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"Crossroads"

by Thompson Girl

The bullet wound in his side spasmed again, and he doubled over, trying to curl around it. Exhausted muscles couldn't hold his balance any longer, and he pitched to his knees. The crash jarred his side harder. A soft cry escaped his clenched teeth. Saunders knelt there a moment, head down to his knees, pressing both hands over the wound, trying not to pass out again.

He couldn't remember who had bandaged it. A medic, but not their Doc. Just one of the roving medics who'd been kept far too busy on the battlefield that evening. *Don't move*, the medic had warned him. *Just stay put. Help is on the way.*

He had intended to. Just lie there on the wet ground, staring at the starry sky until the night battle was over and the ambulances arrived. But the battle had swung the wrong way and they'd been overrun. He couldn't just lie there, waiting for either a German bullet or a German medic. Not while he had life remaining. The wound had been serious, but not bad yet. He knew that from how long the medic had worked on him. They didn't spend time on dying men. The day a medic looked him over and hurried on... that's when he would know his time was up.

He'd still had strength then, and he'd used it to climb to his feet and head into the woods, running with the rest of the routed American troops. He'd hoped to encounter the rest of the squad, but he hadn't seen any of them after he'd been shot. The pain had been tolerable then, and he'd been able to move fast enough to retreat with the other soldiers around him.

Only he'd lost them in the woods. He'd slipped and fallen unconscious a couple of times, and he had no idea which way he was going anymore. Night rendered all possible landmarks in shades of grey and black, and one field looked the same as the next. He should have encountered a line of artillery, camp, trucks, and American soldiers by now, and since he hadn't, that meant he must have somehow gone the wrong direction. The way the wound in his side throbbed, the way each step he took left him trembling and even weaker, the last thing he could afford was going the wrong direction.

Pockets of small arms fire still crackled, punctuated by the occasional shouts of soldiers, but he couldn't find them. They were all around him, and nowhere, all at the same time. He hadn't wanted to yell out because some of that gunfire was German. He hadn't escaped the front just to fall back in the enemy's hands because of carelessness.

He drew up against a tree, clinging to it. Pain and weakness threatened to drag him into unconsciousness again. He fought it, licked parched lips, and desperately craved

a drink of water. His canteen was still buckled to his belt, still half full, but when he tried to reach it, the twisting motion left him gasping in pain.

A branch snapped nearby, and he tightened his grip on the tree, steadying himself. His glance swept the dark woods. If he had gone the wrong direction, he might be deep into German territory. Running was no longer an option, but maybe whoever was out there would overlook him in the dark.

A flashlight switched on, aimed at his face. He screwed his eyes shut and twisted his head away. Footsteps approached through the grass, and he heard a voice say something in German, another voice answer, and he knew his fears had been realized.

"See what we have here?" one voice said smugly, his accent clipped and almost British. "An American, alone and far from his lines." The German switched to his native language, and the light blinding Saunders shadowed as the second man stepped in front of it. An iron grip twisted Saunders free of the tree and shoved him. No strength remained to resist, and he tumbled hard to the grass, unable to stop the cry of pain.

"A wounded American," the German corrected himself. "How bad is it?"

For a second, Saunders thought the man was asking him, but the lead German was glancing instead at his companion for a response. The silhouette of second man knelt beside him, and Saunders felt rough hands rip his jacket aside, probe agonizingly at the bandages. He tried to double sideways, the instinct to protect the wounded area too strong to fight. The soldier shoved him flat again and spoke in German. Saunders heard the words *nein* and *tot* mixed in with whatever the soldier was reporting and didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Ah, American, you hear? You understand?" the first man said. "You are dying, I'm afraid. Your wound is very grave. You need a doctor." The man gestured behind him, vaguely. "We have doctors. Many of them. Do you want a doctor, American?"

Saunders didn't know if the Kraut expected an answer or not, but he wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of saying anything. The light was still in his eyes and he lifted his arm to shield his face. The second German yanked his arm back to his side, eliciting another cry of pain.

"I'm sorry, American," the first German said again, sounding anything but. "But the doctors are for good German soldiers. You... they'd want to help you even if you are the enemy. Is it the same in your army? Doctors are doctors. They want to save lives, they don't care who is who. Whose lives really matter. But we care. We soldiers care. Do you see?"

