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The match flared, lighting up the major's face. As he touched the flame to the end of his Lucky Strike, I thought of how it was just one of a hundred cigarettes he had on him for the trip. The glow from the tip burned bright enough to reveal most of the boxcar's interior, its scarred wood paneling showed between the crates that lined the walls. We both smoked carelessly given the boxes of ammunition, oils, and other essential components of warfare that surrounded us. Each of us had built a nest of sorts among the crates. Using the various blankets, we'd been able to stash on the outskirts of the of the châteaux on our recuperative walks about the grounds. Early February 1945 was no warmer than the preceding December and we knew we'd be in one hell of a fix if we didn't have enough insulation for the trip.

I'd met the Major shortly after I arrived at the allied hospital, a makeshift infirmary created using an abandoned chateau in the northern part of France. I was told they brought me there after I was blown off the back of a Sherman just outside the Ardennes Forest back in December. I first heard the word chateau from one of the French girls that was serving as a nurse. I could guess from the first minute I awoke that the place must have cost a fortune! Consisting of what seemed like a hundred different rooms, the place looked like something from a fairy tale, despite the men in bloody bandages adorning the rooms and hallways. I had never been in such a fancy building and the thought of the owner just leaving for who-knows-where didn't add up.
Even now, looking back on it, it strikes me as silly that officers were housed in a separate part of the makeshift hospital from the enlisted casualties. As if it still mattered that I was a lieutenant and the guy down the hall was a corporal. But since I’d already felt the cold shoulder from guys I’d served with before coming to England as a Lieutenant I knew that, real or not, men felt the difference and that made the difference real enough.

For the first several days, the only people I saw were the nurses who came in to change my bandages. I also got visits from one of two different docs on and off for the first few days. Once they figured out that my most severe injury was a concussion, I became the least of their worries. The constant loud ringing in my left ear was something they would monitor for several days, but they said that I should regain normal hearing in that ear eventually.

My room was warm and comfortable, and I’d gotten used to quiet privacy when, on a particularly cold day in January, they wheeled another fellow into the room with a big splint on his left ankle and what looked like another that went down his left arm and around his back somehow. One of the docs walked in behind him and the nurse smiled at me.

“Lieutenant Adams, meet Major Fitzpatrick of the eighty-second airborne division,” the doc said. I immediately went to get up when the nurse broke away from the wheelchair and held me down with a “non, non, non…you mustn’t get out of bed so quickly.” Her French lilt made her that much prettier.

“Damn Adams, as you were…I’ll be in the area for a long time it looks like,” the major barked.
“Yes sir, thank you sir,” was all I could come up with.

“Well gents, I’ll leave you to get to know each other. Major, needless to say, you need anything, you just sound off and one of the nurses will be in directly,” the doc said as he walked out without looking back.

“Damn place looks like a New Orleans whore house doesn’t it Adams?” The major chuckled to himself as he looked around the room at the ornate wallpaper and curtains.

“Never been to New Orleans sir,” I replied.

“Hmm, I’m not sure you’ve missed much there Adams. Well, that’s not entirely true. Depends on when and where you go there but overall it’s a dirty place full of loafers and pick pockets, though it does have its charms.”

Within a couple of days, we’d pretty much covered the standard biographical stuff like where we were from and how we came to be in a hospital in northern France that resembled a whorehouse. Army life, for us at least, had changed quite a bit. Clean sheets, three squares, and pretty nurses had replaced the snow, mud, and bitter cold of our advance toward Germany. Within a couple of weeks of meeting each other, we were past ready to get the hell out of there and on with our war.

We’d just finished breakfast when a buck sergeant from some admin outfit knocked on the door to our room and came in without waiting for us to answer.

“Good morning gentlemen. My name is Sergeant Wilson and I’m here to brief you on behalf of HQ regarding your reassignment orders,” he said as the major cut a glance over at me. The sergeant continued.
“Given the tempo of operations in this theatre, HQ has decided that it is not practical to attempt to reunite you with your former units and thus you’ll be reassigned to units that are in need of officers of your rank.” His words caused my gut to sink as I imagined taking over a company of draftee recruits just out of boot camp.

