

"The Question"

2-2-1

It had just been one of those days where everything goes wrong. Of course, waking up with your face lying directly atop the frozen ground is never a good start. Dax Braedon slid the army poncho off his legs and sat up, greeting the cold morning full in the face.

"Coffee?" asked his Sergeant, holding out a small tin cup.

"Thanks," said Dax.

"You up yet, Simmons?"

Dax looked over his shoulder just in time to see the Sergeant place a well aimed kick on the lump that was Davey Simmons.

"Come on, men. We move out in ten minutes."

"Got our question yet?" asked Private Hendricks. Every morning, the Sergeant asked a question to get the men's minds going. They varied from trivia to philosophy to political and economic theory.

"Not yet," said the Sergeant, trudging away.

Dax swigged the last of the cold, bitter coffee and then began rolling up his poncho.

"It's just too darn cold to be doing anything today," said Georgie Hendricks, slumping over next to Dax.

"Well, you've never been good with pain," Dax replied. The chill hanging in the air was making his teeth ache, but he managed to keep the smile on his face. Georgie smiled embarrassedly.

"Do some jumping-jacks," Dax said. "It'll get your blood moving. Not that we won't be doing enough to keep your blood moving soon anyway."

“Bad news, boys,” said the Sergeant, returning to their section of the grove. His face was grim but his voice remained calm. “Private Collins deserted last night.”

A murmur of shock and outrage filtered through the men.

“In light of this recent occurrence, my question for you all this morning is, ‘Why?’ ... We move out in three minutes.”

The men didn’t take too well to the news. Davey Simmons in particular had trouble swallowing the adjustment. He was only just eighteen, the youngest in the squad, and he had attached himself to Collins. Dax ignored Red and Dick who were muttering hateful comments. He was disappointed in Collin’s decision but hadn’t there been times when he’d been tempted to leave too? Why had he stayed?

“Sergeant seems to be taking it well,” said Georgie, interrupting Dax’s thoughts.

“Well, someone has to keep it together,” said Dax, tightening the strap on his sack and pulling his rifle up to his side.

Georgie didn’t answer. The two of them made their way behind the Weapons Squad. Half of their platoon had been shot over the course of the last two weeks. Now all that was left was the bare remnants of the Rifle and Weapons Squad.

Directly in front of them was Ezekiel, their only sniper and the only other Christian in the Platoon. Dax had never had the chance to become terribly close with Zeke, as everyone called him, but they didn’t need to speak to be an encouragement to each other. Zeke looked over his shoulder to view the platoon behind him and his eyes met Dax’s. He smiled and continued plugging along. Dax smiled too.

Georgie stifled a groan. He tried not to complain, Dax could tell, but Georgie and most of the others had become discouraged and tired.

The cold stinging their faces and gnawing at their fingers and toes didn't lift even after the sun rose two hours later. Dax could feel his insides squirm as though they were trying to rearrange themselves to preserve warmth.

The trees began thinning and a hilly plain replaced the forest. The sun lit up the dew droplets on the ground and the mist that had clung so tightly to earth began its ascent to heaven.

"Hey Dax; Georgie," said Charlie coming up from behind them, a half-smile playing at his lips and an enormous gun on his shoulders. Charlie had carried the unit's only B.A.R since they hit the beach in Normandy.

"Hey Charlie," said Dax. "How are you?"

"I'm good," Charlie said. The half-smile disappeared, proving the insincerity of his response. "Did you hear about Collins? Of course you did," he said, answering his own question. Charlie shook his head. "What I would do to get my hands on him..."

"Collins made a bad choice," said Dax calmly. "And he's going to have to pay the consequences sooner or later. Just be grateful God has given you the strength to endure. It could be you wandering around like a coward in an unknown land carrying nothing but a gun and regret."

"Oh don't be so holy, Dax," Charlie said, annoyed. "Jesus didn't know what it was like to be a soldier – he shouldn't have the right to tell us not to complain when someone pulls a Benedict."

Dax smiled.

"Jesus was definitely a soldier. As far as I'm concerned he should be the role model for the rest of us. He sacrificed himself so that we might live. Isn't that what we're doing for our family and friends?"

