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"Prisoner's Base"

By White Queen

Doc had been sure he'd have time to get that stone out of his boot before the others were out of sight. But when he straightened up, he was alone. Mystified, he looked around, as if expecting the squad to pop out from behind some bushes and yell, "Surprise!" But no, they were gone. He hadn't thought they'd been moving that fast. He would have called for a quick break, but Saunders' mood had steadily soured as morning faded into afternoon. They'd been out since sunup, trying to bring in a prisoner for S-2 to interrogate. No matter how close they had gotten to the German lines, they couldn't locate a single enemy soldier. Doc hadn't wanted to risk the sergeant's ire by calling for a rest.

So now he was stuck in the middle of unfamiliar territory with no map and no clear idea how to get back to the camp at Saint-Caprais. Doc hoped that if he just kept walking the same direction they'd been going, sooner or later, the squad would realize Doc was missing, Saunders would send someone to find him, and all would be well.

Unless, of course, the Germans found him first.

So Doc trudged on through the autumn woods. At one point, he thought he heard gunfire in the distance, off to his left. Doc considered heading toward the noise, since it meant there must be Americans nearby. He couldn't get much more lost – he wasn't even sure if he was still going the right way. The spindly, half-bare trees were all starting to look alike.

Before Doc could make up his mind, the unthinkable happened: a German soldier popped out of a clump of bushes a few yards away. Doc stopped and raised his hands.

To Doc's amazement, the Kraut also raised his hands, and cried, "*Ich ergebe mich!*"

"Say what?" Doc kept his hands up. "I don't speak German."

"*Ich ergebe mich,*" the Kraut replied. He kicked his rifle out from behind the bushes and away from him, and also kept his hands high. Helmetless, his brown hair combed neatly to the side, he looked a little younger than Doc. He was a bit shorter too, and probably twenty pounds lighter. He had a pleasant face, not handsome, but certainly not menacing.

Doc didn't trust him for a minute, no matter how agreeable he looked. "Hang on, now, what're you doing?"

The Kraut shook his head. "*Ich verstehe kein Englische.*"

Doc said, "No English? Well that's great."

"*Sie verstehen kein Deutsch?*" The Kraut sighed, lowered his hands, and walked a few steps toward Doc.

"Now wait a minute." Doc backed up as the Kraut came toward him. "I'm a medic, see?" He pointed to his armband. "Don't hurt me. I don't have any weapons. I'm a medic." He kept pointing to his armband and backing away. Sure, this guy had kicked away his rifle, but he could still have a Luger or a grenade Doc didn't see.

The Kraut stopped. "*Sind sie ein Arzt?*"

"Artst? No, not an artist, a medic. Doctor. Doc-tor." Doc spoke slower and louder with each repetition, knowing he must sound as ridiculous as Kirby trying to make time with a French girl.

"Doc-tor?" The Kraut pointed at Doc.

"That's right. Uh, I mean, yah."

The Kraut smiled. He looked positively friendly. As friendly as someone who might want to shoot you could look, anyway. He said, "*Wo sind die Amerikaneren?*"

"Americans? You want to find the Americans?" The dropped gun, the raised hands, the eager smile all began making sense to Doc. "You're surrendering, is that it? You want to surrender to the Americans?" And Doc realized that, since he was the only American in sight, the Kraut intended to surrender to him.

The Kraut smiled. "*Ja!*" He pointed to his chest. "*Mein Name ist Hermann Hufschmied.*"

"Nah-muh? You mean, name? Your name is Hermann Something-or-other?"

"*Ja!*" The German pointed at himself again, said, "Hermann," then pointed at Doc and said, "Doc-tor."

"Doc. Just Doc."

"Doc?"

"Yah." Doc lowered his hands. "It's nice to meet you, Hermann, but I don't suppose you have any idea where the American lines are, do you?" Taking the German prisoner was all fine and dandy, if only he knew where to take him.

Hermann just politely stood there with his hands raised.

"Okay, well, let's just go this way. Sooner or later we'll find someone. Or maybe we'll luck out and the squad will come back." Doc motioned Hermann toward the direction he'd been going. He'd like to keep the German where he could see him.

Hermann put his hands behind his head and headed off where Doc had indicated.

"Hey, that's okay, you don't have to keep your hands up." Doc caught up with him and tapped his arm. "It ain't like I've got a gun or anything. Only thing I could shoot you with is a syringe." He motioned for Hermann to put his arms down.

"*Danke!*" Hermann said as he lowered his arms. "*Wir gehen, ja?*"

"Uh, yah." Doc followed him on through the trees.