“We will try to assign you to units whose mission is the same as your former units but that is not guaranteed,” he continued. “Your physicians have told me that you’ll be fit for reassignment within several days. I’ll take that information back to Colonel Trice at HQ and he’ll make the final decision as to which of you goes where,” he snapped his folder shut.

“If you gentlemen don’t have any questions, I’ll leave you to continue healing. I may see you at HQ next week before you head to your new duty stations.”

With that, he turned on his heels and walked out of the room.

“What a crock of horse shit!” The major roared, “I’ll be God damned if I’m gonna go from the All Americans to commanding some company of snot-nosed green kids just off the friggin’ boat!”

The major began to pace back and forth across the room. The only hint of injury that remained was his slight left-favoring limp. His shoulder seemed fine as he clinched and released both fists while he paced.

“Seriously Adams, I can’t imagine that after being with Hell on Wheels since Normandy you’re too damn keen on becoming a platoon leader in graves and registration for God’s sake! This shit is FUBAR and I’m not gonna stand for it.”
“Well Fitz, I ain’t gonna lie, I’m not too happy about the prospect of running a crew of cooks or collecting information on the whereabouts of buried G.I.’s either.” I raised both hands in the air as if to ask for an alternative. “But I’ve learned the hard way that nobody really gives a rat’s ass what I do and don’t like about this man’s army.”

Attempting to calm him down some I asked, “You wanna grab some chow? Get our minds off it for a while?”

“No, you go on ahead. I’m gonna take a walk around the grounds.” The major sat down next to his boots and jerked one on.

Being in a hospital isn’t anyone’s idea of a good time, but I can say that I enjoyed not being shot at constantly. I sure as hell didn’t miss freezing my ass off either. The winter of 1944 was brutally cold. Many of the locals we’d been able to talk to told me that there hadn’t been a winter as bitter in living memory. The memory of having to lay on top of the warm hood of my halftrack so I wouldn’t freeze gave me a chill. I grabbed a slice of chocolate pie from the small chow line and found a chair next to what used to be the dining room of the big place. As I ate, my mind wandered to my guys, as it often did when it was quiet. I’d been out of commission for right at two months. While I was laid up, the Second Armored had continued to push the Nazis back toward the Fatherland. I was certain that, in my absence, First Sergeant Yantsios was staying on all my guys in Baker Company like a bad smell. It hadn’t occurred to me, though, that I might have already been replaced by another lieutenant like they were doing with me and the major. I shuddered at
the thought of how damn cold it must be out there now that February was settling in.

Just as I was about to go back for another piece of pie I spied the major walking up the hall toward me.

“I thought you were walking the grounds Sir,” I said as I stood.

“I did walk the grounds. I was gonna keep going for a while longer when it hit me like lightning outa the clear sky,” he looked over his shoulder and back at me. He lowered his voice and moved closer. “Adams, I think I know how to keep you from grave registration duty,” he hissed.

“I’m all ears Sir,” I replied.

Raising his voice, he boomed, “Damn if you ain’t Adams! In the dark you kinda look like a taxi coming down the alley with all its doors open!” He clapped me on the back as we made our way back to our room.

“So, here’s the thing Adams. I’ve decided that there’s no way in hell I’m going to let some pencil neck reassign me and since I’m willing to bet folding money you feel the same way I’m gonna let you in on my plan. I’m gonna take the rest of this week to squirrel away wool blankets, candy bars, other traveling food, and as many cigarettes as I can scrounge.”

He quickly glanced side to side and continued, “I found a perfect spot on the edge of the grounds here that looks like it used to be a root cellar before it got picked clean. I’m planning to jam all my supplies in there over the next several days and there’s plenty of room for your supplies too, assuming you’re in and wanna take the trip, that is.” He paused for a breath and his eyes burned a hole in me.
“Sir, if I read you right, you’re saying we should both go AWOL,” I asked.

With a grin he replied, “Yep, that’s just what I’m saying.”

