Interbellum

by WolfOfAnsbach

Summary

1935. The Great Depression ravages the world. Fascism threatens Europe. Millions languish in poverty and despair. The nations stand on the brink of ruin or rebirth.

A workers' strike in Riverdale Township stirs something in the heart of destitute young Jughead Jones. The fallen socialite Veronica Lodge flees her tycoon father's cruel legacy. Over the cynical protests of his sister, the taciturn Jason Blossom starts to wonder if perhaps the capitalist system whose ruthless machinery has made his family rich is not all it's cracked up to be. Against her mother's virulent isolationism, Elizabeth Cooper searches for right and wrong. Would-be musician Archibald Andrews cannot make a decision to save his life.

The gunshot of a Pinkerton strikebreaker, a cache of secret papers, the storm of war over the sea, and a fascist conspiracy to rule the nation will ensnare Jughead and his friends into a cruel struggle, from the banks of a chilly New York river to the blood-soaked valleys of sunny Spain. In the balance hang the lives of millions and the liberty of peoples.

Or the Great Depression-Spanish Civil War AU no one asked for.
Priorities

Chapter Notes

I have no idea where this is going. Don't expect a coherent plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A cold front begins to roll in. Heavy grey clouds mass in the skies overhead. The cheery, multicolored letters announcing ‘Pop’s Chock’lit Shoppe’ have long begun to flake away under the twin forces of weather and time. Inside the old diner, two young boys sit across from one other. A light rain begins.

Jughead Jones opens his faux-leather bound journal. The pages are beginning to yellow, curling at the corners. Though he’s owned it for more than a year, it’s less than half full of his scribblings. He tries to conserve space best he can. After all, it’s not like he’ll soon have enough money to spend on another one. Thrift. That’s the key to surviving in these tumultuous times.

He scrawls the date in the corner of the page.

November 20th, 1935

Our story is about a town, but beyond that, it’s the story of a nation, and a world. A world changing with greater speed and greater intensity than anyone might have ever imagined. Or dreaded. The optimistic reveries and Pollyanna dreams of the decades past have vanished in the face of an impossibly grim reality. In this country alone, one fourth of workingmen are out of a job. Across the seas, entire nations fold under the brutal might of destitution and poverty. Dictatorship rears its head and threatens to trample first Europe, then the world, underfoot. The future is marked by crooked crosses and scarlet flags.

Even here, in picturesque Riverdale, safely ensconced in the land of the free, the travails of the world make themselves known.

Our story begins with the Blossom family, and in particular with the strike called by the laborers employed by Clifford Blossom’s nation-wide maple syrup empire. Like in so many towns throughout America, the class divisions and tensions in Riverdale ran deep.

“I just don’t know, Jug. I get that going after music is kind of a fool’s errand in this economy, but it’s my passion.”

Jughead looks up for a moment, his pencil ceasing its dance over the paper. “Archie I’m kind of busy.”

The class divisions and tensions in Riverdale ran deep. On one side, there was the happy, clean-cut face of Riverdale. The Northside. Populated by cheery, all American, middle-class suburbanites. They ran their small businesses, raised their wholesome, fresh faced sons and daughters, kept their lawns immaculate, and made up one little disc in the backbone of our proud nation. On the other side, there was the unsavoury element that made this lifestyle possible. The Southside. Populated by poor day laborers, destitute bums, petty criminals, an-
“My dad really wants me to take up the family business. And I get it. It’s been in the Andrews family for generations. But I just don’t think that’s me.”

Jughead stops writing again. He fixes his friend with an exasperated stare.

“Archie. Listen to me. We are in the middle of the worst economic downturn in history. Half of this country is unemployed. Crops are rotting in the fields. Democracy is crumbling in Europe. Fascists are bombing Abyssinia into ash. I don’t want to sound rude, but you really have to ask yourself, ‘what are the biggest problems right now?’

Archie looks back at Jughead. He runs a hand through his ginger hair. He blinks. There’s a moment of silence.

“So you’re saying I should pursue my music?”

“For fuck’s sake.”

Chapter End Notes

Archie's inability to prioritize is a constant through time and space.
“Penelope, get me some strikebreakers. The kind they had at Blair Mountain.”

The mass of shabby workingmen milling about in the lot of Blossom Syrup’s primary manufacturing plant is more than enough to put a bolt of fear through the hearts of Riverdale’s very own robber baron, Clifford Blossom. The strikers’ lined, worn faces and tattered clothes are inscrutable to him. They come from a different world than the well-heeled, slick-haired, smooth-voiced son of privilege. To Cliff, they are like alien creatures. They labor under him. He grudgingly gives them a cut and they keep his business in operation. But he cannot understand them. Not their motivations nor their emotion, nor their joys or sorrows.

Cliff watches with disgust, his steely blue eyes hard. He watches from a safe distance, of course. It wouldn’t do to get too close to this mob. The last thing he needed was to be strung up from a lightpost. Ungrateful bastards. He pays them fine. They’re lucky to have jobs at all, what with this depression and with Roosevelt’s war on business. Cliff’s stomach turns. He hops into his car, motions for the driver, and speeds away.