Charlie didn't say anything but his brows furrowed in thought.

It was quiet for a long time, except for the thumping of boots and the heavy breathing of strained bodies.

"Braedon," the Sergeant said over the heads of the men, "Come here."

Dax made his way to the tall, broad-shouldered figure.

"Sarge?"

"Are you sure those coordinates you drew up are correct, because this doesn't seem right."

Dax surveyed the area quickly as he fell into step with the sergeant. Suddenly, a vicious thought jumped into his head, making his stomach churn, and doubt filled him. What if he had been wrong? What if they were going in the wrong direction? He took a deep breath. This was no time to panic.

"I'm sure. I'm sure they're right."

"Okay, that's all I needed to know. Thanks."

Dax nodded and caught up with Georgie. He hadn't lied to the Sergeant, but he kept his eyes open. If he had made a mistake, the sooner they caught it the less trouble they'd be in.

By mid morning, Dax was beginning to think that something was definitely wrong. There were supposed to have met up with another platoon by now. Dax found his way back to the Sergeant. He didn't have to say anything.

"Alright, we'll stop here and let the boys take a water break while you and I figure it out." Then he shouted, "Water break men. Ten minutes. Then we move again."

Sergeant pulled out the coordinates they had mapped out and set them across his knee. Dax seated himself on the ground next to the Sergeant and looked nervously over the paper to see if he could spot his mistake.

They recalculated once; twice; three times with no result. Dax ran his fingers through his grimy hair. His sweaty hands smeared the dirt on his face as he ran his hand across his forehead.

“Hey, relax. We’ll get this worked out,” said the Sergeant. “Focus, Braedon.”

Dax ran over the numbers in his head again. Carefully following each calculation to make sure it was right. Zeke sat down next to him and handed him a canteen. Dax took a swig and the water revitalized him for just a moment. Two minutes later he was groaning over the discovered mistake. The Sergeant didn’t say anything, but Dax suspected it was taking him a lot of will power – it had been a significant miscalculation.

“It’s fixable,” the Sergeant said coolly. “We can work this out.”

They put together an alternate route and the platoon set off, quickening their pace to make up for lost time.

“Hey, it’s not your fault,” Georgie said, coming up beside him. “And now we’re on the right track. It’s all good.”

“Thanks,” Dax said, not really that encouraged. He just hoped that time was all that this mistake would cost them.

Around lunch time they found themselves standing in front of a huge wheat field. Much of the wheat had been trampled down, but there were many places which were tall enough and wide enough to conceal an entire regiment.

Instinctively, Charlie hit the ground, his B.A.R. close by his side and ready to shoot.

“Get up,” the Sergeant said, rolling his eyes a little. “But...” he added quietly, pressing his fingers to his lips, “stay low.”

Cautiously, the platoon started through the tall stalks.

Dax sensed Georgie coming up behind his right shoulder. He adjusted his pace to allow his friend to catch up.

“Dax,” he whispered. “What if this is a mine field?”

“I doubt it.”

“I don’t want to land on a mine.”

“You won’t, Georgie,” Dax whispered back.

“What if I land on a mine but don’t die?”

“Hope you get knocked unconscious, because at that point the pain could probably cause your heart to go into cardiac-arrest and you really would die...”

“Are...” Georgie paused. “Are you joking to me or are you serious?”

Dax grinned and rolled his eyes, then straightened the tip of his gun and persisted through the wheat field.

“Dax. Dax! Dax, are you joking to me or what?”

“Hendricks,” whispered the Sergeant from a few feet away. He held his index finger to his lips and mouthed out, “hush.”

Dax crept through the golden stalks and listened carefully for any unkind noise in the surrounding environment. He heard the rustling of the wind through the wheat and the shuffling of feet behind him. His ears pricked and for a second he thought he heard the cocking of a gun. But nothing followed and he pressed on.

The wheat field ended and an ominous, brown barn stood a hundred yards away. The squad gathered in the safety of the tall, grassy wheat.

“That thing has to be loaded with Jerrys,” Red said in a hoarse whisper as the Sergeant came up beside him.

