

# As Heart And Blood

– a story from the Third World War ... that erupted in 1946

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(in progress)

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**Last Updated: 17 Jan 2012**

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## Episode 1

Javier Gonzalez had lived all of his 27-year old life until now in the provincial town of Tarija in southern Bolivia, and had feared that he would probably have to live the rest of it there, too ... running his father's wine-business as everybody else expected of him. But what else was there to do that made sense?

It was, after all, a privilege to be an heir to a moderately lucrative enterprise in a pitiful excuse for a country that had been beaten in every war it had fought (which his father, a retired colonel from the catastrophic Chaco War against Paraguay, often grumbled about - whether anyone listened or not); Bolivia - a country that had more people begging on the streets than street dogs, or so it sometimes seemed to Javier. No, nothing much would probably change, even though the world was in flames elsewhere.

And Javier's ... secret ... life would probably not change either, including his inability to make it more than a fantasy, that is, without being discovered. That was not even an option. Not in a society where family was everything and men were expected to be ... men. Just as he was expected to take over Los Viños de Valle, a prospect which made him both frustrated and angry at times, but no more so than he kept working in the administration and accounting for his father. But at least he would not have to think about economics and then, maybe ... one day, he would know what to do. To make something real.

Well, maybe that one day could conceivably come before too many years. There was, after all, always Renan ... Renan who worked in the bank at the Plaza and who, at least in Javier's most daring imaginations, shared his dreams for another ... life. A life that was not ... expected.

And Javier had something to pin his hopes on (when he did not chide himself for having them in the first place): It was well-known that Renan Fuentes was one of the most sought after bachelors in Tarija - wealthy family, respected, all that - but he never seemed to have an interest in the girls offered to him, for the obligatory marriage. Even old Don Gonzales had tentatively inquired about Renan (whose father he knew well and who was 'respectable') and, well, Marina - Javier's youngest daughter. The girl needed a husband soon (and to get out of home!). That was for sure. But Renan

did not seem to be interested and so nothing came off it.

But nothing came off Javier's extremely discreet suggestions to Renan either. He tried whenever he was in the bank to get the salaries for the workers, to leave a remark that would somehow indicate a reason that the two should meet privately, since 'they got along so well' during business hours. Etcetera. Etcetera. There had been many convoluted attempts by Javier at designing the conversation... but each time with no change. Renan seemingly saw right through him, with trained politeness – attractive politeness. But nothing changed.

Yes, the only thing that was sure in Tarija, and in Javier's life, was that nothing much was bound to change at all! And apparently he did not have the guts to change it, or the wherewithal, or both. Sometimes he felt cursed. Sometimes he hated himself. Sometimes he just took Virginia, his favorite horse, for a ride out onto the Great Chaco plains that stretched beyond Tarija and all the way into Paraguay and northern Argentina – in order to stay away for days at a time. And to try to forget that he had to come back.

But then the war in Europe erupted again and his grandfather's Spain was suddenly threatened and everybody in the family began talking (his family was very good at that) about what ought to be done... and what a terrible, terrible situation it was that nobody, not even the recently-so-mighty United States and England seemed to be able to do anything.

That's when Javier felt deep inside that he knew what to be done: He would volunteer. He would go to Spain and fight.

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## Episode 2

He turned the thoughts over again and again in the long, dull afternoons in Tarija's incessant summer heat:

Volunteering ... for the war in Spain.

Fight against the Communists.

Each time, each thought became more and more vivid, as if it lit up a little more from the inside.

Yes, by all that he cherished - he would go defend the old land from the red scourge. And he would come back and be someone else. It was sometimes clear as a magnesium flare inside him, the feeling that all of his life would change if he did this. He wasn't exactly sure how, but it would change something - because it would prove that he could make those kinds of decisions. He could not explain it anymore than that. It was drawing him and he had to go.

Of course there were rational explanations, only they were vague, and not really suitable to reflect to much upon lest their internal logic be torn apart under close scrutiny. It was about his father, for one thing: The old man had always been, so Javier felt, not really in favor of him. He only had to accept, like everyone else, that of course Javier had to take over the family firm, because who else could? He was the only son in the family. But Don Gonzales wasn't impressed by his son, he had let that slip on more than one occasion. And perhaps he also suspected something?

No, Javier would not even allow himself to think that. But still the doubt was there. And even though he knew it was blatantly irrational - a record of courage, of having *done* something - when everybody else seemed content to just blabber on and comment and chit and chat and watch in badly concealed horror as the world slid into the abyss of war ... *that* would change everything for him once he returned. He would be another man, someone to be reckoned with.

And it wouldn't have to be flamboyant or anything like that! Javier loathed that idea; he was more attracted to an image of returning home, with stories and all - of the horror of war - and then noticing the suppressed pride in the eyes of everyone who was important. And perhaps a sudden interest from ... well, that was scarcely something to hope for, but still. It would not hurt his chances of unmaking that strange unreality of being a gay man in one of the most machismo societies in this hemisphere ... an existence that, he had often reflected seemed to be little better than that of a ghost.

The only thing he had to do now was to transform the light-filled thoughts into action. He had to go to the consulate, get the papers.

And soon, he would be bound for Europe – and a new life.

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That afternoon Javier slipped off from work early, and walked through the Calle Madrid and Ingavi past the venerable church and then headed directly for the Spanish consulate in Tarija. He had to clear the paperwork now, to make it real.

And then, as he crossed the street, and nearly was hit by a car because he was so absorbed in the sudden feeling of clarity that it gave him to have this purpose - then it occurred to him for a moment that he hadn't really checked up on the situation in Spain. What was going on at the front? What was the most recent news?

The Soviets juggernaut had looked poised, just a week ago, to smash through the Pyrenees at some moment in the not too distant future. Overwhelming amounts of men and materiel kept flowing in from the seemingly endless supplies of the Motherland - willing cattle to be sacrificed, he mused, for a cause so wrong, so idiotic that there were not really any name for it in Spanish. He could not imagine that these ... men, whoever they were, from Siberia or some farm in Ukraine –how they could be worth much as fighters. Their only strength lay in sheer numbers. And yet ... what if those numbers were still enough and were about to be put to use, once again, as they had been since Moscow, Kursk and Sedan.

What if the Soviets were about to win?

It was so banal and he felt instant shame for having considered it. Because it made him hesitate...he stopped. The consulate was just around the corner. The afternoon was hot and pleasant. A couple strode across the street, passing him - hand in hand. He didn't feel a sense of loathing as he usually did when he saw couples. Instead he suddenly felt ... a strange sense of loss. And then ... fear?

Would he be coming back?

Mobilizing all his courage Javier Gonzales breathed deeply, then continued, turned the corner, and went straight to the consulate entrance.

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## Episode 3

Dear sister,

It is a strange feeling to write someone whom I may never see again. It is also strange to admit to myself that because of that I feel closer to you now than I did in Tarija. We were always on good terms, you and I – and for that I am grateful. It was not that we never had an argument, we had plenty! I used to loathe the fact that you seemed to be content staying around the house, instead of running off to get married with one of father's 'promising young candidates'.

