



Always October

by C. E. Edmonson

There's a darkness that falls over soldiers in a prolonged war, a darkness that affects everything you do, even the way you think. Sometimes, when the weather was hot, during July and August, you could smell the dead before you saw them. Sometimes you *only* smelled them, they never came into sight. Many of the villages had been bombed and shelled so many times—by the Allies, by the Germans—there was nothing left to them, every building smashed and burned. Animals, too, horses and cows and pigs swollen up double in the fields.

One late afternoon, we drove into a farmyard, this one still occupied, where five GIs had a dozen German prisoners under guard. We'd barely jumped out of our vehicles, a Jeep and a two-and-a-half ton truck—called a deuce-and-a-half—when the farm came under fire from a pair of Tiger panzer tanks several hundred yards away on a little ridge.

Two shells struck the barn, the second coming right behind the first, and the flames shot up toward

the sky, fast and sudden, like the spirit leaving the body. Trapped inside, the animals began to wail, a high-pitched keen muffled by the roar of the fire. One of the GIs guarding the prisoners, a sergeant, got on the radio and called in an artillery strike, from where I'll never know. But only a minute later, a half-dozen shells whooshed overhead to fall within twenty yards of the tanks. That was enough for the panzers. They turned and lumbered off.

With the tanks gone, the farmer, a tall bearded man whose wail matched the cries of his livestock, tried to reach the barn door, but his wife and two sons pulled him back. And what did we do while the entire family, four grown adults, wept like children? We ignored the animals, ignored the family's distress, loaded the prisoners into the deuce-and-a-half and took off down the road. I'd been promoted to lieutenant by then, a battlefield commission that came my way after a sniper took out Lieutenant Harrington.

It seemed that within just a few weeks after landing on that Normandy beach, my life narrowed down to the world of war, as if I'd never had a past, as if I'd never have a future. I don't mean that I feared death, or saw death around every corner. No, I meant to live and I took every precaution outside of pure cowardice to keep myself and the soldiers under my command alive.

War dragged you into itself, like the great fish that swallowed Jonah. Within its gut, there was only the darkness, only the rules of engagement, which were really simple, at least when the bullets were flying: Kill or be killed, grow hard or go insane.