“Cheryl, get your father some strikebreakers!” Penelope bellows as she storms through the front doors of Thornhill. Her voice thunders through the house’s cavernous interior, invading even the relative safety of her daughter’s bedroom. Cheryl groans (though certainly not loud enough for her mother to hear) and rises from her bed. She knows this drill. She’s done it more than a few times, and having unpleasant or lengthy tasks delegated to her is just an expected feature of life around here. She slogs down one flight of stairs to the phone on the first floor dedicated to ‘business’ calls. By muscle memory, she enters the number her father drilled into her head a long time ago. The glamorous redhead taps her perfectly manicured fingernails on the lacquered surface of a coffee table as the phone rings.

Rings.

Rings again.

“Pinkerton Detective Agency. Hello?”

Cheryl puts on the sweetest, friendliest voice she can muster.

“Hi! Mr. Redman? This is Cheryl Blossom. Clifford’s daughter?”

“Cheryl! Of course! How are you? How’s everything up in Rockland County?”

She puts as much enthusiasm as she can into her words, while her face remains a mask of disinterest. Cheryl twirls the phone cord around her pinky finger.

“Oh, everything’s fine. It’s just that we’re having a little problem in Riverdale that we were hoping you could help us remedy.

“And what might that be?”

“Well, my daddy’s workers are getting a little ornery. We’ve basically had to halt production. The
wages they’re demanding are ridiculous.”

“Mhmm. Strikes, huh? Yeah, those are a real doozy? I assume Cliff wants me to send down a few guys. Bust some heads. Put everything back in its place.”

“I think you read his mind, Mr. Redman.”

Cheryl hangs up the phone and makes her way to Thornhill’s ancient sitting room. She finds her brother there, reclining on the couch before a dying fire.

“Who were you on the phone with?” Jason asks his sister, as he tosses and catches a rubber ball, in the throes of boredom.

“The Pinks.” Cheryl replies, flopping down onto the couch next to him.

“Again?”

“Well, daddy needs somebody to take care of these strikes.”

“Do we really need to turn this place into Harlan County? Talk about bad press.”

“Oh please, JJ. The rabble will scatter as soon as the Pinkerton boys pull out their revolvers.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then they’ll find the top organizers and bump them off. Come on, you know how these things work, Jason.”

“Wow. That’s murder,” he says in mock indignation.

“Please. Who’s gonna arrest dad for it? Sheriff Keller? Real likely.”

“It’s funny because rich people are above the law.”

“Like it or not, that’s the way things work.” Cheryl slings an arm around her brother’s shoulder and leans up against him. “It’s the American way.”

“All this over maple syrup,” Jason mutters.

“Well, over the manufacture, packaging, and sale of maple syrup, too,” Cheryl expands. “But yeah, in a reductionist sense. It’s all about the sweet, sweet maple syrup.”

“Can’t we just get some scab workers to take their places? That way we can put a stop to this whole thing without pulling any guns or shooting anyone?”

“Oh, JJ.” Cheryl smiles. “You’re so soft-hearted”

“I’m being selfish. I don’t want to be the son of the guy who shoots his employees when they ask for slightly higher wages.”

“One minute they’re asking for higher wages, the next they’re flying red flags and sending death squads after everyone who lives in a two story house.”

“Ah, yes. The infamous ‘slippery Bolshevik slope’.”

Cheryl pouts. She scoots closer to Jason.
“Hey, do you can ask the Russian Tsar all about slippery slopes.” Her eyes go wide. She curls her hands into claws. “Oh wait. You can’t! Because he’s dead!”

“Eh, whatever. Turn on the radio, Cher. I’m bored.”

“What for? Here. I’ll summarize everything you’ll here on the radio for you. ‘Hitler does something. Everyone’s poor and no one has a job. Roosevelt is saving this country. Roosevelt is ruining this country. Mussolini gasses Ethiopians. Everything is terrible.”

“This is why I love you, Cheryl.”

The next morning at breakfast, Cheryl suddenly pipes up. It’s only her, Jason, and the servants, today. Cliff is out dealing with the massive inconveniences that typically accompany most of one’s workforce going on strike. Penelope is…God knows where.

“I had a pretty terrible nightmare last night.”

“About what?” Jason inquires.

“All of the workers from the maple syrup plant organized and formed a Riverdale Regional Soviet.”

Jason’s bacon stops halfway to his mouth.

“What.”

“Oh yeah, it was awful. They collectivized everything and made us move six homeless families into Thornhill with us.”

“Nightmarish.”

“There were hammers and sickles everywhere. And so many poor people” She shudders in horror. “And that was before they put us in front of a revolutionary tribunal to try us as enemies of the people.”

“What was the verdict?” Jason asks, smiling now.

