepared to live with it.

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