The ground sloped downward, and Doc noticed that the trees were getting bigger and more numerous. Before long, the woods leveled out, and they found themselves on the bank of a stream. Doc wondered if it might feed into the river that went past the platoon's camp at Saint-Caprais.

As if he could read Doc's mind, Hermann said, "*Es fließt zu Saint-Caprais.*"

"You're pretty smart, Hermann." Doc pointed downstream. "You think we should just follow this until it leads to the river?"

Hermann shrugged, holding his hands with his palms up.

Doc figured that meant Hermann either didn't know, or didn't understand. "Well, let's go." Doc led the way, and he started to hurry as they walked beside the stream. The

sun was sinking faster than he cared for; if they didn't get a move on, they'd be lost in the autumn woods all night.

After half an hour, the trees began to thin. Before long, Doc and Hermann stood on the edge of the woods, looking out over a wide meadow. Tall grass beckoned for them to follow the stream as it left the trees and wound away from them.

Doc didn't like the looks of it. There wasn't much cover out there, and he didn't have to carry a gun to know the value of cover. But what else could they do? The stream was their sole guide.

Hermann frowned as well, hands on his hips as he surveyed the open meadow. "*Nicht so gut.*"

Doc could guess what that meant. "Not so good is right. You think we should still follow the water? Or stick to the woods?" Doc pointed to the stream, then back to the trees.

Hermann chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, then pointed up a slight rise along the line where trees gave way to grass.

Doc nodded. "Head up the hill and see where the stream goes? Good idea." They moved back into the trees a bit and headed up the rise. When they reached the top, they stepped out again to where they could see the stream curving into the distance. At the base of their hill stood a rickety shelter for whatever animals had grazed the meadow. It had a roof and one wall, with timber supports holding up the other ends of the roof. Most of the roof lay on the dirt it should have sheltered, and the one wall had lost at least a third of its boards.

As they looked out across the grassy expanse, German voices and the sound of boots crushing fallen leaves floated toward them from the trees they had just left. Doc and Hermann both dropped to the ground and slithered down the hill until they reached the shelter. There they huddled behind what remained of the wall.

Hermann's eyes widened as he peered out one of the wall's gaps. Doc looked out too and saw why. A dozen Germans came out of the trees where they had just been standing. Their leader made a sweeping motion with his arm, encompassing the whole meadow. The other soldiers fanned out, obviously searching for something. Or someone.

Doc clenched his hands. There had to be a way to keep them both from getting killed on the spot. He pulled his medic's bag off his shoulder – if they walked out holding it over their heads, would that be as good as a white flag?

And then he had an idea. Maybe not the greatest idea, but if he moved fast enough, it just might work. It might at least buy them a little time and provide a reasonable excuse for them to be cowering in the shelter. "Hermann!" Doc whispered.

Hermann looked at him, nostrils flaring, eyes wide. "*Wir sind Toten,*" he whispered.

"Look, I have an idea, but you'll have to trust me." Doc opened his bag and pulled out several rolled bandages and a packet of sulfa powder. He pulled his canteen from his belt and dug out his pocketknife. Then he pantomimed what he meant to do, hoping Hermann was good at guessing charades.

Hermann looked puzzled, then raised his eyebrows and nodded.

"Okay, here goes." Doc cut a small slit in Hermann's left pant leg above the knee and ripped the fabric open. Then he rinsed off his pocketknife before poising it above the lower thigh. He looked up at Hermann.

The German gave one short nod and closed his eyes.

Doc sliced open Hermann's leg, making sure not to cut too deep or close to any major arteries. Hermann gasped and turned pale as blood welled up in the wound, but he did not cry out. Doc put down his pocketknife and dipped a bandage in the blood. He smeared it over Hermann's leg, then soaked the edges of the torn cloth and smeared more blood on the pant leg.

Doc bandaged up the minor wound he'd created, bloodying the white bandages to create as much of a mess as he could. When he had finished, he wiped off his knife and returned it to his pocket. He wiped his hands on his shirt and pants, smearing blood on himself too. Then he sat back and surveyed his handiwork. To an untrained eye, it just might look like Hermann had been shot in the leg.

Hermann smiled, but weakly, his face still pale. That was good – it would add to the illusion. Doc just hoped the German was a passable actor.

He didn't have to wait long to find out. Not two minutes later, a Kraut soldier walked around the wall and pointed a rifle at them. Doc raised his hands.

The Kraut shouted, *"Oberfeldwebel! Eilen Sie! Ich habe einen Amerikaner gefunden!"*

Three soldiers came running, the leader and two others. The leader joined the first Kraut, while the other two came around the other side of the shelter. They all pointed their weapons at Doc.

"Please don't shoot," Doc said. "I'm trying to help. He's wounded, can't you see that?"