“I don’t know. An owl hooted outside my window and I woke up.”

Chapter End Notes

All rich people have regular nightmares about communist revolution, right?
Reports of Criminality and Targeted Harassment in Germany Greatly Exaggerated by Hostile Elements blares the front page of the Riverdale Register one morning.

“So much for journalistic impartiality, huh Cooper?” Veronica Lodge teases as they stroll to school under a grim autumn sky.

Betty sighs, fidgeting with the hemline of her skirt in a particular expression of frustration.

“I actually talked to my mom about it.”

“Really?” Veronica asks.

“Yeah. Well, I just said ‘hey, maybe we should tone down the partisan rhetoric in the paper down a little bit, don’t you think?’”

“And her response was…” Leads her friend.

“I quote: ‘The Riverdale Register is a private publication and as a private publication it reserves the right to endorse or denounce any political or ideological sympathy or tendency it wishes to.’ In other words, it was a big ‘no’.”

“Well, I try to give politics a wide berth myself. Unless it’s useful for pissing off my mother,” Veronica jokes. “Can’t say what I know of the new Germany endears them to me much though.”

“Yeah. Well, actually, it’s a bit of problem between my mom and dad. Well, you know my dad was in the army, and he went to Europe during the war, so he’s not a big supporter Germany. My mother, on the other hand…”

A car whips by with the windows rolled down. It all occurs much too quickly for either girl to identify the occupants, but it’s probably a safe bet they’re fellow Riverdale High students. A blurry figure in the backseat pulls back an arm and chucks something with considerable force.

“Fuck you, Nazi!”

The bottle of coke shatters at Betty’s feet, splattering her bare legs with drink and little beads of glass. She jumps back in shock, dropping her books in the process.

“Oh my God!” Veronica exclaims, leaning down to help her friend. The two collect Betty’s school materials (now soaked in the puddle of coca cola), while the poor blonde recovers from the surprise. “Are you okay?”

“Well.” Betty assures her. “Just the wages of being the daughter of the town’s only newspaper proprietors.”

And so they resume their trek to school, minds consumed with thoughts of Coca Cola and National Socialist Germany.
“Dad, are you going to work today?” Jughead asks. His eyes are hollow. Dark and tired. FP looks back at his son. His own face is little better. Sallow. Pale. Drawn. He makes a half-hearted attempt to rise from the couch and then abandons it.

“Come on, Jughead. You read the papers, yeah?” he smiles, sad. “We’re on strike.”

“Really? Is that it? Because if that’s the truth, then fine. I’m happy to shut my mouth if this is in the service of some…noble cause. But somehow I doubt that.”

FP sighs. He gropes around for the bottle he’d left lying somewhere at the foot of the couch. Finds it. Raises it to his level. It was empty. A single drop of beer falls from the bottle’s lip. The puddle of Budweiser where the drink spilled grows ever wider, soaking into the cheap carpeting and the fabric of the couch. FP sighs. He lets the bottle fall from his fingers and clatter to the floor with a dull thud.

“Do you?”

“Why aren’t you at the lot with everyone else, then? Holding up a sign or a flag? Fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work, right?”

Jughead shakes his head.

“Jug…what does it matter? Why I’m here? Nobility, laziness. I’m here, and not there.” FP closes his eyes. Jughead scowls, face flushed with disgust. He decides there’s no sense in pushing any further. His father is going nowhere. The all-important drink has captivated him. There’s little in the world with the power to draw him away. Certainly not his son. Jughead turns on his heel.

“Well…I’m heading to the factory. Where the strikers are. The actual strikers. Good luck with your own battles, here.”

He turns to leave, but stops short when he hears his father’s raspy laugh.

“Do you think they’ll get anything? Think Cliff Blossom will raise wages? They’ll stand out in the cold for a few weeks for nothing. Blossom’s got gold and food and warmth. We don’t. He can wait us out. That’s if he doesn’t call in some scabs to work for pennies on the dollar or some thugs to bust skulls. Better I lie here and rest for a while then stand out there freezing my ass off for nothing.”

“No, instead you just drink your ass off for nothing, right?”

“I drink my ass off because there’s nothing, Jughead.”

“Is that supposed to sound profound?”

“No, true.”

“Really?”

“No jobs worth shit. No help. No charity. No future. At least we’ve got fucking drink, for
crissakes. Leave me that.”

“I never knew you were such a fatalist.”

“Never took you for an optimist.”

FP’s hand finally finds a beer bottle not entirely emptied. With a grunt of victory, he lifts it to his lips and takes a swig. Soon, it’s emptied too. Jughead storms out of the tiny house, the doorframe shaking with the fury of his exit. FP shakes the bottle, as if that might magically induce more drink to appear. It doesn’t, of course. Hope and willpower are good for nothing. He can’t will himself more beer anymore than he can will himself employment that can provide better than starvation wages. Anymore than he can will his wife to return. Anymore than he can will this fucked up country to mend itself and make good on the bullshit promises its politicians make. Anymore he can will the world to purge itself of all the evil and misery.