I continued, “Except instead of running away from the fighting, we’re gonna run back to the war?” I stopped and shook my head. “That’s one crazy-assed plan, I gotta hand it to you Sir.”

“Just crazy enough to get me back to the All Americans and you back to Hell on Wheels,” he said. “That east-bound train we saw early last week is on a schedule and will pass through here again this coming Monday. You and I both know it will probably continue east, toward the front. Even if it doesn’t go all the way, it’ll get us farther and faster than we can ride our leather personnel carriers.” He beamed with pride as he revealed a plan of action that only somebody who makes a habit of abandoning perfectly good airplanes could think was sound.

“Jesus Fitz, that’s one hell of a long shot. We’ll go to the stockade or worse,” I almost whispered.

“No doubt about it. That’s if we get caught. Who’s gonna be looking for two AWOLS heading toward the fight?” His voice had that calm air of conviction and I realized he was going whether I went along or not.

“Well Sir, I don’t know how I’d live with myself if I didn’t cover your play. And since I sure as hell don’t wanna leave it up to some pencil-pusher to decide how I’m gonna spend the rest of my war; you better go over the nitty-gritty with me, so we don’t screw this up.” I leaned in to hear the rest. I was about to ride the AWOL train.

We had three days left before we thought the train would be through again, so we set about reconnoitering the specifics like where the train would likely stop
and around what time. We pilfered a half-dozen additional green wool blankets and laid them up in the growing larder in the old root cellar. We added to the blankets four bottles of bourbon we’d gotten as part of our officer’s liquor rations. From those rations, we traded the vodka to one of the cooks in the kitchen for a carton of chocolate bars and ten packs of Lucky Strikes.

Since the major had just about walked into the hospital with one of his men that had it much worse, he still had his Tommy gun and his .45 pistol. We weren’t completely screwed if we had to save our own skins on the trip. They’d issued me new uniforms and a new field jacket in anticipation of my release by the docs, so I was good to go on clothes. It was beginning to look like the good Lord was smiling on our hair-brained scheme.

On what was to be our last stroll around the grounds, we checked the root cellar one last time. Satisfied that we’d done our best to prepare, we walked to the dining room and ate a huge dinner. I wrapped a couple yeast rolls in a napkin and jammed them in the pocket of my robe. Together we went back to the room to turn in for the night.

The sun cast a bright light through our window as it rose the next morning; Monday morning. I got dressed in my new uniform. Fitz did likewise. We made sure to leave our shaving kits out and our robes hung on the back of the door, so it would look like we intended to use them later. With everything laid out, we headed to breakfast.

We ate in silence. Both of us were running the details again. We both ate as much as we could stomach. I grabbed another plate of sausages, wrapped those in
my napkin, and stuck them in my jacket pocket. Fitz crammed the big pockets of his paratrooper smock with rolls and hard cheese. Thanking the cooks on the way out, we made for the big French doors that led to the veranda of the impressive house and out to the gravel drive.

Our last stop was at the root cellar. I was certain that we were gonna open the door and find all our traveling supplies gone. Truth be told, I think I was hoping they’d be gone. But opening the door, we found everything packed in the two kit bags just like we’d left them the night before. We both slung our bags. Fitz pulled the blanket off his Tommy gun and slung it over his shoulder. I reached down and grabbed his pistol belt with the .45 holstered on it and strapped it on as Fitz closed the cellar door. With that, we walked off in the direction of the little village not half a mile down the road.

Within sight of the tiny whistle stop, we heard the high-pitched whistle blow two quick toots to clear the tracks where the train would stop briefly to offload supplies. Lucky for us, there were plenty of GI's milling around waiting to sort the contents of the boxcar designated for our hospital, so we didn’t stick out too bad. We were careful not to get too close, as all the saluting that would surely ensue would draw too much attention.

“Damn it’s cold this morning,” Fitz blew on his cupped hands.

“Yep, it is. Good thing we’re gonna be in one of those boxcars wrapped up soon.” I said.
“Let’s get over to that patch of trees just east of the station we scoped out,” Fitz said, jutting his chin over toward the spot we’d picked to hide until we jumped the train.

