

Italy, early spring, 1944

Blake was in no rush. We called to him from our open turret to come back and take cover, but he was taking his time, examining a few errant enemy papers he'd just picked up. He was twenty feet away from us. Couldn't he hear?

"Blake," I said, "come on back. Now."

Somewhere overhead a plane droned. Was it ours?

Prisco, my gunner and resident expert on anything mechanical, cocked his head and listened in the clear, mid-morning air. He was trying to determine the plane's nationality. Within seconds he laid it out: If this was a German plane—and he wasn't sure of that yet—the only way the pilot could enter a low-altitude sustaining run was from the southwest quadrant of the field. Which happened to be precisely in line with where Blake stood.

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This time it was Martel who shouted, from our open driver's hatch: "Blake!"

Blake looked at us and then back at something on the ground, something only he could see. He stood, seemingly perplexed as to what to do, how to prioritize the potential risk, our calls, and his motion.

Prisco and I struggled to see the sky through the distant trees, no sight of the intruder, although we could tell from the way his sound bounced all around us that he was close and not a casual fly-by. Prisco whispered, as if the pilot could hear: "That's a fighter, a 109 from the sound of it." Then: "He's coming in lower now. Single-engined. He's figured out who we are."

The enemy.

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At last Blake leaned in our direction and began to move. Good, that was it, he needed to hurry. He took a few steps towards us and stopped. Our turret crew—me, Shanahan, and Prisco—were now crouched in cover behind our tank destroyer, groaning like angry Dodgers fans. Henry and Martel were buttoned up inside the vehicle, hatches closed tight. They were no fools.

Wait! What was he doing now? Blake had gone out several yards and was stooped over something.

Shanahan was livid and out of breath: "C'mon Blake!" Then: "I'm going to grab him."

I held his jacket sleeve: "No."

We yelled to Blake again, each of us pleading our own special case, Shanahan using charm now because

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force hadn't worked, Prisco trying to graft a bridge of reason across a tank chassis and a bit of cold turf, and me just plain shouting. Blakey wasn't coming, and I knew he was going to die. Even if he ran to us now, there was barely time.

I stood tall on a roadwheel—the chassis still protected my body—and scanned the low horizon behind him. There! Saw it! The plane: Dark, impossibly small, banking towards us, just above treetop level. Really close, too close. That pilot had skills. Prisco: “Blake's got about fifteen seconds. If that.”

Now! Blake made his decision!

Working fast, too resolute to fail, he picked up whatever he'd seen, looked at me and smiled. He put his head down and started toward us.

He needed to run!

“Go Blakey! C'mon!”

Our guy was walking to us, a spring in his step now, the plane had disappeared, had it pulled away? Blake seemed to fill everything in my sight, he was bigger than life as he moved.

I stayed focused on his head. His round helmet kept right and true despite his saunter. And then from behind him rose a larger, rounder, spinning swirl, black with a shimmering trace of white. The plane was practically on top of him, and it was firing.

Blinking lights flashed in the cowling above the fat propeller spinner, the spinner's white spiral mesmerizing me, freezing me, distracting me, as it was designed to do.

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Prisco yanked me down as bullets, sounding like a fistful of drumsticks pounding a piccolo snare, sprayed our heavily armored vehicle.

The fighter roared overhead, up the grove of trees behind us, and was gone. I'd barely acknowledged we were clear when I led the rush to Blake.

His body was torn and unmoving. He was finished, without a word.

Blake had been in no rush at all.

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It had been a random attack. A happenstance of a German pilot returning from, or heading to a mission. And now Blakey, that kid from Minneapolis, was dead.

I could have flicked a quarter to where he got it. That's how close he'd been to safety. He'd have lived if he'd come straight back to us.

The fact is, we shouldn't have stopped in that pasture in the first place.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," I said as I fell to a sitting position beside him on the torn earth. Prisco, Shanahan, Henry and Martel closed in on us, as if their shadows were a comfort. "Hey, boss," Prisco offered.

"He wasn't even my guy," I complained, like the Germans broke a rule by killing a man who wasn't a part of my crew. My men got in tighter, not indicating any offense to my words. I'm sure I wouldn't have cared if they had.

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Later that day I made the report to Colonel Harvey. Harvey summoned me into his command post, an abandoned villa about twenty-five miles from the front lines. It was just the two of us in the post.