He shakes the beer bottle once more, and then lets it tumble to the floor. It rolls across the room slowly, bumping gently against the far wall. He watches it rock back and forth for a bit. Now he’s alone.

“Did you talk to your dad?”

“You could say that,” Jughead spits.

Betty frowns. As if this were her problem. As if problem even affected her. She grabs Jughead’s hand. He lets her do it, but he doesn’t really return the gesture. At least not with any appreciable amount of enthusiasm. He sinks onto the steps, defeated. Betty takes a seat beside him.

“What happened?”

“He’s not going to work. Or even to the strike he claims to be supporting. I wonder how long til he gets fired. Not too long, I’m guessing. Then we’ll really be in the thick of it.”

“You don’t know that’s going to happen, Jughead.”

He ignores her attempt at reassurance.

“See, with the money he brings in, now, we get to eat. Sure, not enough to keep away hunger pangs at night, but enough that I don’t collapse in the street. Let’s see how much food he brings in when Cliff Blossom sends him packing. Like Fred Andrews did.”

What a row that had caused between Jughead and his best friend. To fire a man was one thing, but to fire him now? When half the damn country couldn’t find work? That was tantamount to condemning someone to pauperism. How could your dad do this? He didn’t have a choice, Jug. No? Well I’m really sorry your dad was forced to make us homeless. That must be really hard for him. Jughe—Fuck off, Archie.

FP Jones had found another job. Barely. As much as shipping for the Blossoms could be considered a ‘job’ and not glorified slavery. At least Fred Andrews had given a decent wage. Blossom’s largesse was inversely proportional to his personal wealth. Half of it could have kept everyone in Riverdale, Greendale, and the next six towns fed and clothed for another year or two. But to expect generosity from the Blossom clan was like expecting a kiss from a rattlesnake. Nobody was really dumb enough for that.

Anyway, now that that job was gone, it hardly seemed likely the universe would grant a third
chance.

“Jughead, we’ll figure something out. This isn’t the city. We won’t let you end up sleeping in a gutter somewhere.”

He shrugs. His lips twist into a crooked smile.

“You know, I hear in Russia everyone’s got the right to work. 0% unemployment. Guaranteed housing. Maybe I should look into moving to Leningrad, huh?”

“Don’t talk like that. The last thing you need is people calling you a red.”

“Better a Bolshevik than begging for scraps from the Blossoms’ or the Andrews’ tables.”

“Things aren’t that bad, Jughead.”

“Easy for you to say, huh?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Betty looks genuinely taken aback. Her big blue eyes go wide. Her lips pressed into a tight line.

“You live in a two-story house and I live in a shack on the southside. Your parents run the town newspaper. My dad can’t keep a job ferrying syrup from point A to point B.” His voice rises. “You’ve bought clothes more than once this year. Are you really going to tell me ‘things aren’t that bad? Really?’” His voice reaches its peak, stopping just before a breaking point. She looks hurt now. Whatever. He isn’t in a particularly compassionate state of mind at the moment. She stands. He doesn’t.

“I’m sorry, Jughead, I didn’t mean t-"

“Are you?”

She turns and storms into her house. Her two story house where the water and electricity are never cut. Where there’s always food on the table. Later tonight, Jughead will probably feel bad for his callousness in speaking to her. Not right now. Right now he’s far too angry for regret. He stands, too. He kicks at the steps to the Coopers’ front door. He spits. He floats off down the street and away from this place that mocks him with the comforts that will never be his.

“All the world that’s owned by idle drones is ours, and ours alone! We have laid its wide foundations, built it skywards stone by stone! It is ours not to slave in, but to master and to own! For the Union makes us strong!”

The song lifts into the chilly autumn air, a thousand voices strong. Jughead watches, sharing in the heady thrill of the strikers’ defiance. He doesn’t work for the Blossoms, though half the town does, in some capacity or another. Even Sheriff Keller is far from an impartial avatar of the law. Cliff’s money makes sure of that. He’s managed to get the proprietor of the new theater downtown to hire him for some simple duties around the place. The pay is a pittance, even compared to his father’s meager wages, but it’s better than nothing nonetheless. Though he does not work alongside them, he can’t help but feel a sort of kinship with the laborers massed together on the cold pavement, standing strong in the shadow of the towering factory before them. They were poor, like him. They lived dollar to dollar, like him. They were well and truly fucked over by capital, like him. He stands a little off from the throng of defiant workers, watching intently.

Every minute they’re not working is another couple dollars out of Cliff Blossom’s seemingly
bottomless pockets. The thought manages to bring the slightest amount of cheer to Jughead’s largely ossified spirit. The factory sits on the edge of town, silent and empty. The woods surrounding Riverdale engulf it in a half-moon shape, threatening to devour this symbol of human industry. Its machinery sits idle for lack of hands to operate it. Blossom can call in scabs, but they’re not in the big city. It’ll take a while to bring in enough men to operate the factory and bring production levels back to normal. And all that while he’ll be losing money. Keller’s got a few deputies. They came by a few days ago to try and persuade the strikers to cut this nonsense short and return to work. The workers were having none of it. They arrested a few of the more prominent figures, but they could hardly arrest half of the town’s population. So the strike continues.