“Lead on Sir,” I replied, and we picked up our pace.

The thick stand of pines and cedars was between us and the little depot. We’d figured it would conceal us from view. Finally, we heard the engine building steam, telling us the train was preparing to pull off.

“Last chance, Adams,” the major raised his eyebrows at me.

“In for a penny,” I replied.

“In for a pound,” he smiled back at me.

Within about a minute after pulling away from the loading dock, the engine slowly passed our position among the trees. Next the tender, and then what looked like a mail car.

The first of four boxcars passed us. We’d decided on the third boxcar as that was the one we’d seen them unloading. Fitz took two quick steps toward the car and in one motion he jumped up, grabbed the rail, and planted both feet on the steps at the back corner. I was right behind him and landed on the steps at the front corner of the car directly behind him. We’d just crossed the point of no return. The engine gained speed and we passed behind the grand old castle that had been home for the last three weeks.

We rode in the space between the two cars for what seemed like a lifetime. We were both feeling the effects of the cold wind that whipped between and under the cars.
“Let’s get our asses outa this wind,” Fitz shouted.

I gave him a thumbs-up and he swung around and onto the ladder that seemed to grow out of the railing at the rear of his car. He climbed up to the roof and, on all fours, made his way to the ventilation hatch in the center of the car. When he reached the hatch, I was right behind him. He man-handled the hatch open wider and grabbed the brace that held it open against the wind. With one swift jerk, he pulled the hasp out by the screws where it attached to the bottom of the hatch. He slid over beside the hatch and held it open wide, so I could go through feet first. Once my legs and upper body were inside, I held on to the edge with my hands. Trying to steady myself for the drop, I hoped there was solid floor some four feet below my boots. Letting go, I dropped and rolled as best as I could. Rolling to my side, I crashed into a crate and knocked the wind out of my lungs.

As I laid on my back, trying to catch my breath, down came Fitz. I was certain he would stomp my remaining guts out, but he managed to land on his feet with one boot on either side of me. As he fell into the car, the hatch slammed shut from the wind blowing across it, leaving us with only the light coming through the cracks between the siding slats of the boxcar.

“Damn Adams, I saw you hit!” He bellowed. “That crash woulda killed a regular man!”

I coughed out what little air I had left in a choking laugh and drew in a fresh gulp of the cold air. “Fitz, I thought you were gonna finish me off on the way down for sure,” I gasped.
“You were never in any danger there LT—haven’t crushed a man on a jump yet.” He reached out a hand and helped me to my feet. We stood there to take stock of our surroundings.

The car was still about half full of crates and barrels and steel drums of various sizes and colors. One of the fifty-five-gallon drums had the words “Packed Bearings” freshly stenciled on the side in black letters. Fitz smacked the lid of the drum several times as if playing the bongo drums and looked over at me smiling.

“Winner winner, chicken dinner!” He sang. “This here’s gonna be our heater come nightfall.” He could see by my expression that I wasn’t yet following him. “If this damn thing were full of diesel or some such, it would be useless to us.” He stopped and looked at me with an expectant squint, his head turned slightly to allow himself to hear my recognition of his plan. I remained silent, just raising my eyebrows.

“We can dump out packed bearings and not blow ourselves up,” he said as if speaking to his own kid.

“Then we can break up some of these crates and start a fire!” I said to his delight.

“That’s the ticket LT, we’ll be toasty as can be in no time,” he said.

He quickly had the snap ring off the lid and even in the poor light we could see that the drum was filled with what appeared to be twelve-inch disks wrapped in heavy brown grease paper. I picked one up and unwrapped it. Just as advertised, one big sealed wheel bearing laid inside each wrapper. Axle grease covered the inside of each of the wrappers. We set about removing the bearings and setting
them on the tops of the various surrounding crates. When we got near the bottom, we upended the drum and the rest fell out, scattering about our feet. We kicked out a space of around five or so feet by five feet to place the drum, and I unwrapped a few more of the bearings. Once we had a nice pile of greasy wrappers in the bottom of the drum, we took a break. I wiped my hands off on one side of a wool blanket and then folded it back up so that the greasy part was on the inside. I found a crate that would make a comfortable seat and put the folded blanket on top of it and sat down. Fitz did likewise, and we looked at each other across the top of the freshly emptied drum.