But I see now, here on this dreadful troop transport ship to Europe, that it was just my own loathing of myself that was a fault. I should have gone away, I should have taken a decision, but it was easier to think that there was something wrong with somebody else. It was not only you, it was everybody else. And now the decision has been taken, and I have the pains and bruises to prove it, after the dreadful training camp in Florida.

I guess it is always hard to learn how to die ... Oh, don't knit your brow too much now, we've spoken of this many times, after I let you in on my decision to volunteer to fight the Communist scourge. We've spoken of what it meant, but perhaps it is more real to you now that you have my letter in your hand and feel that I am truly far away. I assure you, as I sit here on my bunk, feeling every convulsion of the hull of the old converted liner, with all that I own consisting of a uniform and my weapon, it feels very real to me, too; in a way I never imagined.

There is a lot of talk here about what will happen once we reach Spain. I will not expect to be able to get into touch with grandfather, but I will let you know, and father of course, if it becomes possible. But I don't even know when or where our regiment will land. We are a motley crew – all Latinos, all volunteers, from different parts of the continent; but they've told me that we will be mixed with the Spanish units and that the army as a whole will be under American command. And there is not much more that they want to tell us, perhaps for security reasons, perhaps out of traditions, but most likely because they don't know.

That leaves room for rumors – and more than I care to count. Some say the Reds are almost about to break through, and that we are merely going to be cannon-fodder; that we will fight a delaying action. Others say that the Americans are preparing, secretly of course, another nuclear bomb to take out the Soviet forces in Southern France. That is the rumor I find least likely. They would have done so long ago, I believe if they were able to. Still, there are also rumors that there will be some kind of invasion soon, elsewhere in France, or possibly in Northern Europe, to open a new second front – like it happened against the Germans just a few years ago. And how do you react to all such rumors?

In the beginning I was very keen to investigate, to try to gain certainty, but no more. I cannot gain any certainty about any thing, in these matters. We are told only what we need to know and we can guess about the future until we go crazy but it will not help.

We will only know what happens when we get there – to the front. Do not be too alarmed for me, dear sister. I know you were against this decision of mine, that you thought it too rash and ill-conceived but I assure you ... it is the best decision of my life. And these are good men I've trained with. There is not a doubt in my heart that together with men like these, spirited and full of

determination to see this war to an end, then the Bolsheviks do not stand a chance. They have worn themselves out, finally, and they will not be able to fight on much longer – not with the rest of the world against them.

We will win, and I will be back soon. You will see.

Love,

Javier

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## Episode 4

6 September 1946

Jaizkibel mountain range

Basque Country

Spain

“ -Why aren't you answering, Javi-boy? I want to know why you didn't go with any of those fine lookin' *chicas*?”

Javier tried not to directly look at Miguel. It was difficult since they were sitting less than two meters from each other in the already overstuffed truck, bumbling its way up from the lowlands towards purple-hazed Pyrenees, towards the last front in Europe.

A push – on the shoulder. Hard. “You gonna fuckin' answer now, Javi-boy.”

Javier gritted his teeth. He would not let this Cuban ox, private Miguel Sanchez, get to him.

He would not.

And the others would see that he was not going to let Miguel get to him. Yes, they would.

If it mattered ... For now, the only ‘response’ Javier heard to Miguel’s challenge were the vaguely repressed chuckle from Corporal Espinoza, who had made himself comfy down in the back, closest to the rations boxes.

Most of the other men in the platoon merely stared down into the dusty planks that only just covered the axles of the worn-out American truck. A few of them stared stiffly ahead, into nothing; as if the single thing they could concentrate on was the sound of half-deflated rubber tires grinding into the gravel road

That ... and the occasional distant booming thunder that sounded too unnatural to come from a clear sky. It kept growing in strength for each mile they closed to the mountains.

Javier almost jolted when he felt both Miguel’s heavy paws land hard on his knees, as if this would then force Javier to look straight ahead. When it did not, Miguel leaned even closer across the small aisle.

“Look,” Miguel said, something cold glinting in his dark eyes. “I just want to know why you didn't come with us and had a piece of those fine Basque girls, my friend. I mean, what if you're a ... fag? I wouldn't want to have you to watch my back, then, against the Reds.”

By this remark Corporal Espinoza roared with laughter. Most of the others joined in.

“So, Javi-boy,” Miguel said with finality. “What's the verdict – can we trust you to watch our backs?”

More chuckles and laughter from all around him. Javier swallowed, and slowly turned his gaze to meet Miguel's:

“You can count on me,” he said.

Another roar, with Miguel laughing the loudest – ugliest – of them all.

“That’s good, Javi! Very good!” he said in mock approval.

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“ - Maybe you should watch your own back?”

Javier stared at the very young Argentinean with the jet-black hair who was seated to his right. The Argentinean had not muttered a word since they left Bilbao, but now he had, and there was a tone in them that was sharp as a bayonet. Challenging ...

Miguel stared at the Argentinian, too, sizing him up. He could be no more than 18. Maybe younger. Perhaps he had lied about his age? Miguel had a good 5 years on him, at least. And Javier knew he was older than both of them, but in this bunch age, didn't matter. Only how tough you were.

“Don’t you like girls either, de la Serna?” Miguel said, slowly – very slowly.

de la Serna just stared back at Miguel, and for a few seconds complete silence seemed to reign in the back of the truck.

“All right, you two – cut it out!” Corporal Espinoza finally intervened. “Sanchez – you shut the fuck up from now on. And de la Serna – you keep the fuck shut up, just like before. I liked that better.”

Miguel breathed deeply, then leaned back. His lips seemed to be mouthing something like: ‘I’ll remember this, Argentinean ... ‘ ... but Javier could hardly be sure.

The only thing he could be sure of was that he felt more like putting a bullet in Miguel’s head now, than in the head of one of the enemies. He stared at the black muzzle of his carbine. That bullet - and many others - would be reserved, though, for some of the few hundreds of thousands of Ivans making out the Soviet 1st South-Western Front stretching from Bordeaux to Andorra.

– How could Stalin keep up finding men to feed into that meat-grinder? Perhaps he couldn’t. That’s what General Diaz (with an eagerly nodding Yankee colonel at his side) had made clear, as they were briefed on the first day after the arrival in Bilbao. An air raid had cut short the General’s speech, however, just as he was in the middle of expounding on how the Soviets had completely exhausted their manpower and compromised their supply lines in swarming from the Elbe to the Bay of Biscay over a couple of months.

“You looking forward to it?”

de la Serna, apparently, had chosen to forget Corporal Espinoza’s belated call to shut up. His voice was low, but not whispering or anything. He looked intensely at Javier. There was a fire in the younger man's eyes, Javier, had to admit that would either consume him or anyone who got in his way. No, age didn't matter much here ...