Jughead reads the signs held aloft by the workingmen.

*Wanted: A Fair Day’s Pay.*

*Cliff Blossom Makes Money. We Make His Products.*

Fair enough.

He figures he should go home and write. This is worth sticking in the ‘novel’ he’s working on (not that he has any delusions about ever getting it published). People love heroic struggles. The underdog against authority. The slave against the master.

The Great Riverdale Strike of ’35.

So far Blossom hasn’t shown any sign he’s willing to negotiate. That’s to be expected, of course. He’d consider that a sign of weakness, no doubt. Give an inch and a mile is taken. It’s a war of attrition. And his father had a point. Cliff Blossom can afford to wait. In fact, he can afford to wait forever. His wife and children’s lives don’t depend on his working twelve hours a day. He’s got more money than he’ll ever need. The workers in moth-eaten coats and shabby caps can’t afford to wait. The Blossoms may lose some insignificant portion of their vast profit, but their workers have already lost out on some five days of wages. They can’t afford that. They have families that need to eat. This has got to come to a conclusion. And soon.

He thinks of heading into the crowd and joining. Chanting slogans for a little while. Singing union songs. Might make him feel like he’s doing something worth a shit, if only for a little while.

Maybe he should apologize to Betty. He was a little harsh. Maybe he should go talk to Archie. See how Andrews Construction is functioning in the midst of all of this chaos. Probably not well. Still better than him. Maybe he should go see his father again. No.

Jughead forgoes all of those options. He goes to Pop’s, where the lights are dim and the customers are few, and thank God, he’s alone with his thoughts. He sits down in a booth, slips his notebook out from his coat, and begins to write.

*In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold, greater than the might of armies magnified a thousand-fold. We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old, for the union makes us strong!*

Veronica Lodge tosses a quarter into a well. Who can afford to do that, these days? The raven-haired beauty sits down on the lip of the fountain. She looks into the murky water to confront the mirror image staring back at her. The girl in the water has a stony, pensive face. Hard to read. Veronica has trouble recognizing her.
Riverdale.

The name is like a foul word. From New York to this? What a cruel quirk of fate. Well, nobody’s luck lasted forever, not even a Lodge. She looks back at her quarter, shimmering beneath the gently rolling waters of the fountain.

Make a wish. No? There are a lot of wishes to choose from. Yes, plenty of wishes indeed.

*Hiram Lodge, you stand accused of conspiracy against the lawful government of the United States of America.*

Really? Like something from a bad pulp. ‘The Business Plot’, the papers excitedly termed it. What a scandal. Germany. Italy. Now America? Would the march of dictatorship leave no land trod underfoot? The worst part was Veronica hardly had trouble believing it. A good daughter would have stood, indignant. Her face red with righteous fury, she would pronounce to all that would listen that her father was a good and honest man, and that all of this was nothing but vile rumor. But to be a good daughter Veronica would have to be a fool or a liar. She was the latter sometimes. Never the former.

Business came before everything else. Success and victory were the only things worth a damn in this life. Anything that stood in your path ought to be obliterated without mercy. Rivals? Guns and money could solve that. The law? Just the same. Democracy? Maybe it was time for regime change. There was nothing wrong with helping a friendlier government to power, was there? It was just good business.

Yes, Veronica Lodge thinks. Supporting a bid to overthrow the government of the United States for the sake of profit was precisely the sort of thing Hiram Lodge would do, the old, incorrigible rascal. He’d always said people were too stupid to know what was good for them, anyway. They’d put this bungling fool Roosevelt into office already, after all. Hiram would not allow anything to cut into his bottom line. Not even the President of the USA.

Veronica makes a wish. She can’t tell anyone what it is, of course. That would be breaking the rules. Then it wouldn’t come true. The rules that governed fortune and fate were the kind that not even the wealth and influence of the Lodge clan could sway. Iron clad.

“Veronica?”

She turns to see her mother striding out into the Pembrooke courtyard.

“Hey, mom.”

“Mija.” Hermione puts a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

“Just fine, mom. Just fine. Well…” Veronica looks back at the girl in the water. She looks a little happier now. Even if it sort of an empty, cruel happiness. Close enough. “Better than the rest of the country, anyway.”

That was no lie. Veronica flicks a second quarter into the fountain. Quarters and dollars. Thousands of them pile up in her mind’s eye. Up, up, up, into the sky. Like a mountain that dwarfs any natural mountain. There’s someone seated at the top, on an undeserved throne. Ruling without sword or rod. Those are trifling instruments in comparison with the terrible power of wealth. They are far above any other being in this wretched world. Who it is, who knows, really? Mammon? Her father? Her mother? Herself?
Jughead Jones returns home late. He still hasn’t apologized to Betty, which means he won’t be getting much sleep tonight. Goddamn his conscience. What a burden it was.