"Just shut up already," Saunders snarled, unable to take the jovial tone anymore.

"Ah, see, that is rude. Typical of you Americans. Here we offer you medical assistance, and..."

"You aren't offering me anything, Kraut," Saunders growled.

"You're right, of course," the man said, just as cheerfully. "You're dying, bleeding your life out right in front of us."

Saunders knew it was true, could feel it in the depth of the pain that enveloped him, how sodden the bandages were, the way his body wouldn't respond to his brain's commands any longer. But, somehow hearing the words aloud, even from a German, gave his death sentence an even greater ring of truth.

The German went on, "A doctor would waste morphine and plasma on you. Supplies are short. We need that medicine for good German soldiers. Not the dying

enemy. But we can help end your pain. Would you like that, American?"

Saunders called him an unprintable name. He couldn't see anything because of the blinding glare of the flashlight, but he could visualize the German turning a livid red, just from the silence and sputtering sounds he was making. It was a satisfying, but very short-lived moment. Then, the Kraut abruptly laughed. It was a harsh sound, out of place in that quiet night.

"You are a good enemy!" he declared, sounding pleased. "You give good sport even when you are dying. Not many do that. Too bad."

"You gonna shoot?"

"No. Why waste a good German bullet on a dying man?"

Saunders heard the sound of a knife being drawn and, instantly, he tensed. He knew he was done for, but he'd still fight. He had to. There were ways to die and even worse ways to die, and he wasn't going to let this German touch him if he could help it. It would take the last of his strength to resist, but what did it matter? What else was he saving his strength for?

Suddenly Saunders heard a terrible thwack, and the second, thin-faced German cried out. Saunders watched his body slump to the ground, a blurred tumbling silhouette. Then the glare disappeared out of his eyes, as the flashlight fell from the other German's hand. It landed on the grass between them, its beam now shining sideways into the grass itself. By that light, Saunders could see the German struggling almost soundlessly. Another figure stood behind him, one forearm crooked across the Kraut's throat, the other arm behind his head, locking the enemy into a death grip. The strangling German choked, trying to draw a breath that wouldn't come. He clawed at the arms curled around him, but the arms just tightened further until the German finally went limp. The figure let the dead German drop unceremoniously beside the first and quickly approached Saunders.

An olive drab sleeve moved into the circle of light, and even though he'd guessed his rescuer had to be American, it was still a relief to see the familiar uniform. Even nicer to hear a twangy American voice say cheerfully, "Talkative Kraut, wasn't he? Never heard me coming over the sound of his own voice."

"Thanks," Saunders said.

"Don't thank me yet," the man said. "We're a lot closer to German lines than American." He bent closer. "You hurt as bad as they were talking, or were they just planning on executing you for the fun of it?"

Saunders shook his head, wanting to say he didn't know, wanting to deny the truth, but he could feel the sheer agony of it, aggravated by the manhandling of the Germans. "It's bad," he admitted.

The man nodded, then glanced around him and picked up the flashlight. For a moment, Saunders caught a glimpse of a big, older GI with bright blue eyes peering out of a rugged but amiable face. Saunders looked for some indication of rank, but saw no chevrons, no insignia on his collar, not even an infantryman's crossed rifles. He wore no helmet and had apparently lost his field jacket as well. One of his uniform sleeves was ripped from the shoulder down past the elbow, the torn edge of the sleeve material dark with dried blood. The man shone the light directly down on Saunders' side for a moment, then clicked it off. Saunders blinked in the sudden darkness. His vision was nothing but blobs of color in a dark background, and, for a moment, he felt more blinded than he'd

been while the light had been on. "Looks like somebody patched you up a bit," the man said, "but you're bleeding through the bandages now."

"That medic seems a very long time ago." Saunders sensed the man smiling ruefully at the comment. "I'm Saunders," he added.

"Palmer," the man said. "And that medic probably *was* helping you a long time ago. It's been several hours since the main battle ended."

Several hours? Saunders tried to draw his left wrist up toward his face, automatically going to check his watch, but the motion tugged the wound and he subsided.

