

Chapter 35

He looked up and across to his friend. Their journey to this encampment had been fraught with dangers. They had lived, and still did, in constant fear of being found. Moving on regularly to new locations, they knew they could not remain in one place for more than a few weeks. Someone would always find out and report, or one of them might be caught and would soon inform, especially under the threat of ferocious violence. It was the nature of the beast from which they were hiding. That beast also threatened anyone who might have any idea of helping fugitives.

From being the representatives of a legitimate government within the Second Republic, they were now classified as rebels to be hunted down like animals and exterminated like rodents. It had caught them all unawares how the tables had turned so quickly. They had never envisaged that such a catastrophe could happen. He still wondered if it was all part of a dreadful dream; he hoped he would awake and find it was, but he knew, in his heart, that this was real. It had all happened, and death was only a short distance away.

They had never been prepared for their exile. They had run only with the clothes on their backs. These were to prove totally unsuitable for the conditions they had then had to endure. Rain, incessant and cold, had driven them to seek shelter, but they had soon had to move on for fear of being found. Then the snow had come, along with freezing temperatures.

They had come across others who had been able to flee the dying Málaga. They told of comrades who had decided that death was a better life than the living death they were enduring; they had walked into the towns and villages to give themselves up. The harshness of the conditions had almost driven both he

and Joaquim to do the same. When the meagre rations they could obtain dried up, the cold had reached their bones, and they had descended into their deepest despair. Surrender had seemed enticing, calling them like the sirens of classical tales.

At first, their need for food had been met by the kindness of others. They had often sneaked into farmsteads, foraging, to find that bread, cheese, and other food had been left out for them. The charity shown had almost made him believe that the nightmare would be reversed and, one day, he would be able to return to these places and thank them. It was not to be.

A decree had then been issued stating that anyone found to have given food to fugitives would be arrested and shot. The food parcels soon started to disappear. They had then descended to theft to feed themselves. They were now classed as common thieves. Where once they had held positions of importance, they were now just criminals. The hand that fate had dealt them was indeed a harsh one.

He raised a hand to rub his face. The dirt was embedded, such that he was sure that no amount of soap could wash away the stains of his existence. Looking at his grime smeared hand and thinking of food, he remembered the time when his selfishness had overcome his duty to help his friend.

He had been scavenging around some small holdings beneath the village of El Burgo when he had come across a wrap of cloth. He knew what it contained. He had seen many before but not so recently. Some kind person, not fearing for their own safety, had left some food out. He had approached the package with care, in case it was a trap. He had snatched it and ran.

Once down by an arroyo, whose waters flowed down from the mountains above, carrying snowmelt, he had sat down and unwrapped his prize. His eyes had widened. He had caught his breath.

There, on the piece of cloth, was a sizeable lump of meat and some bread. The meat had looked like it was an end of a much larger piece that had been cooked. He praised the kindness of the donor, and pulled a sliver off and slipped into his mouth. The taste had been amazing. It had reminded him of the times when he and his friends would have a meal together in some bar, ordering various plates of delicious items to savour. He had pulled another slither off the offering. He had then thought of Joaquim and wondered if he had been as lucky. He remembered how he had shamefully convinced himself that his friend had been bound to have found something. The evil of greed had been tugging at his sleeve, telling him that the offering was meant for him and him alone. How would Joaquim find out about this prize? There was no one to tell him. He had not wrestled with his conscience for too long. His hand had strayed to the piece of meat, lifted it to his mouth, and he had devoured it like a dog.

As he walked back into the camp later that day, he remembered seeing Joaquim sitting, leaning against a tree. His friend had asked him if he had had any success. He had lied. Joaquim had told him that he too had not found anything either; they would go hungry again that night.

As the morning light had begun to illuminate their meagre camp, he knew he was in trouble. His stomach had started to rumble during the night, and then there was a stabbing pain that seemed to be making its way down past his waist. The taste of bile had been in his throat. He knew the signs. He was going to be sick. He guessed that it was the piece of meat. He wondered if his greed had allowed him to eat a tainted meal, and now he would pay the price. He wondered if it had been poisoned. He had been stupid to so readily take it and eat it. It had seemed too good an offering and, as the saying goes, if it looks too good to be true, it probably is.

He had quietly sneaked out of the camp. He hoped that Joaquim would not notice and ask him what his problem was. It would be difficult to explain his severe stomach pains, especially as supposedly he had not eaten for a day.