"I am," Javier said, trying to keep low as well. "looking forward to finally ... making a difference. I am ..."

"I thought so," de la Serna replied. "I myself have wanted to make a difference for a long time – to fight for something real. And this is it. There is nothing greater to fight for right now."

Javier nodded.

The other men had begun mumbling amongst themselves again, and Espinoza had picked up another bottle of something from the ration boxes. Miguel just stared out the rear, arms crossed, as if he was trying to count each truck in the long column behind them.

"You sound Argentinean, too," de la Serna said.

"Of course. I'm from Tarija."

"Ah – in southern Bolivia. Well, close enough, *che*."

Hearing the friendly term that was also used extensively in Tarija, so close to the border with Argentina, was almost enough to make Javier forget the near-humiliation from before.

He smiled slightly to de la Serna. "I think we will fight just fine against those commie bastards."

"Yes," de la Serna said, albeit a bit hesitantly. "You know, I admired them a little at first ... the Communists ... But now – after that treason they pulled, after attacking those who had bled with them to take down Hitler, and after threatening Spain ... Heck, now I would fight even for Franco's skinny ass!"

"You *are* fighting for Franco's skinny ass!" spat Salterra – a small, compact Chilean, sitting next to de la Serna. "Was that what you dreamt about all the way from Buenos Aires, de la Serna?"

"Hey - don't be jealous, Salterra," Javier returned before de la Serna could: "You can have Franco's ass - as long as the rest of us are too busy protecting the old land."

Everybody laughed again. Even Miguel grunted a little, but kept his arms tightly crossed.

"Hey - you girls want it in the ass?" Espinoza barked from down the back. "That's fine, but you give Ivan a bullet in *his* – first. Then you've earned it."

"Hell yeah!" blurted Dominic, the Haitian – and only negro. He was sitting next to Miguel. More laughter, then.

The mood had almost shifted ...

Perhaps, Javier thought, these men – his comrades in the 5<sup>th</sup> Overseas Volunteer Regiment - *would* die for each other without a second thought?

He had just allowed himself to find in his heart a strange warmth by that particular prospect ... when the world exploded around him.

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He thought that he heard somebody shout “landmines!” – or was it: “*Commie partisans*” - ?

It didn’t matter, really, because the next explosion which desintegrated the truck behind them, also desintegrated the rest of his hearing.

So he didn’t hear the rifle fire from the wooded hills above the road.

He didn’t hear the single bullet that tore through the rough canvas cover on the truck’s back, and ripped out through the side of de la Serna’s throat, pulling jets of wildly spurting, dark-red blood after it.

But as Javier scrambled to get to cover - to get his weapon - to get de la Serna’s body out of the way ... even that which he could still *sense* – which was mostly what he could *see* - even that did no longer matter.

Only a single, haunting thought:

‘No, it can’t be over ... not already ...’

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Episode 5

Date: Unknown

Location: Unknown

“He really doesn’t remember what happened? Perhaps cutting out an eye will refresh his memory?”

Javier had only just come out of the darkness again - the merciful darkness of unconsciousness, but he immediately wished he could escape back to it when he heard the gruff emotionless voice next to him. He couldn’t get anywhere, though. He was tied to something, it felt like a table, and the only darkness now was that which filled the small room (in a cottage?) that smelled of rotting wood, piss and fear.

The man who had suggested cutting out an eye, continued walking slowly around him and Javier discovered, by turning his head ever so slightly, that the man was not talking to anyone ... but himself.

He was a big man, broad-shouldered and had a face like a rock – bald and weathered. Javier vaguely remembered being hit by the man several times, before the darkness had shown mercy and descended over him. Before that he could not remember much.

The man caressed a big hunting knife; it seemed again like he was talking to ... it?

“Pablo will be impatient if another one of these traitors don’t have anything to say ... but you ...” - he looked again at the blade that gleamed slightly in the dark, because the glow from the man’s cigarette reflected in it - “ ... you are different,” he seemed to conclude. “You are patient.”

He turned abruptly towards Javier:

“Well, what will it be? Will you talk?”

“I ... don’t know what you want ... ” Javier stammered.

The man hit him hard. Javier’s head was knocked to the side, but his body was still immovable, strapped to the table. He felt the warm, metallic taste of blood surge in his mouth.

“ - Tell me when the next troop transport is coming, so we can hit the fascists and their NATO allies once more!” the man spluttered. “Hit them hard!”

“I – I don’t know.”

Another fist in Javier’s face and then ... the knife. The man was holding it in two fingers now over Javier’s right eye, carelessly, as if he could let it go at any time.

“Look here, young friend,” the man said, his voice ghostly. “I am very old, you know. My hands are not what they used to be. Things can ... slip from them.”

“I don’t know when the next transport is going to be!” Javier howled. He felt a deep nauseous fear bore into his gut now.

“That’s a pity,” his interrogator said and scowled. “I didn’t want kill another one. Pablo will be disappointed. It took them 2 hours to dig you and the two others out of that truck’s wreckage, you know.”

Now it came back ... in strange, clouded images bubbling up to the surface of Javier’s wounded mind:

*We were attacked ... somebody had shouted ‘partisans’ ... yes, that was it. There had been mines, too. Landmines. And rifle-fire. Oh, God ... de la Serna. de la Serna had died right there beside him. One moment they were talking and the next ... Oh, God ... And he had grabbed for his carbine, scrambled to get out with the others. And then there was another explosion and the truck had turned over with a sound from the metal in its ribs that was almost like a wail, and then everything ... turned round and round ... and something hit him in his head. And then ... the first darkness.*

“Yes ... ” the interrogator nodded enigmatically, as if he had seen this kind of fractured remembering in his victims numerous times before and had to decide whether or not it meant anything - a postponement of the inevitable kill:

“Yes, that’s right ...” he continued. “Your fascist comrades in arms didn’t come back for you. Probably thought you were dead, eh? You should’ve been, too. It’s normal when your truck slides down a mountainside, isn’t it? Even if it’s only 20 or 30 meters.”

“I ... the others ... dead?” Javier coughed. He had to know.

The interrogator looked at him with something that almost, and quite perversely, resembled ... pity.

But it was only for a few seconds. Then he said:

“Two survived, beside you. One of them, a corporal - I cut his throat a few hours ago. He wasn't worth shit. The other, a big loaf, might be more fun but I doubt he knows anymore than you. They don't tell you grunts much, do they? Probably because you are traitors ... ”

“I'm not a traitor ... ” Javier tried to say, although it felt ridiculous to insist on - now of all times. But a part of him didn't want to die like this, being called that. He hated the word. His father had used it often enough about the men who had deserted his platoon in the Chaco War against Paraguay not so many years ago.

It seemed illogical and yet there was something in that particular word that felt more dangerous to Javier, if only for a breath or two, than the knife that still hovered above his eye.

A part of him still struggled in the normal way, of course - it was only natural: Think of this, think of that – how to get away.