"This is not a question you're going to want to hear," Palmer said, "but do you have any idea where we are? I got all mixed up when we were routed, and I've been wandering around in the dark afraid I was going to get shot as easily by our guys as the Germans." A burst of machine gun fire opened up to their left, followed by a couple cracks from a rifle, and Palmer hunkered lower in the field. "They're still at it, somewhere," he said.

Saunders was slowly readapting to the dark. He tried to focus on the stars, only he couldn't see any. He raised his right hand and passed it over his eyes, but it didn't help. Palmer followed his gaze upward. "Overcast, if you were hoping for some astronomical directions."

"It wasn't cloudy during the battle."

"You *have* been out of it. Those clouds been coming in for awhile. We gotta get moving. If these two Germans found you, it's a cinch there's more out here. Can you walk?"

"If you can help me stand, I can walk." Saunders wasn't entirely sure that was true, but just having American company again had cheered him up. Now if only he wasn't so blasted tired. *Blood loss*, his mind supplied unhelpfully. *Shock*. Palmer helped him gently to his feet, leaned him up against the tree where Saunders could hang on.

"Helmet? Gun?" Palmer asked him.

"Gone," Saunders said. He couldn't even say when he'd lost them.

Palmer nodded, then grinned ruefully and touched his own bare head. "I hate to admit it, but I'm in a similar boat. You okay there a moment?"

Saunders nodded.

"Cover your eyes," Palmer said. Saunders averted his face and saw a brief glow through his eyelids as the man turned on the flashlight again. He heard the sound of rustling and knew Palmer was searching the two Germans for weapons and anything else of use. The light flicked off a moment later. "I'm only taking one rifle. You're not fit to carry one, and I'd rather not have the extra weight. But Fritz here had this on him..." Saunders felt something cold and metal pressed into his hand: a small flask. "It isn't morphine, but it might be better than nothing."

Saunders didn't argue, just unscrewed the cap and downed some of the fiery alcohol. It burned all the way down, and he gasped at the unexpected heat of it.

"Good stuff?"

"Terrible!" he wheezed. His eyes watered and he tried to hand the flask back.

Palmer laughed. "You keep it, Saunders. I don't drink. Leastwise, not unless it's bubbly, and it's New Year's Eve." He took it from Saunders' hand, screwed the top back on, and tucked it into the pocket of Saunders' field jacket. The German rifle went over

his shoulder, the flashlight into a pocket, then he stepped around to Saunders' right side and pulled Saunders' arm across his shoulders. "I was heading that-a-way," he said, pointing. "You remember the crossroads? We passed it on the way in. That's where I'm aiming for. Should be plenty of Americans passing by there." He hunched over to accommodate the shorter sergeant, and they set off, slowly. "You let me know when you need to rest."

Saunders nodded, but he wasn't sure the man saw him in the darkness. It was all he could do to concentrate on each step from then on. He lost himself in a reverie of dancing shapes colored by pain. He didn't realize he'd passed out again until he woke up on soft, but cold and uneven ground. The breeze caressed his face, and overhead stretched the vague greyish blur of the overcast sky.

The sound of a river caught his attention, the swirling gurgle of water passing around obstacles: rocks and reeds most likely. He curled his fingers and they sank into sand. No wonder the ground seemed softer than normal.

"How long have I been out?" he asked.

There was no response, just the burble of the river, and he realized that most likely, he had been abandoned there. He'd passed out, Palmer had probably carried him as far as he could, then left him to go on for help. Or Palmer had been killed by another German patrol. Or maybe Palmer and the two Germans had been only a fever-induced illusion. There were other possible scenarios too, that whipped through his brain like sped-up motion pictures. One thing he knew for certain: a strange coldness seemed to be spreading through his body, starting from his side. The wound didn't hurt the way it had earlier. It was more numb now. He couldn't feel his left leg, but he shifted it until his heel scraped through the sand. The motion tore through the veil of numbness with a blaze of agony. He screwed his eyes shut, gasping as the fresh pain tried to swallow him.

He wiped his sleeve across his forehead and face. It came away sweaty. *Face facts*, he told himself. *You're losing this fight. This last bullet is going to claim you.*

"Palmer?" he gasped.