The leader nodded. *"Ja, I can see,"* he said, his Luger still pointed at Doc's chest.

"You speak English?" Doc hoped that would make his plan easier to pull off.

"I speak enough."

Hermann's eyelids fluttered open, and he stirred, then moaned.

"Wer sind Sie?" the leader asked Hermann.

"Mein Name ist Hermann Hufschmied." Hermann's voice faltered. *"Ich bin ein Grenadier. Meine Einheit ist...."*

"Das ist genug." The leader nodded, then looked at Doc. "Well? Why are you here?"

Doc lowered his hands a little, but still kept them away from his body. "I got lost."

"And found this man?"

"Yes. I bandaged his leg." Doc bit his lip. He knew he was talking too fast – they had to see he was nervous. But wouldn't anyone be edgy with four guns pointed at them?

"Why? He is your enemy."

Doc looked the Kraut in the eye. "I'm not a soldier, I'm a medic. I'm supposed to take care of the wounded. Ours or yours."

The Kraut leader gave a tight smile. "How lucky was Hufschmied to find a medic



such as you." His sarcastic tone made the smile seem mocking.

Doc said nothing.

"Where is his weapon?"

"I don't know – I didn't see it anywhere around here."

"So." The Kraut lowered his Luger, but did not return it to its holster. "Now Hufschmied is lucky again. We will take him back to our lines for proper medical care." He emphasized the word 'proper,' as if to let Doc know what he thought of American medics. Then he looked at Hermann, whose eyes were open. "*Sorgen Sie nicht, Sie werden schoen zurueck.*" The sarcasm had disappeared, replaced by what sounded like genuine concern.

"*Sehr gut,*" Hermann gasped out between gritted teeth.

"And you will come also," the Kraut leader told Doc. "We will find a use for your talents."

Doc nodded. "I figured as much."

"Can he walk?"

"I don't know. He's lost a lot of blood, so I figure he's pretty weak. It'd be better if you'd rig him a stretcher."

"We have little time." The Kraut glanced at the sun, which dipped ever closer to the horizon. Then he motioned to the two soldiers who had accompanied him. "*Stehen Sie ihn auf die Beinen.*"

The two soldiers bent over Hermann, took him by the arms, and hoisted him upright. Doc scrambled to his feet and reached out to steady Hermann, who swayed, his face twisted in pain. Either the German was a better actor than Doc could have hoped for, or that cut had gone a lot deeper than he had intended.

"*Koennen Sie zu Fuss gehen?*" the leader asked Hermann.

"*Ich weiss nicht.*" Hermann took a shaky step forward with his good leg, grunted, then took another step. His eyes went wide, and he clutched at the two soldiers helping him. He tried for a third step, but the wounded leg gave way, and he would have collapsed if the other two Germans hadn't held onto him.

"*Das ist genug.*" The leader motioned for the other two to lower Hermann back down. He squatted in front of the wounded soldier and said, "*Es tut mir leid.*"

Doc knelt beside them and bent over the bandages. "It's bleeding again," he reported, holding up three fingers slick with blood as proof. He just wouldn't mention that what he'd showed them was the entire fresh blood flow. "I need to add another bandage." He held up his bag. "That okay with you?"

"*Ja,* do what you can." The leader stood up and looked around them. "I do not have time to make a stretcher. But also I do not want to leave him here."

"I'll stay with him." Doc wound another bandage around Hermann's leg and secured it.

"I know you will." The leader smiled thinly, the sarcastic tone returning. "I will leave a man here. Together, you can make a stretcher and carry Hufschmied back." He looked at Hermann. "*Sie werden schoen zurueck,*" he said again, the sarcasm gone again.

"*Danke.*" Hermann closed his eyes once more.

To Doc's surprise, the Kraut leader told him, "If he still lives when you reach our lines, I will see that you are treated well."

"I can't ask more than that." Doc stood up and started for the woods as the Kraut

gave one of his men instructions.

"Medic!" the leader called, his voice sharp.

Doc stopped and turned.

"Where are you going?"

"To cut some poles for the stretcher."

"My man will do that. You stay here." The leader pointed imperiously to where Hermann lay.

Doc came back and sat down again.

While one Kraut soldier headed for the forest, the leader led the other two away from the shack. Doc could hear him call to the rest of the Krauts and begin leading them back into the trees.

As soon as the last sound of the Kraut soldiers died away, Hermann opened his eyes, looked at Doc, and raised his eyebrows.

"They're gone," Doc said, "but one of them will be back." He held up one finger and pulled it toward himself, then pointed it at the ground.