And another part struggled with despair: *It can't be over already. I never even got to the front ...*

And then there was that part of him. That odd, irrational part that made it important for him to press on to get it out - to say it:

“I'm not a traitor,” he repeated firmly.

Was it a part of him that belatedly demanded the dignity he could never really conquer in his own, secretive, sedated life back in that desolate provincial town of Tarija? Whatever the case, even if he somehow got his wish - some surprising agreement of his self-assessment from his interrogator - in a few moments he would then be dead anyway. He was sure of that now.

“You are a traitor to me!!” the interrogator spat, “ - To everyone of my brothers, you are! Coming up from your safe lil' homes - in colonies liberated from exploitation - coming up here to fight with the fascists now. But where were you when me and Pablo and our brothers got slaughtered by Franco?”

Javier had no answer to that. The man ranted on:

“We fought – and we were almost wiped out. But now we have another chance, for a socialist Spain. For a true Spain ... !”

The sudden surge of defiance left Javier again. All he could do now was stare and the knife.

It seemed like it came closer to his eye, the more angry the man got ... the more he spouted out tirades against Franco, wailed about his lost comrades from the Civil War, or ranted about the glories that Stalin and “true socialism” would bring to Spain and how he, and other groups like his, would be “the vanguard” ... Yes, *they* would pave the way for the victorious Worker's And Peasants' Army soldiers, by killing as many “fascist pigs” before the final Soviet offensive ...

... and so on.

The rant went on for a few minutes and the man never took away the knife from Javier's eye while

he rambled, growled, raged – like nobody had listened to him for a long time.

Then he suddenly stopped:

“And now, amigo ... you know why you are a traitor,” he concluded.

That’s when Javier decided he was indeed crazy. Perhaps the loneliness of living with these partisans, or whatever they were, hiding for years in the mountains, perhaps it had driven him crazy.

Yes, the man *was* crazy, and now that glory and redemption of his cause were near - in the form of the two colossal Soviet armies that loomed at the border between France and Spain - now he became even crazier. Like a small flame that blazed up, when sparks from the big fire fed it.

But it didn’t matter that Javier had decided anything. It was just one last, worthless act of defiance.

The man raised the knife. Javier closed his eyes hard.

That’s when he heard the first sounds from the outside he could not see – the first sounds he had heard in hours, aside from the rants of his captor:

Sounds like gunfire ...

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## Episode 6

Date: 7 September 1946, morning

Location: The Northern Pyrenees, Spain

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The interrogator flinched when the next volley of gunfire crackled from somewhere outside – somewhere nearer than a moment ago. But he just looked at his hunting knife again, with that odd glint in his pale eyes:

“Well, where do you want to cut this one? ” he asked ... the knife. “The throat, like that filthy corporal?”

Javier felt icy needles fill his blood. But suddenly the door was flung open. Another man – slightly older, more weathered – burst in:

*“Alonso! Vamos! Los Alemanes vienen!”*

The one called Alonso still looked questioningly at his knife, then at Javier.

“What about the traitor?” he murmured, sounding like he was coming out of daze.

“Get him on the truck,” the other man rasped, obviously short of breath. “I was on the radio with Samsonov, when those bastards found us. He wants the rest alive.”

“Why, Pablo?”

“Don’t question our Russian comrades, you idiot – just get your big fat ass out of here, and bring him, too.”

“No ... ” Alonso murmured again.

“Alonso!” Pablo snapped. “Get this *hijo de puerco* on the truck – now! Otherwise I’ll leave you to Jäger and his vultures.” He hurried out again.

Javier had only a split-second to feel the odd, overwhelming relief that comes with being told that you’ll probably survive for a few minutes more -- then Alonso hit him directly in the face with a knotted fist.

The last thing he heard Alonso grumble was: “So, traitor – they did not forget about you after all.”

Javier almost blacked out - but not quite. He was paralyzed by the blow to his head, yes, but he could still sense what was going on around him. Alonso cut the remaining ropes and threw Javier to the floor, twisting his arm and whirling some of the spare rope around both of Javier’s wrists. Then he picked up Javier and flung him over his shoulder like he was a puppet. It all took less than a minute.

“*Vamos! Vamos!*” Pablo shouted from the outside. Alonso moved quickly through the door that led out of the darkened room.

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The dawn light outside was gray. A thick mist hung between the tall fir trees. But the sudden shift from ink-black torture room to daylight hurt Javier’s eyes nonetheless; the mountain cold stung in the face; there was the smell of tree resin and diesel oil. Javier was shaken more fully to his senses when Alonso dropped him hard on the open bed of a farmer-truck that looked like it was already old when the First World War was on. Then he heard someone call out:

“ - Gonzales! - You’re *alive!*”

Half a day or so ago, Javier had not thought he would be happy to ever hear Miguel’s gruff voice again. The big Cuban was lying on his side in the back of the truck bed with Dominic – the Haitian – beside him. Both were tied on their hands and legs. Dominic was bleeding from his mouth and pretty much everywhere else on his face and seemed barely conscious. Miguel had several nasty bruises as well, but at least there was no doubt he was alive.

“Ugh!”

Javier had only just regained his full ability to see clearly, when the first thing he looked into was the hideously staring white eyes of corporal Espinoza. There was a deep gaping wound in the corporal’s throat and a pool of sticky half-dried blood all over the planks of the truck bed. Then Alonso jumped onto the bed, and immediately began heaving Espinoza’s corpse out over the open rear.

“You - you get rid of him for us!” Alonso shouted over his back and Javier now saw an old man – much older than Pablo – come out of another door of what appeared to be a small wooden cabin: His former prison. The old man was accompanied by a young boy and a young girl – not much more than teens. The boy and the girl grabbed Corporal Espinoza’s corpse just as a bullet whizzed over Javier’s head and splintered against the metal back of the driver’s cab.

“What about Manuel and Francisco?” yelled Alonso, just as Pablo tore open the door to the cab.

“Their sacrifice will be remembered,” said Pablo and glanced quickly back up into the woods. “We agreed they would signal us if there was trouble and - ”

“ - And now we are sitting ducks. Let’s drive!” somebody inside the driver’s cab called out.

While this exchange between Alonso and Pablo went on, the old man walked unsteadily to the rear of the truck, seemingly oblivious to the shots that were now crackling even louder - from somewhere further up the forested slope on which the small cabin was nestled. Javier tried to see, but the pine trees stood too close. Then the old man obscured his field of vision. He just stood there, looking at Javier and the other prisoners. While Alonso was distracted, Javier made a quick decision.

“You’ve got to ... got to help us ...” Javier whispered – “bring word to the NATO forces that we are capt-”

Javier had instinctively assumed that the old woodsman and his children (grandchildren?) were being forced to share their cabin with the partisans. It was an assumption that was quickly put to an end when the old man spat Javier directly in the eyes:

“ - Fascist traitor!”