“Well Adams, I think we’re on our way now for sure.” Fitz seemed pleased with himself. “How ‘bout a drink my good man?”

He reached into his kit bag, pulled out one of the bourbon bottles, and unscrewed the cap. He put the bottle to his lips and took a long pull. Wiping the back of his gloved hand across his mouth, he groaned, “Damnation, that sure does hit the spot.”

“Hey there major, don’t get greedy on me now!” I burst out over the drum.

“Can’t a guy have a moment of reflection with his whiskey before you get all grabby handed?” He winked and handed the bottle across to me.

It was just the ticket and, with a couple more swigs, it did seem like the cold retreated a little more.

Once it got good and dark, we piled a bunch of slat pieces from the crates we’d busted open into the drum and lit the paper in the bottom through the breathing holes we’d pounded into the bottom edge. The smoke filled the car
quicker than I could crack open the loading doors, but as the train was making about forty miles per hour or so, the smoke slipped quickly out and into the night.

“Was I right?” Fitz beamed.

“Snug as two bugs in a rug.”

“You’re welcome,” he quipped.

“You were right sir, it beats the hell outa freezing our asses off, that’s for sure.”

We took turns feeding the fire as the night wore on. By my watch it was around two in the morning when I woke to a hellacious crashing and grinding racket. Fitz was on his feet, staring down into a fresh hole in the center of the boxcar’s floor.

“Holy shit Adams, did you see that?” he cried.

“No, but I heard what sounded like the second coming! Where the hell’s the drum?” My voice pitched higher than I’d heard it before.

“That’s the holy shit part man!” Fitz was yelling and laughing simultaneously. “The goddamn thing burned clean through the floor and fell out onto the tracks!” he roared.

I could see that he was shaking his head by the light of embers of the smoldering ring in the floor of the car. “Well I guess that’s that then, no more heater. Now we’ve got a new friggin’ cold air vent in the floor to boot!” He plopped down on his perch.

We laughed and cursed the wind coming up from the floor until dawn. The train had slowed over the last hour. We guessed that they were running slow to
conserve coal as it wasn’t all that easy to get lately. Within a few more minutes, we realized that the train was coming to a stop. The engineer blew a couple of short toots and rang the bell for a few seconds. We’d stopped just short of a crossing in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere. Peering out the cracked door, I could see a bunch of vehicles. I quickly realized they were Deuce and a half’s and M3 halftracks. Inside the tree line I made out the shadowy outlines of a couple Sherman tanks.

“Holy Shit,” I whispered.

“What do ya see Adams?”

“You’re not gonna believe me sir.” Hell, I couldn’t believe it myself. But there it sat, big as life. The unmistakable white triangle with “2AD” painted next to it.

“Fitz, I can’t believe my eyes, but that’s my damn halftrack sitting right there next to the road bigger than shit.” I turned and smiled at him. “I guess I’m home, sir.” I said with a laugh.

“Well I’ll be damned Adams. I guess you are indeed,” he let out a deep breath.

“Come on with me sir. I’ll introduce you to whoever’s left. We’ll figure out where the 82nd is and get you over there somehow,” I said as I jumped out of the car.

As I walked up to my old ride, the driver’s door swung open and First Sergeant Yantsios jumped out. Hearing me approach, he spun around and raised his hand to shield his eyes squinting, “Jesus Lieutenant, what the hell took you so long?”

His face twisting into a grimace. Just then, Fitz came into view around the corner of the halftrack. Yantsios got ramrod straight and almost saluted but caught himself, as he knew better that to salute in a combat zone.
“Cut me some slack, Top,” I motioned over my shoulder toward Fitz. “I was carrying a ton of baggage.”