He steps through the front door of his house, kicking off his filthy boots. His father sits up on the couch. He looks lucid, the alcohol gone from his mind and his veins. FP Jones meets his son’s gaze. Jughead, for once, sees not an empty confusion there. He sees a focus that he thought had long since gone. Even the unshaven stubble peppering his father’s face suddenly seems more dignified. FP stands, and strides over to the closet, without a word to his son. Jughead follows his father’s movements without speaking. He expects a disappointment of some sort. FP pulls his old leather jacket from the rack. It won’t do much against the cold, but Jughead supposed that isn’t really the point, anyway. FP slips on the jacket. Outside, the last rays of the sun are extinguished. A fierce wind sweeps in from the stormy sea miles away. Somewhere out there, the strike continues in defiance of powers both natural and manmade.

“Alright dad, you got me,” Jughead says, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Where are you going at this hour? You know, even if you have any money left, the general store’s closed. They’re not gonna sell you any more beer.”

FP looks back at Jughead. His eyes don’t betray hurt exactly, but his son’s words do strike him.

“Does it matter?”

“You’ve been saying that a lot lately. Getting into nihilism?”

“Don’t tease me, Jug. You know your old man isn’t very bright.”

He starts for the door. His hand falls upon the knob. He pauses at his son’s next words.

“So. Where are you going, then, Nietzsche?”

“To the strike.”

Then he’s gone, into the night. Jughead doesn’t know if his father is telling the truth, and he finds that he really doesn’t care all that much. He shakes his head. The house is still and silent and the already laughably small structure closes in on him.

Alone in the dark.

“What are you reading, Jason?”

Jason Blossom flips the next page of the hefty tome. Cheryl cocks her head in interest. Her brother looks up for a second, then returns to his book.

“Capital. Karl Marx.”

Cheryl smiles and shakes her head.

“Don’t let dad catch you, huh?”

Chapter End Notes
The Business Plot was real. It's an interesting story:

Kevin Keller turns to look at the girl striding into the lunchroom with such confidence. His eyes go wide. His mouth goes slack. Archie, Jughead and Betty watch him with interest.

“There she is.”

“Veronica?” Betty asks, her voice even. “She’s not so bad. I’ve been talking to her in A few classes.”

“Yeah?” Kevin asks. “Veronica ‘my father tried to replace the FDR government with a fascist autocracy’ Lodge?”


“Hey, that’s not proven,” Archie asserts. “Don’t judge her on hearsay about her father.”

“The Roman salute isn’t too hard to pull off, though,” Jughead continues.

Without warning, Veronica turns and begins walking towards them. She slides into the empty seat next to Betty. The dark-haired girl beams.

“Hey, Betty!”

“Hey, Ronnie.”

“Hello to the rest of you,” Veronica says, offering a wave cautiously returned by the rest of the table. Without waiting for a response, she says: “God, the food here is abys—”

“Stalin or Hitler?”

“What.” Veronica looks back at Kevin, unblinking. The latter’s eyes widen again. “Is this about my father?”

“Uhh…”

“Kevin! Seriously?” Betty hisses.

“I prefer the full mustache to the Charlie Chaplin,” Jughead mumbles.

“I hear the German economy’s doing well.” Archie offers, weakly.

“I hear the Soviet economy’s doing better.”

“Bolshevik lies,” Veronica says.

“Nazi lies,” Jughead retorts.
“You’re all communists.”
Blacklegs & Triggermen
Chapter Notes

Bit of a long one.