Then Javier heard Alonso curse loudly somewhere behind him:

“What if it’s not *los Alemanes*, Pablo? Did Manuel or Francisco signal how many there are? If there are only a few ... ”

“It’s all of them,” Pablo said with grim finality and slammed the door.

\*

The truck roared down the winding dirt that snaked from behind the wooden cabin and down the mountainside. Alonso had slumped down again on the truck bed and produced an old Mauser rifle from somewhere. It was his only weapon besides the hunting knife, which was now tucked in his belt. He fired a few shots back up towards the heavy pine trees, where the invisible enemy appeared to be firing from, but he didn’t bother to fire more than two or three times.

“Once we get down to the village – we can disappear from them!” Pablo panted from inside the driver’s cab. “Yes,” the other voice from inside agreed, equally short of breath. “It’s market day – ha,ha.”

Then Javier felt it: – One of his hands was almost loose from the ropes.

Javier was lying on one side near the rear of the truck bed, his back pressed against its right side which was little more than one large plank bolted in an angle to the others. His hands, however - tied behind his back - were very much out of sight from Alonso. The truck hurtled through the woods and Javier hit his head on the planks and rusty bolts of the truck bed several times, but he gritted his teeth and kept working with the loose rope. Javier had rather small hands. He had always hated that. Now it would make a ... vital difference.

Alonso was lying flat down, aiming over the truck bed's open rear, trying fruitlessly to find something to shoot at. It took him one precious second to become aware that suddenly Javier had a free hand - a hand that now grabbed the partisan's big hunting knife from his belt. And when that precious second was over and Alonso was fully ready to twist around and shoot Javier ... then the knife was planted deep in his thigh.

Alonso howled in pain and almost fell out over the rear of the truck, as it took another swerve.

"Kill the bastard!!" Miguel shouted from the back, desperately worming his way towards them to help. Dominic still didn't move.

With his free right hand Javier tore the knife out of Alonso's thigh. Thick, dark blood spurted all over both men. It looked like he had hit a vein. Alonso clung on to the rear of the truck with one hand, trying to get a clear shot with his rifle with the other, but it was a rather difficult feat at such close range, hanging half-way over the back of a racing vintage truck.

Javier suddenly felt nauseous. The blood just kept pouring ... like a waterfall ...

"Kill him!!" Miguel cried again - but then he was thrown back against the driver's cab as the truck braked hard - not to stop, but to take off speed so it didn't go down the ravine on the left side of the road.

"You ... haven't got the ... guts," Alonso sneered while he struggled to heave himself all the way up on the truck bed again. Wounded and still hanging half-way over the rear, the big hulk of a man actually managed to hold on to the rifle and fire it with one hand, but the shot went nowhere. It was close enough to Javier's head, though, to leave his ears ringing.

Javier did not think about the blood anymore. His left hand was still enmeshed in ropes but he could move it now that his right one was free, so he grabbed the nearest edge, which was the planks that made out the open rear of the truck, pulled himself forward in one swift movement and plunged the hunting knife deep into Alonso's gut.

\*

Pablo almost had to wrench his neck to look out the window in the passenger's side. He could not see what was going on up on the truck bed - but he could hear that something had gone terribly wrong. He grabbed his revolver. The driver, Antonio, suddenly braked again. Pablo hit his head against the window-sill.

"What the fuck are you doing?! The road is almost even from here - drive, drive!!"

"But comrade - look!" Antonio gasped, pointing frantically ahead.

Pablo's eyes narrowed. Then he felt for the first time how cold the sweat on his brow actually was.

The vintage truck had just raced around the last bend in the dirt road. From now on it should have been a more or less straight run to the village. But no more than 100 meters ahead there was another truck parked – no, it was ... an armored personnel carrier – an American M3, it seemed. It was placed firmly across the dirt road, making it impossible to pass ... unless they wanted to crash into the cliffs on one side or into the pine-filled ravine on the other.

But it was not an American white star that was on the side of the M3. And it was not an American G.I. who Pablo saw behind the Browning machine gun on its roof. It was a single man who wore an open camouflage jacket of indeterminable origin. The man wore a gray high-peaked cap with a black stripe.

The man aimed the machine gun slowly, leisurely. He wasn't in any hurry.

“What are you waiting for!!” Antonio howled - “Shoot him! Shoot him!”

“It's no good,” Pablo mumbled. “We're already dead.”

Even so Pablo tried to aim with his revolver, out the window, while the old truck still rushed down the gravel road towards the lone man. His last thought was of Guernica, when Pablo's dying brother had told him take his revolver and 'fight on' for them. So many had died in the fascist bombing. It was at that time that Pablo knew he could no more look on from the sidelines.

Here and now Pablo felt he could see the skull on the man's cap very clearly, just before a spray of machine gun bullets hammered through the truck's front window.

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## Episode 7

Late September 1946  
Northern Spain

Former Waffen-SS Standartenführer, Graf Franz von Jäger, looked at his adjutant with cold, clear eyes that did not betray a single hint of emotion:

“Should we tell them, Diego?”

von Jäger nodded towards the tent opening – out of which they could see Javier, Miguel and Dominic, who were huddled around a small fire in a clearing in the woods. It was a grim, cloudy morning in the mountains and everything had been soaked during a heavy rainfall at night.

They had had to move fast yesterday, retreating back from the valley and up into the forest, in order not to be caught in the open by several waves of Sturmoviks, presumably out of Toulouse. They had changed camp site several times already and Jäger had commanded that they be ready to move again at a moment's notice. So this camp was very primitive, even by partisan hunters' standards. Inside the commander's tent, however, everything was dry and in perfect order. As always.

“They will need to know soon,” Diego replied after having thought about it. He was a small, quiet Spaniard and he seldom spoke without having chosen his words carefully. “We are very near the front – where their regiment is supposed to be.”

von Jäger nodded sombrely: “Yes ... supposed to be.”

Since they had succeeded in eliminating the core of Pablo Mendoza's *Nuevo Frente Popular* partisans, including Mendoza himself, Jäger had not thought much about what to do with the three Latin American volunteers they had rescued. They had to go back to their regiment, of course. But this morning's disturbing news from Laruns had changed things. However, if they could not go back, would they have to stay? And if they stayed would they become a help or ... a problem?

The hunt had exceeded expectations so far. Months of cultivating new, invaluable informers had borne fruit. NATO's 1<sup>st</sup> Army HQ in Bilbao had all the opportunity for plausible denial that the weaklings needed – that is, when it came to gloss over that ‘unfortunate’ leak of information which tipped off Mendoza's partisans about the Overseas Volunteers column; which allowed the partisans to place those landmines in a very predictable right spot at a very predictable time.

All Jäger had had to do was to follow the column at a distance, keep a look-out, and then have some of his most experienced ‘shadows’ follow the raiding group back to the hideout which he had been getting ever closer to these past 3 months – but without actually finding it. From then on it was just a matter of springing the trap.