As he had walked down towards a small arroyo, the pain in his stomach increased with each step, along with the discomfort in his bowels. He had just reached its bank when he felt a violent urge grip him. His body had arched, he had opened his mouth, and a jet of puke had shot out. He had fallen to his knees, his head swimming, as the retches wracked his weakened body. He had cried out at the pain that engulfed him, fearful that he would not be able to catch his breath and suffocate on his vomit. He had felt another vice-like retch, and then it had happened. He had shit himself. He had cried out again as, with each vile retch, the contents of his bowels emptied themselves into his trousers. He had tried to clamp the cheeks of his bottom together but to no avail. The hot liquid just exited at a faster pace.

He did not know how long he had lain there, his body ridding itself of the evil that he had eaten. He had eventually found the strength to haul himself onto his hands and knees and crabbed his way to the rushing waters of the arroyo. He had slid down its bank and had cried out as he fell into a freezing pool.

Slowly he had taken off his clothes, his shirt and jacket smothered in vomit, his trousers yellow with liquid shit. He had tried to wash away the stains of his greed, and it was then that he had begun to cry.

He had felt a wave of absolute despair wash over him as the tears streamed down his face, cutting rivulets in the grime that smeared his face. He had descended into the hell of self-pity, and his body arched with sobs, the remains of the vomit drooling down his chin. He cried for himself and what they had done to him. They had taken away his life, taken away his dreams, and

now they had taken away his dignity. He had felt an overwhelming need to hang himself from a nearby tree, but he couldn't. It had not been from cowardice that he did not do it. He had pulled his belt out from his shit-stained trousers, ready to end it all. It had, however, been his total lack of ability to stand that had saved him. That abject failure, though, had only added to the depths of self-pity into which he had sunk. Even now, that sense of misery sat just beneath the surface. He knew his fate; there was nothing he could do to change it.

It had been about two days before he had returned to the camp. He had explained, to a worried Joaquim, that he had gone off to hunt for food and had nearly run into a patrol. He had made up a story that he was sure that Joaquim would believe. He was relieved that his friend did not notice that his clothes appeared to have been partially washed. The guilt he had felt then remained with him now as he looked at his dear friend. He had tried to reduce the feeling of shame, which had surrounded him like a rope noose around his neck, by telling himself that Joaquim too would have suffered if he had eaten a part of that evil offering. It was to no avail. He still carried his remorse like a yoke. He had let greed rule his heart.

His musing was interrupted by the sound of what he knew was a rifle shot. He looked up. As he began to rise, another shot was fired. He then heard cries of warning. The Guardia Civil had found their camp. They had to flee.

“Joaquim!” he shouted. “We must run! Get up. We must go now!”

Joaquim did not move, his head still hung down, eyes staring at the nearly dead fire.

He stepped over the fire and grabbed his friend's shoulder. “Come on!” he cried. “Move! The Guardia Civil are here!”

Another shot could be heard, along with more cries of anguish.

Joaquim looked up. His eyes vacant, his dirt-smeared face a mask of resignation.

“Come on!”

Joaquim allowed him to pull him upright.

“Quickly! We must run!” he told his friend, grabbing his arm and pulling him away from the fire. He set off, towing Joaquim behind him. His friend was stumbling along with no haste.

More shots could be heard. Cries of the wounded and the dying filled the air beneath the canopy of cork oaks.

He looked back and tugged Joaquim’s jacket, trying to get his friend to speed up.

“Run! Faster!”

He turned and ran a few paces but then stopped. Amongst the sounds of gunfire and shouts, he heard a softer sound. A sound like a stick hitting a cloth. He turned. Joaquim was stood still. A look of surprise on his face. A red smear began to appear on his shirt.

“No!” he cried and ran back towards Joaquim as his friend’s legs began to buckle. He caught the falling Joaquim before he hit the ground. Oblivious to the sounds of mayhem that surrounded him, he sat down, laid the still body on his lap and then grasped his friend’s head to his chest.

“Come on, my friend,” he whispered. “We must run. We must escape.”

He looked down at Joaquim’s face. The eyes were open, but all the light had gone.

“No!” he cried. “Don’t leave me, my friend. Don’t leave me!” he shouted, and the despairing realisation that he was now truly alone swept over him. His tired, emaciated body found a reserve. It found enough for a tear to rise and begin its journey

down his grimy cheek. He sobbed at the loss of his friend and the knowledge that he had not been able to say goodbye.

Clutching his dead friend to his chest, he never saw the shadow that fell over him nor heard the sound of the rifle butt being swung towards his head. As it connected, he grunted and toppled over, moving a hand to his head where the shock of pain had almost knocked him senseless. The dead body of Joaquim flopped to the ground motionless.

He never heard the gruff voice who spoke.

“You’ll wish you were dead like him, scum.”

The rifle butt descended once more.