Fred Andrews sits at his desk. His eyes are bleary and the papers before him have long since
Negotiating. Layoffs. Even in good times running a business is no easy thing. Now it’s damn near
impossible. He knows all about the Blossom strike, of course. Everyone in town does. He
sympathizes with them, of course. Just like he sympathizes with anyone subject to the cruel whims
of Clifford Blossom. But he also knows how difficult it is to pay and maintain laborers. He’s had to
lay off five in the past month. Fred is more or less working with a skeleton crew, now. Not that the
bidders are exactly lining up to offer Andrews Construction contracts, anyway.
Not so long ago, he’d fired Forsythe Pendleton Jones. His right hand worker as well as his friend.
Not anymore, of course. But he hadn’t really had a choice. Fred can understand FP’s frame of
mind. To steal a few materials, maybe it isn’t a big deal. He had to eat. Jughead had to eat. But
every spanner and every bag of cement gone means less money for Fred as well. And he has to eat,
too. So does Archie. So he’d ‘let FP go’, to put it politely. Not that it should be. There is nothing
polite about robbing someone of his livelihood, even if it is to protect your own. He doesn’t expect
FP to ever forgive him. And that’s fine. Fred likely wouldn’t forgive himself either. But he hopes
at the same time that the rift between Jughead and Archie can be healed. It was neither boy’s fault.
Neither boy’s fight. They shouldn’t suffer for the sins of their fathers.
Fred sighs. He crosses out three names. Three men he’ll have to let go. Three men who won’t be
receiving a paycheck anymore. Three men he’ll have robbed of food and shelter. It weighs heavy
on his soul, but that will be little comfort to them. God willing they can find other jobs. Maybe
here. Maybe in Greendale. Maybe in the next town over. Callous as it sounds, it simply won’t be
his problem anymore. Most of them aren’t from here, anyway. It’s a strange feeling holding the
futures and fates of men in one’s hand. Printed on a cold, careless slip of paper. It’s not a good
feeling, either. It’s the feeling of crushing responsibility and often unbearable guilt. Only a natural
tyrant could enjoy that power. Unfortunately, those are all too common.
It could be worse, of course. It is worse, in the big cities. New York. Boston. San Francisco. He’s
seen the pictures of men lined up for city blocks for the slightest hope of a day’s worth of work.
Riverdale is insulated. A little town tucked away in upstate New York. The shockwaves that shake
the world strike here, too, but Riverdale’s isolation cushions the blow. Just a little bit.
Fred looks to his clock. It’s late. Past 2. He should go to bed. He won’t.
Archie pokes his head into the room, startling his father.
“Jesus, Archie. You scared me.”
Archie smiles sheepishly.
“Sorry, dad.”


“What are you still doing up?”

“I was working on a school assignment.”

Fred shakes his head. It’s probably a lie. He’s too tired to care.

“Well, get to sleep.”

“More layoffs?” Archie asks, ignoring his father’s command.

Fred sighs.

“Yeah.” Archie looks upset. Legitimately upset. It stings Fred, really. His son is a compassionate boy. More than he lets on. “I don’t like doing it, Archie. Not even a little. You know that.”

“I know, dad.” Archie nods. Unsure.

“How’s Jughead?” Fred suddenly asks. And he really does want to know. It was enough to ruin FP’s life. He doesn’t need to do the same to his boy.

“He’s alright. We had lunch at Pop’s the other day. He’s still in a mood lately, though. I think.”

“He’s got every right to be,” Fred responds.

“Like you said, dad. You did what you had to do.”

“This town,” Fred begins. He scribbles something on another slip of paper. “Is eating itself. And I’m not the most blameless person around.”

Archie is silent for a moment. He fixes his eyes onto the floor. Onto his feet.

“Jughead went to the strike yesterday. Well, Reggie told me at school that he’d seen him there.”

Fred snaps to attention. Archie starts at his father’s sudden animation.

“You should tell him to stay away from there. It’s not safe.”

“Why?”

“ Strikes never are, Archie. Especially not when they’re aimed at men like Clifford Blossom.”

Archie laughs. His voice is a bit frail for a guy his size. A bit nervous.

“I doubt Jug will listen to me. Especially not about something like that. He doesn’t get a whole lot of excitement in Riverdale.”

“You should tell him, anyway.”


“Night, Archie.”

And Archie vanishes down the hall. He steps into his room, dark and solitary. But he really doesn’t want to go to bed. His mind is stormy, restless. He thinks about Jughead, standing so precariously between life and immiseration. Thinks about Betty, trying her best to help her boyfriend, even when she comprehends so little of his plight. Thinks about the new girl, Veronica, who isn’t her
father but is treated as if she is. Even thinks about the Blossom twins and wonders whether they’re more than the pampered demons the town sees them as.

Archie plucks his guitar from its place beneath the windowsill. His father likely won’t hear if he plays quietly. Even if he does, he’s probably too engrossed in his work to care much. Archie positions himself on the edge of his bed with the instrument in his arms. Nothing of his own composition today. That’s too much trouble. He doesn’t have the mind for it. Something simple and calming. Traditional. His fingers begin to dance across the strings.

*From this valley they say you are going, we will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile, for they say you are taking the sunshine that has brightened our pathways a while. Come and sit by my side if you love me, do not hasten to bid me adieu. Just remember the Red River Valley, and the boy that has loved you so true.*

The strains of the old song drift through his half-open window into the lonely night beyond. In the house next to the Andrews’ lies a young blonde tormented by her powerlessness. Maybe Betty Cooper hears the slightest hint of the ballad’s notes on the wind. And if so, maybe it brings her the slightest bit of comfort.

A week after the laborers walked off the job and called a strike, the battle was still raging. Even as hunger and exhaustion mounted, the laborers tenacity did not diminish. Tensions rose. The first of Clifford’s scabs, bussed in from out of town, found themselves unable to break the mighty wall of human flesh between themselves and the factory. Even under the escort of Keller’s deputies, they were forced to retreat. The local police might be another extension of the Blossom empire, but they still were not willing to throw themselves into an all-out brawl with these men. It seemed, against all odds and all expectations, that Cliff Blossom might be forced to concede. It would be unprecedented. Unimaginable.