As expected there had been several larger NFP units camped in a jagged mountain area, not far from the El Portalet border crossing. They had chosen the area because they felt safe. After verifying their locations Jäger had divided his own men into 3 squads, making sure each had superiority in both numbers and weapons. Then he had struck.

A delightful bonus was that in one of the partisan groups Mendoza himself had been present. A not so delightful bonus had been to find NATO prisoners alive in that group. Yes, Corporal Genscher *had* reported that the partisans pulled some bodies from the wreckage of the truck which had fallen into the ravine, but Jäger had dismissed this as the usual partisan tactic of saving a few enemy bodies for convincing sabotage attacks in the coming days.

In fact, yesterday there had been a particularly nasty one near a large NATO check point outside Pamplona. The only live human being in the ‘provisions truck’ which had been the last to be checked - had been one of the NFP “Heroés”, as the suicide attackers were allowed to title themselves. The other three uniformed men, two on the truck bed amongst the rations boxes stuffed with explosives and one in the front, were apparently captured bodies of NATO soldiers that had been propped up. Or at least that was the conclusion post-investigation. There wasn’t much left ...

“Do you think our three guests will ask ... questions about the ambush?” Jäger asked Diego softly. But it was a superficial softness that did little to hide the deadly resolve that was always directly underneath.

“They are only common soldiers, Colonel ...” Diego began slowly, then held his tongue for a few seconds to gauge Jäger’s reaction.

Diego Estevez had fought under Jäger’s command in the last days of Berlin with the *Spanische-Freiwilligen Kompanie der SS 101* which had been attached to 11th *SS Panzergrenadier Division Nordland*; but unlike von Jäger he was content to keep his ‘translated’ NATO-rank of lieutenant - and wear the full uniform to show it. It annoyed Jäger somewhat but he chose not to make an issue of it. Times had changed.

“Considering the fate of their regiment this morning,” Diego finally continued - after having decided how best to ‘handle’ Jäger this time - “I think they will soon have other things on their mind than thinking about why that ambush happened – which I don’t think they would think too much about anyway! As I said, they are just soldiers. And sometimes there ... is an ambush.”

“Yes,” Jäger said, but more to himself than to Diego, “but then there is still the small matter of what we should do with them now. We could send them back to Bilbao, of course – or up to General Allen. But I wonder if we have exhausted all the possibilities ...”

“What other possibilities are there, Colonel?”

“Jimenez and Nijmegen will not recover from that skirmish the other day, will they?”

“The doctor says no.”

“Then we are two men short. And it doesn’t look like our little war is over anytime soon, does it?”

“No,” Diego concurred, feeling slightly tired from standing (Jäger had not once asked him to sit down, although Diego had been in the tent for half an hour now). “The Bolsheviks have had extraordinary luck these first five months. Or they have been too well-prepared - or both. And if it’s not going to be the last war the Western Allies will ever fight - they had better get their act together – and use all means necessary to win it. As we did.”

“And even that was not enough,” Jäger remarked, and for the first time a hint of a smile betrayed

itself on his lips “ - when Berlin was in flames and the Führer was dead.”

Diego was about to say something more, but Jäger raised himself from his chair and walked past him, without a word, ducked through the tent opening and went out into the clearing.

Diego followed, as he was supposed to do. But he couldn't help looking forward to it. After all, he knew Jäger so well now that he had almost guessed what the commander had decided about the poor bastards out there ...

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“*Buenos dias, amigos,*” Jäger greeted the three men in heavily accented Spanish (he had never bothered to learn the language). Diego quickly came to his side and began translating as Jäger went on in German:

“I'm afraid I have some bad news for you ... This morning I received a message that the 5<sup>th</sup> Overseas Volunteers Regiment was sent over to Laruns just in time to fend off an enemy attempt to break through. They fought heroically and stopped the Bolsheviks. They also lost about 75 per cent of their men. The remainders have been transferred to shore up other under-strength NATO divisions - elsewhere on the Sherman Line.”

He paused and watched the three soldiers' reaction. They stared back at him with an expression of incomprehension, almost bordering on fear; as if he had just told them they themselves were about to be shot by Bolsheviks. In fact, they had – circumstances permitting - been treated quite well these past many days which they had been with Jäger's men.

“This ... is true?” Dominic asked with some difficulty. He still wore heavy bandage around the head and arm and field surgeon Mihailovic had been very cautious when evaluating his prospects for returning to duty. It was annoying, Jäger had thought, that they had to go through so much trouble for a nigger but as Diego kept reminding him: Times had changed.

And so, for now, Jäger forced himself to nod in response to Dominic's question, recognizing his presence:

“It is true,” he confirmed.

Javier and Miguel looked briefly at each other. Miguel snorted and looked down again, and crossed his arms tightly, as if he had even been expecting this - and as if his regiment's failure to survive the onslaught of what was probably a vastly superior force of Soviets was somehow a personal insult.

Javier just felt empty inside. He had already had his share of troubles accepting that they had, in fact, been rescued by these ... men.

“What do we do then?” he finally said, quietly, as if it was more a question to himself than directed particularly at von Jäger.

The former SS-officer, however, understood Javier quite well - even before the translation. He smiled fleetingly for the second time today:

“You don’t have to worry about that, young man. I can always use new interpreters. So from this moment on consider yourself part of NATO’s Anti-Partisan Unit I.”

The three Latinos stared at Jäger in dumbfound silence.

“You should be quite happy,” Jäger offered, “You will be fighting with an elite cadre of soldiers – all handpicked by our American allies.”

“But ...” Javier began, while scrambling to his feet “ - you are not in authority to -”

Jäger stepped very close to Javier and the glare of his cold, white eyes made the young man shiver involuntarily: “Wrong. I am the *only* authority in these mountains, amigo. This is my land and I draft any men that I need to carry out my mission.”

“Could you at least contact Major Alvarez? If he – I mean, he was in charge of ...”

“Major Alvarez is dead!” Jäger snapped. “So is almost every other man that was in your regiment. Don’t you get it? – they were being used as cannon-fodder, just as Franco’s poor sods are, to hold that pitiful excuse for a fortification line. The Allies” - he deliberately used this term “- are keeping their best troops in reserve for the time when they are prepared to go on the offensive again. You are, in fact, the three luckiest men in that regiment. But don’t push that luck ... amigo.”

Franz von Jäger turned and walked away. Diego nodded courteously at the three, as if he showed the merest hint of sympathy. Then the lieutenant went after Jäger.

“Maybe I would rather have been at Laruns,” Miguel said, and stared into the small flickering, flames of their fire. It had begun raining again and the fire was soon extinguished.

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Episode 8

October 1946

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"This is the last time I will ask! Where – did – he – get – those – weapons?"

Colonel Jäger’s steel-gray eyes gazed at the man before him:

Marcel Carstagnol shook his head again. As he was there in front of them all, held firmly down by Larsson and Berg in the diminutive dining room of the cottage, muttering and being generally incoherent – he came off more like a drunkard than ‘le maire’ of the small community of Pont d’Enfer – or what remained of it.