Hermann nodded and stayed prone. "*Was sollen wir tun?*"

Doc pursed his lips. "We need a new plan." He checked to make sure the Kraut soldier wasn't returning with stretcher poles yet, then said, "Take off your belt." He unbuckled his own belt and motioned for Hermann to do the same.

Doc stuck both belts in his pack. Then he picked up a short piece of wood from the roofing materials that lay scattered in the dirt. He smacked it against his hand a couple times to test its strength and nodded, satisfied. Doc sat down facing Hermann, the piece of wood beside him, where it looked like just more wreckage. "Now, we wait."

The Kraut returned soon after, trundling two long poles. He brought them to the shelter and put them on the grass beside Hermann to measure them.

Doc said, "They look long enough to me."

The soldier looked at Doc and shrugged. He turned to Hermann and said, "*Versteht er kein Deutsch?*"

"*Nein.*" Hermann glanced at Doc, then looked back at the Kraut and said, "*Ich habe Durst.*"

"*Bitte.*" The soldier pulled his canteen from his belt, knelt, and helped Hermann raise his head to drink.

Doc rose to his knees and thwacked the piece of wood against the side of the Kraut's head. The soldier's helmet flew off, and he started to fall sideways, but he'd merely been dazed. He caught himself on his hands and started to push back up, shaking his head a little.

So Doc had to hit him again, harder this time. The Kraut crumpled next to Hermann and lay with his eyes closed, moaning. Doc was relieved to hear the man's groans; he didn't have much experience bashing people on the head, and had been worried he might seriously hurt the Kraut. But if the man could still moan, he wasn't even unconscious.

Hermann sat up and shoved the soldier's rifle out of reach. Doc tossed him a belt, and Hermann secured the soldier's feet while Doc used the other belt to tie the man's hands. Together, they propped the semiconscious Kraut against one of the shelter's support posts, then threaded his own belt between his arms and his body and secured him to the pole. Doc pulled his last two bandages from his pack, stuffed one in the soldier's

mouth, and tied the other around his head to keep the gag in place.

Hermann stood up. He tested his bandaged leg, stepping gingerly at first. But after a few steps, he didn't even limp. He turned to Doc and said, "*Wir muessen gehen.*"

"If you're saying we need to hustle outta here, I agree." Doc slung his pouch over his shoulder. He checked the sun; dusk would fall in maybe half an hour. Then he glanced around to see if any more Krauts lingered in the area. "It looks clear."

Hermann picked up the other soldier's rifle and held it out toward Doc. Doc shook his head. "I don't want that."

Hermann nodded, then walked to the stream and dropped the rifle into the water. Doc caught up with him, and together they followed the stream through the meadow and on into another stretch of woods. Once in among the trees, darkness came swiftly, and soon both Doc and Hermann walked slower and slower, trying to follow the water while also avoiding any low-hanging limbs or roots covered by dead leaves.

More than an hour past dark, Doc finally heard the familiar click of a Garand's bolt being drawn back, followed by a voice demanding, "Halt! Who goes there!"

"Don't shoot! I'm an American." Doc stopped and raised his hands a third time.

It was late when Doc and Hermann finally reached Saint-Caprais. And who should be waiting outside Hanley's CP tent but First Squad. Their chorus of, "It's Doc!" and "There he is!" made Doc smile despite his weariness.

Lt. Hanley and a stranger emerged from the CP. When Doc, Hermann, and the two men guarding Hermann reached the tent, Hanley said, "Good work, Doc. Maybe we should send you out alone more often." He smiled.

"If it's all the same to you, Lieutenant, I'd rather not." Doc looked at the slender man beside Hanley. He wore gold-rimmed glasses and looked like he'd be more comfortable in a library than an army tent. "Are you the interpreter?"

"That's correct." The man straightened his glasses a little.

"Can you tell Hermann something for me? Tell him I'm proud to know him."

The translator raised his eyebrows a little, but did as Doc asked.

Doc held out his hand to Hermann, who shook it and said, "*Danke, Doc. Wenn alle Amerikaneren aehnlich zu Ihnen waeren, so haette ich keine Sorgen.*"

The translator said, "He says if all Americans were like you, he'd have nothing to worry about."

Doc stepped back and nodded. "Good luck, Hermann." He watched as the guards marched him away, the translator following.

Saunders said, "You know, I think he must've been the only Kraut out there? We didn't find a single one all day, and neither did second squad."

Doc shook his head. "Oh, there were more. A dozen at least."

Caje grinned. "Well, why didn't you bring them too, while you were at it?"

"I thought we only needed one."

"Hey," Kirby said, "how'd you capture a Kraut when you don't even have a gun?"

Doc smiled. "Not all of us need guns to get by in this man's army, Kirby."

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