No answer. Just as well, he thought suddenly, letting the resigned calmness settle over him. Better to die alone, not involve the man. They all saw too much pain and death out here. Saunders wasn't afraid of dying. He never had been, though it had always been his intention to delay that moment as long as possible. Now that it was here, the idea appealed more than he expected it to. It was seductive, death. It promised relief at last. No more responsibility, no more decisions to make, no more inescapable pain. What was wrong with that?

So many had gone before him. So many would go after. It was the nature of war, the nature of life. Everything died. He could accept that. And here, with the gentle sounds of the river next to him, the breeze *shirring* through the reeds and vegetation, the croaking of frogs, the clouds overhead.... He'd have liked to have seen the stars again, but even without them, this was a peaceful place. *A fitting place to die*, he thought, though he wasn't sure why. He was a city boy, born and bred, but he thought dying was one of those things better done somewhere wide and spacious. And better here where it was peaceful and quiet than in some hospital tent surrounded by the groans of other dying. Or worse, in the hands of the enemy.

He heard a shifting of reeds and bushes, a muttered curse, and recognized Palmer's soft twang immediately. "Palmer?" he called softly.

Footsteps approached, the boots quiet on the sand, but he could still hear pants material swishing as the man approached and dropped down beside him. A cool hand briefly touched his forehead. "You're awake. How do you feel? You're burning up."

"Where are we?"

"River."

"I don't remember a river."

"I know, me neither. But here it is. I scouted around a bit. We're by the foundation of a bridge. The bridge was blown up pretty recently. Our side, their side, I don't know who, but it's not here any longer. There's a road not too far away on the other side. I've heard trucks pass, seen a glimpse of headlights. I think they were American. If so, we don't have far to go. We just have to cross the river and we're home free."

"Go without me," Saunders said, without hesitating. "You can bring back help."

"I thought about it, but I don't think you'll last that long, so we're going together."

"I can't swim like this."

"You won't have to. I made a raft."

"You... you what?"

Palmer laughed softly. "Nothing that exciting. There were a lot of broken tree branches around. I just lashed some of them together, that's all. It's not much, but it should help keep you afloat."

"No," Saunders said. "Just leave me here and go."

"Why?" Palmer said, his voice still friendly. "You aren't thinking of giving up on me, are you, Saunders?"

"I know when I'm beat."

Palmer was silent a long moment. "If you say so," he murmured. He climbed to his feet.

It surprised Saunders so much, he couldn't help blurting, "You aren't going to argue?"

"Would there be a point to it? You seem to have made up your mind. If you're not going to fight to stay alive, I can't fight for you." The man's voice was matter-of-fact, the twang lessened a little by what sounded to Saunders like sadness.

"Just like that?"

The man laughed again then. "You're one for speechmaking aren't you? But then you would be, wouldn't you? You're a sergeant. Never met a sergeant yet who didn't insist on interfering with his men. Now me, I'm just a private. I don't make speeches, I just follow orders."

Saunders looked at him in surprise.

"Not expecting that? Figured I would hold some rank? Why? Because I'm older than you?" Saunders saw the man's shoulders lift in a shrug. "I had to enlist to get in the war. They weren't going to take me."

"You act like an officer," Saunders said.

"Do I?" Palmer mused. "We all see what we want to see. But if you want to see me as some officer here to give you reasons to keep going, well, you got the wrong guy. That's *your* role, Sergeant. How many times you tell some wounded soldier to hang on, to keep fighting, that help was coming."

Saunders was silent. He knew Palmer saw the answer in his face.

Palmer knelt beside him again and went on softly, implacably, "How many of

those soldiers died anyway because help took too long to get there? Did all that talking do anything for them? Or did it just ease *your* conscience a little? You'd done the best you could, tried to get them to hang on those extra few minutes that might make all the difference. But for what? Are you sure they wouldn't have been better off dying right there than losing their legs, or arms, or dying later in some hospital?"

"Yes! Any chance to live is worth taking," Saunders said, angrily.

Palmer rocked back slightly on his heels and considered him a moment, a slight smile on his face. "Now isn't that funny?" he said. "I must have heard wrong. I thought you'd just asked me to leave you behind."