Most of the dozen or so inhabitants had already fled the small collection of houses that were nestled on the slopes leading down to the river which wiggled through the borderland of the Pyrenees. But some remained ...

... potential enemies.

Jäger hit Marcel again. He spit blood again.

“Answer me! – These are Soviet weapons! Were you going to arm the remaining villagers – select some snipers – join the partisans – what?!”

Lieutenant Diego Estevez tried to keep up with the translation to German, but even he had trouble now. And worse: The man apparently spoke only Catalan, which was not Diego’s forte. That, and the fact that he did not speak it particularly clearly:

"Answer me!!" Jäger howled again. And hit Marcel again – and again. But Marcel just kep on mumbling – as if he was praying.

Jäger looked at the man in disgust. Marcel was not looking at anyone now; his head drooped ... but he was not unconscious from all the beatings. He was also still held firm by Jäger’s two men, of course, but he hardly appeared as if he had any plans of trying to resist, let alone assault the ex-SS officer who had been screaming at him for half an hour now.

And who had finally exhausted his patience ...

"You had your chance," Jäger said curtly. He pulled his gun from his belt holster ...

BLAM

Standing near the cottage door, behind the SS-men, was private Javier Gonzales. Something cold – like needles dipped in ice – pricked in his stomach and around his heart.

He had seen these executions five times now, in the days and weeks that he and his fellow soldiers of the now extinct 5th Overseas Regiment had been ‘drafted’ as local scouts by Colonel Franz Jäger. He never got used to it. In fact, he felt like vomiting each time. But it was not so much the killings that made him feel this way, he knew, as the fact that he felt powerless to prevent it – and more and more ashamed each time it happened.

But this time it was worse. Only half an hour ago he had had dinner with Marcel and his wife and two children.

\*

Yes, Javier had been invited into Marcel Carstagnol’s house as an honored guest. He had come to the nearly deserted village on the French side of the old border last evening, telling the first man he met – a goat shepherd who understood a little Spanish but spoke none – that he had been separated from his regiment, after an air attack – which was not far from the truth. The shepherd had led him to Marcel’s house and he had been welcomed, albeit with some skepticism at first, but then given food and drink.

They were ‘peace-loving people’, Marcel had explained in Catalan – his native tongue, while Javier struggled to follow. It resembled a mix between Spanish and French, and yet none of them. Marcel’s French wife, Charlotte, was not of much help, but she smiled and kept pouring him warm soup. At least he understood as much as Marcel’s insistence that they did not like the Soviet invaders any more than the German and ‘would do everything to help him get back to his regiment’.

Tomorrow he would get a ride with Marcel himself, in the village's only motorized vehicle – another old truck. NATO troops were continually striding up and down the valley, to get to the fortifications south of Laruns, Marcel explained. He would meet fellow comrades and be back with his own in no time. The two children, Jean aged 5 and Marie aged 8, stared at Javier without daring to say anything – they were obviously wary of strangers; – to which Marcel proudly commented several times how well-behaved they were. Javier had said as little as possible that evening.

In the morning he had excused himself and gone for a brief walk, reported to lieutenant Diego Estevez who was waiting nearby, and then returned to the village. He had told the lieutenant that he had experienced nothing out of the ordinary while being there, and that there was nothing in the manner of the village 'maire', as Marcel titled himself, which suggested anything would ever be out of the ordinary. The remaining villagers just wanted to ride out the storm.

Presumably he hoped that whenever the Soviets came – and they seemed to expect this – they would be so high up the mountain that the battle would hardly touch them. At least Javier could think of no other explanation for why a man like Marcel had not brought his family to safety elsewhere, since the front was so close.

Javier had been sure that that was that, after talking to Estevez. Nothing would come off it; after all – what could possibly be to find in this small, nearly empty village? Shouldn't they be more concerned about what happened at the front – at the Sherman Line itself – less than 10 kilometers away?

The thunder from the Soviet artillery seemed like it went on around the clock now, instead of just intervals. Many of the Waffen SS-men, experienced combat veterans from the Eastern Front and Berlin, had looked at each other with the 'yeah-it's-going-to-break-loose-any-moment'-look, but said nothing to their commander.

There were rumors that Kesselring himself had been dug out of one of the VIP-prison camps to act as a consultant for the NATO field commanders who frantically tried to build line upon line of bunkers, mine-fields and trenches in the few passable valleys between the mountains. But what would it help?

Their men were tired, resources were few, the terrain was hideous, and Stalin had plundered half of France to feed new hordes of soldiers, recruited from the seemingly unending reservoir – further and further east from the steppes of the Soviet Union, from the new Communist 'allies' in the Balkans, even many volunteers from the countries that had switched the Nazi occupation force for Soviet troops.

It would have to stop soon, though. The Soviets could not go on. And yet, Javier had thought grimly, as he had made his way back to the village, what if it could? What if everybody had been wrong about the Soviets? He had been wrong himself about a great many things – including the role he had imagined for himself in this war. He was glad when he finally reached Marcel's house. He did not really like to think too much about what a big, bloody failure his decision to go to Europe and fight may have been.

Javier had been ordered to return for breakfast at Marcel's and one more 'reconnaissance' and so he had, coming back to the house as if he had just been on an extended walk.

And then – suddenly – the door had burst open, and Jäger and his men had made their entrance,

and Javier finally understood. He had not been there to scout – but to keep the family occupied, while some of the stealthier amongst Jäger’s small anti-partisan unit had searched the surrounding area.

And they had found weapons, buried – not far from the main house.

Nobody had needed to translate the horrified looks in the faces of Marcel’s family, and then the darkening of those same faces, as they looked upon Javier with something that could only resemble hatred, when his ‘comrades’ entered the house and immediately seized Marcel for interrogation ... and worse.

They had given Javier shelter, trusted him, but he ...

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The man who until moments ago had been Marcel Carstagnol, lay still on the floor. A pool of dark blood slowly spread under him.

Had he had connections to Communist partisans or not? Did he even know about the weapons cache – that it had been buried on the grounds behind his house? He never had a chance to fully answer before Jäger had killed him.

It was as if answers did not matter to Jäger, Javier thought. Was it the same for everyone else who had been fighting in a war for too long now? Since when? 1940? 1939?

Javier’s grim reverie were broken off, when somebody began screaming inside the bedroom which was adjacent to the house’s dining room. It was Marcel’s wife – Charlotte. They had locked her in there with the children:

*“Marcel – Marcel – qu'est-ce qu'il passe? Qu'est-ce qu'il passe? Marcel!!”*

Now Javier also heard crying – it was Jean and Marie, the children.

“Tell her to shut up – and to shut *them* up,” Jäger said to Javier “ – or I will have the brats shot.”