Harvey wanted to know every detail of Blake's death. Wanted to know why we'd dismounted in the clearing when we'd had orders to proceed directly from the ridge, wanted to know why we'd stopped when we could have called in a detail to assist us.

"You were on your way back from the front. For repairs to your tank. And crew rest."

"Yes."

"Then, en route you were issued orders to bring fire support to a company of men bogged down on farmland. You had an infantry escort, as well as some support vehicles who accompanied you part of the way."

I nodded.

"And you provided fire, destroyed a barn, a self-propelled gun that was concealed in there, and a half-dozen German infantrymen. Hangers-on, from the looks of it. We didn't expect they were there. The front was several miles north."

"Yes."

The colonel looked at me. "Well, what happened to your infantry support after that? What happened to Blake?"

I'd smeared Germans across Tunisia. I was giving them a good kick up the Italian boot too, but I wasn't going to win a fight with Colonel Harvey. He was fortyish and fit, and it had been my year-long

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observation that he tended to navigate life in wooden ruler movements, one foot at a time. While the regular fighting man got used to being jerked around, set in motion on one course and then spun to another, Harvey drove in straight lines. Task set, task complete. And repeat. To him, the war was measured in yardsticks.

“You only brought one man back with you, from that point? Blake, he was the only one you picked up?” he asked again.

“We had more men with us,” I explained. “After we destroyed the target, well, then our support vehicles and most of the men went back to their units. Blake stayed with us for the ten or so miles we had left to get here.”

“All right.” He motioned for me to sit at a crude wood table. I sat down and took an extra moment to clutch the table’s edge. That was the easiest way to steady my hand. I wasn’t trembling from nervousness; not at all. Fact was, I was always a bit unsteady after a long ride in an open turret. And, well, there had been the shooting. I could be forgiven for shaking a bit over that.

He looked at me and his expression softened. “Would you like some tea?” he asked, quickly answering himself, “Let me get you some tea. Strong and warm, right?”

“Yes sir, that’s it. No adjutants?”

“I’ve cleared everyone out for the afternoon.”

Harvey hustled to his small open kitchen area and I looked around. I leaned on the table and it sank an inch before the fourth leg grabbed real estate. This piece of furniture didn’t belong in that fine house.

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War had a way of reassigning possessions like that. Harvey's wobbly table had been one of many household replacements for the nicer items that had found their way off these premises. Because it was sometimes easy to forget this "command post" had originally been a home. With a dad and a mom. Probably kids.

How long had the unnamed, unknown Italian family lived here? Where were they now? Did it ever cross the colonel's mind? It hadn't crossed mine, until now.

One time I saw a cast-hull Sherman tank, from a distance, with a neatly-stenciled name on her gun. This Sherman was one of the older models, with the original Lee suspension, but she was doing just fine in late 1943. The writing was white paint, tiny lettering, maybe two inches high. What did it say? Even with my eyes, I couldn't make out the word.

You have to understand that tankers loved naming their rides. I was used to GI humor, and how our men assigned their tanks quirky names, like SLAP HAPPY, HIGH BALLER and such. For days I was itching to know what that tank's writing said. During a lull in the fighting I made it my business to get close to her. I chatted with the toothless driver, just so I could read the letters.

FAMILY

The driver caught my darting eyes, like how a woman caught her date looking at a certain part of her anatomy. He smiled. "Yep-ah," he said, turning to match my look to the gun. "Nothing's more important than family."

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That driver had meant his family, obviously. Maybe with the stenciling, the crew was honoring their families back home.

Or maybe they'd just meant their crew. How they were a family. After all, those older-style tanks didn't last by pure luck alone. Those guys had to function together, and well. Out here, so far from where they grew up. They were together in this world. This particular world.

I knew of a family that was without a home. I knew of them because I was about to have tea in their living room. And so it began to bother me because I was sitting here without the permission of the woman of the house.

Silly thoughts of a shaky man.

Someone had built this home and decorated it. I imagined there had been celebrations, right here. Perhaps decades of happy gatherings, birthdays or weddings. And arguments too. And then they'd made up and swore they'd never part angry again. Because that's what a family did.

I looked around the open floor. I saw three worn, shapeless rugs. An empty China cabinet on a handprint-smearred panel. Furniture missing. Furniture present—like this table—that didn't belong. Light-colored rectangles on carefully-painted walls, indicating where portraits had hung.

The first pass of item removal was most certainly by the original homeowners, when the war reached their area.

Load the cart, and hurry! We have to leave, now!