Saunders opened his mouth to say something, then silently closed it again.

Finally, he said, "For someone who doesn't make speeches, you just made a pretty good one."

"Did I?" Amusement tinged Palmer's voice. They sat quietly a moment, then Palmer said, "So, you ready to go?"

Saunders would have laughed, but it hurt too much. He settled for a smile. "All right, you... let's go."

Palmer helped him down to the river's edge. Water sloshed against his legs, cold and shocking against his hot skin. Palmer rested him there a moment while he fetched his makeshift raft. It was exactly what he'd said, a small collection of fat branches he'd lashed together with his belt and Saunders' and apparently some reeds. It was barely two feet wide, about four feet long, depending on the length of the branch. But it floated. Palmer laid him on it on his right side keeping his wound as far away from the water as possible. The raft sank beneath his weight before bobbing back up, and Saunders gasped as the cold water drenched his shoulder and back.

Palmer waded into the river, towing the makeshift raft. The water deepened abruptly, and he sank out of sight before popping up again and shaking the water from his eyes as he tread water. "Hang on," he told Saunders. He locked one hand around the edge of the raft and began swimming.

Not being able to help, legs dangling in the river, the cold water splashing against his back and chest, Saunders hated every moment of it. His hair was wet where his head rested against the raft, and he shivered incessantly.

Palmer fought the current, trying to keep Saunders out of the water as they drew closer to the opposite bank. Then his feet found purchase on the sandy bottom and he was able to stand and tug the raft inshore. The raft cracked, spilling Saunders into the river, but they were nearly on the sandy beach then, and it only dumped him a few inches into the water. Palmer caught him under the arms and dragged him up onto dry sand. The broken raft floated away, borne downstream almost instantly.

Both men lay there a moment, Palmer panting from the exertion. They could hear trucks approaching down the road, their engines growling.

"That the crossroads?" Saunders asked.

The trucks were getting louder. "Hang on," Palmer said. He ran, dripping wet, into the darkness. Saunders rolled slightly and saw the slitted headlamps of the trucks cutting through the night. He heard Palmer shouting and the abrupt squeak and brake as one of the trucks came to a stop.

Then there were voices approaching and a flashlight leading the way as Palmer brought help back to him. A circle of figures closed around him, nothing but featureless

shadows backlit by the flashlight.

"Hey, buddy, just hold on," a new voice said. "I'm a medic, and we got a doctor coming." His face turned suddenly, and he said, "Out of the way, Private. Gimme that," and took the flashlight away from Palmer. Saunders met Palmer's eyes briefly as the older man was pushed back. Saunders wanted to say something, but the medic blinded Saunders with the flashlight beam as he knelt to check his dog tags. Saunders twisted away from the glare and when he looked back, trying to locate Palmer in the crowd of soldiers that was gathering, all he saw were spots and blobs of yellow light.

"Saunders, is it?" the medic said, and Saunders felt the cold dog tags fall back against his chest. "Well, you'll be all right now, Sergeant."

Thanks to that man, Saunders tried to say, but the medic was still talking, calling out orders to bring down a stretcher, get an IV ready in the ambulance. Saunders tried to spot Palmer, to thank him, but he couldn't see around the medic to find his rescuer. He tried to sit up.

"No, lay back. Here," the medic said, and Saunders felt the prick of a needle. "That oughta help." The medic turned away as two soldiers arrived with the stretcher.

"Wait..." Saunders said, trying to get his attention. "Need to..."

"There's nothing you 'need to,' Saunders," a familiar twangy voice said. "Just relax. I didn't carry you all that way just to have you fight the docs." Saunders felt the soft warmth of a blanket settle over him. "That oughta help some," Palmer went on. He tugged his own blanket tighter around him. "Grabbed 'em from a truck up there."

"Just wanted to..."

"I know," Palmer said. "Now just rest, will you?"

Saunders gave in. With the blanket, he wasn't shivering so badly. Or maybe that was just the morphine acting; the pain seemed to be moving farther and farther away. The medic ordered Palmer out of the way again, and Saunders saw the man sketch him a brief salute, before he was lost to sight as the soldiers crowded close to lift Saunders onto the stretcher.

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