Javier felt like throwing up. Still he went into the room and did his best to try to calm down the woman. He knew a few phrases of French from school but he found out that Charlotte, who had been born in France, understood enough Spanish to be clear about Jäger’s sincerity.

And when it was clear to her what had happened – that Marcel was dead – and what she was expected to do now, she simply dropped back on the bed, but in an awkward sitting position, like a puppet whose strings had been cut. All she could manage to do was huddle Jean and Marie.

They all looked very pitiful and Javier felt deeply sorry for them. But he knew that he could not – would not be allowed to – say anything comforting to. Nothing. He was, after all, responsible.

He went back into the dining room because he could not stand being in there with them anymore. He closed the door behind him.

Jäger was standing at the big dining table, inspecting the catch:

"Five Tokarev SVT40 semi-automatic rifles, three Model 1891/30 bolt-action rifles, and a DP28 Dyegtarov light machine gun," he noted with some satisfaction. "Not bad – not bad at all." He then looked at Javier:

"Quite an inventory to have buried behind once's outhouse if we are only talking about left-overs from the Spanish Civil War, wouldn't you say?"

Javier said nothing. He felt like a ghost.

One of the men who had held Marcel down grinned loudly. It was the big Swede – Larsson – who had also been in the Waffen-SS Division Nordland – just as Jäger. He was standing over Marcel's corpse, and, after having lit a cigarette, he threw part of the ash on it.

"Well," Jäger sighed " – this is not usable for sniping, obviously, but I suspect far worse. Mendoza's people have picked up weapons, air dropped here and there by the Bolshies ... then he has handed them on to the locals on both sides of the border – locals he felt he could trust enough to help him, when the Bolshevik offensive finally came."

"Good thing we came here first, sir," Larsson said.

"Yes," Jäger agreed. "It is our job, after all – too find the enemy before he finds us."

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Some hours later, Javier met up with Miguel at the partisan hunters' camp. In the weeks they had been together since the ambush on their old regiment, they had not particularly come to like each other – which would probably have been against all odds anyway. But now at least it felt like there was a mutual understanding of the necessity of respecting each other – for the sake of survival, if nothing else.

Miguel smoked a cigarette, looking on disinterestedly as the men – some former SS, some odd Wehrmacht soldiers left over from Blaskowitz' evacuation of Southern France when Operation Dragoon hit in August '44, and some Javier had no idea where came from.

A bunch of fucking mercenaries .... And he and Miguel and Dominic were now part of that bunch. But they had also sworn to fight on the same side as those mercenaries. Or whatever they were.

"You look like shit," Miguel said, not making fun.

"I feel like shit, too," Javier said.

"Was it rough down there?"

"Jäger shot the village leader – the man I had lodged with. At least he let the wife and kids live ... "

"Why?"

"God only knows ... "

“No, you idiot,” Miguel spat and threw away his cigarette, “Why did Colonel Fascist shoot that man? I thought you said the village was clear.”

“I thought it was but ... perhaps Jäger had guessed something I hadn’t. We found a weapon – several in fact.”

“So there was a reason,” Miguel said flatly.

“That doesn’t make it any less wrong,” Javier said and looked at him, ready for another challenge. He was no longer afraid of Miguel. There were far worse things to be afraid of than the big Cuban ox.

But Miguel had apparently made up his mind about something, too. For he came over and put his big paw on Javier’s shoulder. For a second Javier wished that Miguel had not been big, and ugly and Cuban ... then at least it might have mattered.

“You know, Gonzales,” Miguel said, “you’re all right. The way you killed that partisan-shithead ... and I had you pegged out for a fag, or a coward – or both ... from the beginning. I was wrong. I mean it.”

“Maybe I am still a fag ... ” Javier said, too tired to guard his words.

Miguel thought it was a joke. He laughed heartily: “Maybe, amigo – but you sure as hell are no coward.”

Javier was about to say something, but then he saw the look in Miguel’s eyes: Miguel had heard it too ... the hum of airplanes. Many, many airplanes.

They kept staring at the gray mid-day sky for a few minutes and that was enough.

Coming in over the mountain was a swarm of Soviet planes – the largest Javier had ever seen. After only a few minutes the gray sky turned into black – so many were there.

“Jesus – ” Miguel burst out ” – they cover the whole goddamn sky. There must be at least five hundred ... ”

“At least five hundred ... ” Javier whispered.

Someone in the camp behind them shouted orders frantically – in German and Spanish. Movement erupted all around, as men struggled to pack their things, get their weapons and be ready for anything. Suddenly the distant thunder of artillery which had for a week now been a strange habitual background noise grew in intensity, and the earth trembled and they could feel it with absolute certainty; it was not imagination.

Javier started back for the camp. They had been standing in a small clearing about a hundred meters away, but those hundred meters felt very far now – a long stretch to run for cover, or to jump onto a wagon –

Miguel caught his arm: “Now – ” he whispered hoarsely. “Now we go – away from that shit, Jäger and his Nazis. I don’t care if we are shot as deserters. And I know you don’t care. Now – ”

Javier looked back at the tents that were rapidly being pulled down.

“But Dominic ...” he said. The Haitian was still there, only a few hundred meters away – but inside the tent of their Croatian doctor, Mihailovic, and he did not seem to get any better. Many days he could barely walk. Jäger had kept him with the unit out of goodwill, for aside from his wounds he was also a Negro, which wasn’t exactly an advantage around here.

Out of goodwill ... or so Javier had thought.

“Dominic was always as good as dead anyway –” Miguel hissed, still holding Javier’s arm – “they only kept him here so Jäger had some kind of guarantee we would not split.”

Javier tore his arm away from Miguel’s grip.

“I’m not leaving Dominic.”

“Christ ... you sound like Theresa of Avila, man –”

“I’m not leaving him,” Javier said, firmly. “You can go, Miguel.”

“What is this, Javi-boy – some kind of martyr-thing? – Or is it because you feel guilty for all those people Jäger shot while you looked on –”

Javier’s fist hit Miguel square in the face. The Cuban did not fall, though. He just looked surprised at Javier, then felt his nose and the trickling, warm blood. All around them there was a whirl of thunder now, as if the artillery barrages themselves had been aimed upwards – up towards their mountain and not straight forward at the Spanish and American bunkers in the valley.

“You can go,” Javier said, determined. Maybe Miguel was right, but he just knew that he could not leave Dominic. Maybe it was stupid. But he had had enough. He had had enough of being that other thing Miguel had called him, again ...

... a coward.

But above the sky burst into a hissing, flaming inferno as the first jets of the RAF and USAAF engaged – Below, in the narrow valley leading from Laruns towards the Spanish border, the ground shook under a massive artillery barrage and plumes of smoke and debris unfolded themselves like flowers of death.

Javier shuddered too, involuntarily. If this really was the Soviet’s final offensive ... soon there might be no one left alive in these mountains to call him anything ever again.

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*TO BE CONTINUED!*

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*You can also read my own short stories at <http://www.shadeofthemorningsun.com>, including a*

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