

**The Blood of Madrid**

By Michele Jennings

The rapid pop of a machine gun—Republican or Nationalist, I cannot tell—explodes in the distance. A volley of returning shots follows shortly after. I instinctively duck into the nearest alley, knuckles white on my gun, and hold my breath, listening for shouting or more gunfire. No sound comes, save for the hollow scrape of the breeze against the crumbling buildings. Many of the structures are peppered with bullets. I remember a time not long ago when this stretch of the city was teeming with life, shouts being thrown back and forth rather than ammunition. Franco's army was not yet approaching from the southwest, and political debates punctuated streams of local gossip. The terror we lived under hardly seemed palpable.

Now my neighborhood is hollow, scarred. Anyone who remains is hunkered in their quarters, too fearful to step outside. Several of my childhood friends have joined the fighting, some for Franco, most against. I am unsure how many are alive.

The machine gun spews a second round, and a scream cuts through the gathering dusk. It is hastily silenced by more fire. Anxiety flares in my shoulders, my chest. *Someone—someone just--*. I cannot dwell on it. If I let the horror flood me, I will become vulnerable, and a lurking enemy soldier might gun me down. I will die in the shadow of my home, left to bleed lifelessly on the street I grew up on.

It is fitting, really, that my trek through the city led me here. I'd followed what I believed was a Nationalist soldier through the twisted, empty streets, only to realize I'd been chasing nothing but flickering shadows. My mind had shut off everything but the most primal hunting instincts, somehow believing there was a human nearby. As always, there was no one. It was just me, a paranoid and confused soldier who jumped at the slightest noise.

I run my tongue along my teeth and the inside of my lips. Perhaps there is someone around, someone whose fear and passion mirrors my own. A foreigner supporting the Republicans in the war against Franco. A civilian. A rogue Nationalist combing the vacant stretches of city for Republicans.

The miniscule part of me that dares to hope wonders if Jorge, Marco, and Bernardo trailed me as I ran after an imaginary fiend. I was rash to break away from them. We were brawling a pocket of Nationalists, and I had thought I saw one of them break away from the group. Now that I have proven my search to be futile, I should turn back to them. Explain what happened. Apologize. Marco and Bernardo will be forgiving, but Jorge will be harder to crack. His passion and loyalty are fueled by deep-seated bitterness, for his father was assassinated by who he believes were Franco's men. He's taken it upon himself to avenge his father's death, and he brutally attacks every Nationalist who crosses his path. This battle, for him, is not solely about defending Madrid from the fascists. Jorge is waging a campaign of vengeance.

*God have mercy.*

I abandoned them. I abandoned them in a flight of panic. I tried to pursue a Nationalist soldier who didn't exist, and now--.

Trembling, I emerge from my hiding spot in the alley. A cursory scan of my surroundings reveals that I am still alone; no Nationalists prowl the streets, and no civilians are braving the outdoors. I suck in a sharp breath and begin to retrace my earlier steps.

My feet thud dully on the familiar stones. I used to play games here with the local kids, back when we were carefree, innocent. Most of us were too young to remember the influenza pandemic, and we did not understand the residual fears of our parents and the older children. We existed in an idyllic world, unable to foretell the horrors that awaited in our futures.

I nimbly jog onto an adjacent street that slashes through the buildings, marking the edge of my neighborhood. The anonymous machine gun breaks the stillness behind me, and I increase my speed, heart thundering. Every step brings me closer to the turmoil. Guilt rages in my head, guilt mingled with fury at myself for leaving. Jorge, Marco, and Bernardo could all be dead because of me.

And I am still alive, frantically backtracking, weaving through buildings that the fascists have yet to bomb. An enemy sniper would find me an easy target. How I have not been shot at this point is something that could be considered a miracle, were I a person worth sparing. I am simply a coward disguised as a protector of Madrid and the Republic.

The closer I get to the end of the city, the more I notice the physical damage our fighting has left behind. Scorched buildings embedded with shrapnel stand shakily amid decimated foundations. Bullets and bits of shells are strewn across my path, which is made more treacherous by rubble.

A flash of movement up ahead gives me pause. I crouch, sweeping my gun in all directions, then squint. The figure approaching is rapidly picking through the wreckage of the street. There is no time to duck behind a wall or crawl into an intact structure; likely, I have already been spotted by the newcomer.

I study the uniform of the stranger, who is most definitely a soldier. A gun is clutched in his hands, and his expression is predatory. He does not appear to have taken notice of me, but it is simply a matter of time--.

As silently as I can, I aim my gun at his torso. I cannot convince myself that he will ignore me, for I am conspicuous and very, very exposed. It is clear from his uniform that he is fascist, a German. I grind my teeth, bracing myself for the recoil, and fire.

The man yelps, red blooming from the left side of his abdomen. I shoot two more bullets at him as he falls, then roll to the side, blocking his dying gurgles from my ears. *It's just faraway gunfire. Another bombing. The sun is setting, they could be starting the night bombings....*

I gulp as I crawl toward what was once a house. Any moment, more fascists will appear, and I will be their prisoner or their next victim. There is no time for me to process what I have done.

Other than the omnipresent roars of the war and my hitching breaths, I hear nothing. No wave of approaching fascists. No shouts in Spanish or otherwise. Cautiously, I pull myself into a crouch, then begin to resume my journey on all fours. It seems highly unlikely the soldier was by himself, unless—

Impossible. The enemy I chased was a phantom.

The debris scrapes the palms of my hands. I hardly feel the sting as I gradually make my way down the street, eyes and ears on high alert for incoming adversaries.

Somewhere off to my right, a vehement curse is uttered. Several yells ensue, and multiple pairs of booted feet crunch against broken rock. I am on my feet in an instant, fingers poised to fire at the newcomers in case they are allies of the man I shot. My pulse thunders as I wait for these rambunctious individuals to enter my line of sight and shoot me into oblivion.