Dax crouched low and absentmindedly ran the crumbly earth between his fingers. Red was right – that thing had to be a nest.

“Can we make it to the trees over there?” Davey said, pointing to where the forest started again some two hundred yards past the barn. Sarge got down on his belly and examined the stretch of bare land ahead of them. It looked as though it had previously been another wheat field but had been harvested already or cut down.

“Why not just go down another hundred yards south?” Dick asked.

“You can’t,” Joe Maverick said. “You’ll have the same problem there that you do here. It’s a big open space with no where to hide.”

“But no barn,” Charlie pointed out.

“I think the distance between here and the woods is smaller than it would be if we started another hundred yards down,” Sarge said.

“Let’s just run for it,” said Joe, the intensity lighting up his eyes.

“You boys all okay with running for it?” Sarge asked.

There was a hesitant murmur of approval and then Sarge stood up.

“Get your guns, boys.”

Dax grabbed his gun only to find that his hands were shaking uncontrollably.

“We’ll go out in fives – those who stay will cover for those who go,” Sarge explained.

“Who wants to go first?”

No one moved.

“I’ll go,” Zeke said, calmly.

“I’m game, boss,” said Joe, moving next to Zeke.

Two others from the weapons squad joined, followed by a pale-faced Davey Simmons who seemed shocked to hear his own voice volunteer for what seemed like certain death. As if he were trying to make him feel better, Sarge clapped Davey on the shoulder and said, “Don’t worry son, it’s the ones who go last who’ll be in the real trouble.”

Georgie leaned over to Dax.

“I don’t want to go last.”

Slowly and with determined effort, the first five moved to the very edge of the field. Then they were off. They ran as fast as they could for as far as they could.

Davey turned out to be a pretty fast runner. They were all making good time and not one gun shot had been heard.

Dax looked anxiously at the barn.

“Alright,” Sarge was saying, “The rest of us will go when they get within one hundred yards of the woods. Braedon, you and Hendricks stay here to cover. When we get within one hundred yards, start running yourselves. By that time the first group should be ready to cover you.”

That was all he had time to say. And he was off, running with the other four. They passed the barn as the first five made it to the woods.

Dax got ready to run and he heard Georgie whimpering behind him. Bowing his head for the briefest moment, Dax whispered, “God, give me the courage to charge that field.”

And then he was running too. But something went wrong. Almost as soon as he had left the wheat field he heard gun fire. Someone was shooting from the barn. Sarge and the others were left without cover in the middle of the field. He saw Lance fall to the ground but didn't have time to hope he was only wounded. He was running past the barn and he could feel the heat of the bullets as they shaved past his arms.

Georgie was right behind him. Dax saw two of his comrades enter the forest – Sarge was not among them.

Hearts thumping, brains pounding, and fear and courage driving them faster, they reached the half way mark between the field and the woods. It was there that he felt the bullet plunge into his back. One, two, three bullets pierced his leg and his side. Tripping over his useless leg, he fell to the ground and found himself in the same position he had been when he woke up that morning: face down to the cold earth.

The dark soil stuck to his sweaty face and his tears carved tracks down his cheeks. Two feet away lay Georgie, gasping for breath and covered in blood.

“It hurts!” was all he managed to say.

Coughing up blood and wincing in pain, Dax crawled next to his friend. The sound of gun fire had stopped.

“Why?” Georgie said, huffing. “We never answered the question this morning. ‘Why?’”

Dax flopped on his back and looked at the sun as it began its decent from the late afternoon sky.

“I’ll tell you why, Georgie,” Dax said hoarsely, gasping for breath. “It’s because you love your country.” He coughed again, blood running down his mouth. “You want them to be

safe and happy and free from pain – so you take the pain yourself, like Christ did for us. Why? Because you're a soldier – and this is your sacrifice.”

Georgie smile faintly. Then he whispered, “You know what, Dax? It's not so bad when you think about it that way – it doesn't hurt so much.”

“Of course not, Georgie; there is joy in pain.”

He grasped the hand of his dying friend and laid there in the dirt. The sun shone blindingly and Georgie's moans became silent and sometime in there it stopped hurting and Dax Braedon went home.