“*Geraldo!*”

“Geraldo, don’t shoot!”

“*Cállate*, you idiots! You’ll draw the attention of Nationalists—”

Realization starts to circulate through me. I slowly lower my gun, then sling it over my shoulder, mildly stunned as Jorge, Marco, and Bernardo dash up the ruined street. Jorge reaches me first, eyes wild with fury. He seizes a fistful of my uniform and throttles me.

“Where the *hell* did you go!” he seethes, spittle flying from the corners of his lips.

I glance over my shoulder; the body of the fascist is behind me now, staining the cobblestones and chunks of razed buildings dark red. “I was—.” Words fail me. Light from the setting sun casts an ethereal combination of brightness and shadow across Jorge’s face, giving him an almost haunted expression. I pretend he is heated with something other than anger, that he is not directing his explosive rage at me but his vicious hatred toward the Nationalist rebels.

Licking my chapped lips, I try again. “I thought I saw—thought there was a--.”

Jorge drags me out of the street and shoves me into a blackened wall. He scans our surroundings, gaze lingering on the dead enemy, then snarls. “How *dare* you abandon us, abandon our cause! You cannot opt out of this war or take a pleasure stroll when the very Republic is in danger!”

“I-I was hunting him.” I jab a finger at the body. “I chased him down, lost him, and...and I was heading back when--.” There is not enough air in my panicked lungs. I take frantic, shaky breaths, desperate to collect myself.

Bernardo yanks Jorge away from me. “Leave him be,” he hisses, tone uncharacteristically sharp.

“What if he’s spying?” Jorge demands. “What if he’s a weak, sniveling rebel—”

“I’m not!” I insist, ire flaring in my blood. Sweat drips down my face and neck, soaking the collar of my shirt, and I clench my fists.

“Then why did you run? I watched you leave us behind!” Jorge lunges at me, landing a punch on my sternum before Marco and Bernardo restrain him.

“We don’t have time for this,” Marco growls. “Jorge, we need to get back now that we found Geraldo.”

“Fight Franco’s army instead. Geraldo isn’t one of them!” Bernardo casts a scowl at me. I lower my eyes, unsure how to respond.

“Then let’s go.” Jorge breaks free of his captors and marches onto the street without looking back. Wordlessly, the rest of us scramble after him.

We move as a unit, our steps as synchronized as possible. No words escape from our mouths, for we are on high alert, anticipating the precise shots of snipers, the roar of airplanes about to drop bombs. This street is quite close to the fortifications around the city. In fact, we frequented here when we were first building our line of defense.

At the street corner, we make another right. The barricade is now visible; I become more anxious as I take in the men crouched behind it, firing at encroaching fascists.

“Hey. Geraldo.” Marco smacks me on the shoulder. I flinch, mildly dazed. “Stay awake, my man.” He attempts a reassuring smile that fades quickly when he looks into my eyes.

“I thought I saw a fascist. When I ran. But there was—there was no one.” I sniff. Exhaustion tugs at my bones, and I am aware of how little I have been sleeping. But I must always be ready to fight. There is no room for relaxation or complacency.

“It’s okay. Don’t give up on this. We will beat the Nationalists, we will secure democracy for Spa—”

Marco is interrupted by the world ripping apart.

Light, smoke, ash, rock, blood spray into the air. I am flung off my feet, temporarily weightless, drifting through the dust with my arms splayed. Then I slam into something hard, and a spike of pain drives into my head. White flickers across my vision before everything sinks into black.

I feel warmth on the side of my face. Taste blood that pours from my nose trickles from my mouth. My right arm is engulfed in fire, or maybe it is simply searing agony.

Ringling, ringling in my ears. I can barely hear the faint hollers of other soldiers. Whether they are directed at me or the fascists, I am unsure. I try to move my head toward the source of the noise, but there is too much pain.

I was talking to someone. Telling him that...something about how I...

Struggling to remember. Hurts too much to...don’t think I can....

“Medic! MEDIC!” A voice I don’t recognize. A swarm of blurry shapes, all moving too quickly for me to follow.

*Marco.* I need to talk to him. My lips quiver without sound. Marco. Why am I not talking to him....

More agony explodes in my skull. I think I’m caught between reality and sightless black, and people are grabbing me, hoisting me onto something. They’re carrying me, and I don’t know how I’m here, where I’m going. In and out. Things are fading in and out.

I must be on my side, for I can make out Jorge sprinting away. His outline is fuzzy. Wavering. No one is at his side, which is odd, though I do not understand why. I’m struggling to maintain my focus. He seems to be shooting at the barricade, shooting an endless volley of bullets. He could be screaming, but the ringing is too loud.

Shells are raining all around him. Yet he won’t stop. He’s unleashing the wrath that’s always been...always been there. Jorge has never not been without his wrath. Perhaps he was born with it, perhaps it existed even before....

The reason for his fury. I can’t think of it. I know he’s told me countless times. Why he is like this. Why he is running.

Through the fog, I see him fall. He collapses to the ground, to the street buried under rubble. The street that seems to be littered with destruction. I wait for him to get up. Even when I cannot see him anymore, I wait for him to get up. I vaguely recall him being angry at me. Something I did...because I left...abandoned....

“Hang in there. Hang in there.” Another strange voice. Not Marco. Not Bernardo. Not my older brother, Simón, who is not in this part of the city. He told me, once, not to join the fight. I remember that conversation. Remember....

“We’re almost there. Doctor, I need a doctor!”

Jorge has been waiting for vengeance. He’s going to exact it. That’s why he’s....

*Remember.*

I want to hang on. But my consciousness is letting go.