*Then, the Pinks arrived.*

Jughead puts down his pen.

“Check this out, Cher,” Jason says, face bright. “The USSR has raised literacy from 25% to almost 90% in less than twenty years. They’ve more than tripled industrial output.” He gushes, excitedly scanning the pages of his book. Cheryl scopes out the title.

*Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?*

She lifts an eyebrow.

“Did you finish *Capital* already?”

“Uh huh.”

“Wow. That’s…that’s actually impressive. It was the size of two bricks glued together.”

“Couldn’t put it down.”

“…It’s an economics textbook. God, you’re boring sometimes, Jason.”

“It’s not an ‘economics textbook’. It’s a critique of political economy. Maybe you need to expand your mind, Cher.”
Cheryl rolls her eyes. She sits down next to her brother, who doesn’t even look up from his book at her. Rude.

“If I didn’t know any better…” she teases. “I’d think you were turning communist on us.”

Jason frowns at her. He closes the book.

“I’m just exploring different points of view,” he retorts. “Remember when that German finance guy gave dad that medal with the swastika on it? I don’t remember you complaining about that.”

“The ‘German finance guy’?”

Jason gently slugs his sister in the shoulder. She sticks her tongue out at him. Despite himself, he smiles.

“My point is it’s possible to try and understand something without supporting it, right?”

Cheryl shrugs.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Truth be told, she doesn’t particularly care how her brother feels about communism or capitalism or fascism or the tooth fairy for that matter. What she does care about is how her father feels. Clifford Blossom rules Thornhill as an iron-fisted dictatorship. And like most dictators, he is not inclined to tolerate dissent or difference of opinion. Not even from his children. Especially not from his children. and especially not from his only son. Jason is supposed to be the heir to the kingdom. Next in line for the throne that he’s not certain he really wants. Cliff won’t stand for his mind being contaminated by any untoward ideas. Better to have no son at all than a useless one. So yes, Cheryl worries about her brother sometimes. Just a little bit. “The strike’s still going.” She says, hoping to shatter the silence.

Jason sighs. Huffs. He turns to his sister.

“Have dad’s guys shown up yet?”

“Guys?”

Jason draws a finger across his throat.

“Oh. Guys. Well…no…I don’t think so.”

“I don’t understand why dad can’t just raise the factory workers’ wages. Just another dollar or two. It’s not like we can’t afford it. Hell, we could afford to pay them all five bucks an hour if we wanted to.”

“I don’t know, Jay Jay.” She says with mock concern. “If that happened, we might have to make do with nine hams this Christmas instead of ten. Can you imagine the privation? Do you want me to go through that?” She smiles.

“God forbid.” Jason laughs a little. Then his face is grave again.

“You know it’s not going to happen, Jason. Dad won’t give up a single cent.”

“I know. But that doesn’t mean I understand it. Or like it.”

“Just business, right?”

“Been hearing that all of my life.”
“You’re gonna have to hear it a lot more, I think.”

Cheryl leans her head on his shoulder. She takes in the sights of Thornhill’s parlor for the thousandth time. But this time she sees it through alien eyes. The splendor, which she’d acclimated to so many years ago when she was young, strikes her again in force. The animal heads mounted on the walls. Moose. Crocodiles. Bears. The rosemaled wallpaper. The fireplace fringed with gold and silver. The glittering chandelier swinging precariously on its chain. It’s all so much. Worth more than most people will make in their entire lives. Worth more than most people’s lives, ugly as that truth might be. How much is a human life worth these days, anyway? Market price? Everything has a market price, after all. That was an important lesson to learn.

Cliff Blossom pays his workers about 20 cents an hour.

There it is.

How many hours does a man work in his life?

Multiply by 20 cents.

Convert to dollars.

There it is.

The price of a human life. Quite simple. Cheryl’s too tired to do the calculations right now. Jason picks his book back up. The little gold-leafed hammer and sickle on the cover gleams in the parlor’s dim lights. He’s about a third of the way through the book, a worshipful chronicle of the Soviet Union’s history and inner workings. Jason makes himself comfortable and settles in to read of revolution, progress, the power of the masses, and five year plans.

“Hey, Jason. Does the Daily Worker publish in Riverdale?”

“Well, damn! FP Jones! It’s been a little while, no?”

FP grunts.

“A few weeks, maybe.”

“Time moves real slow for us. You know that,” the other Serpent replies with an ugly grin. “Ain’t seen you down at the strike, ‘fore tonight. Busy?”

“No. But that’s what I want to talk about.”

“Go find Rattler. And that kid what’s been running errands for him.”

“Welcome to Riverdale, gentleman.” Cliff Blossom says with a smile. The three men in his office nod in response. That’s fine. He doesn’t mind. He isn’t paying them for their conversational skills, after all. Long as they get their job done. God knows that’s become a high expectation in this town lately.

“Sure don’t feel too welcome,” one of them offers. “Lot of strikers for such a small town.”

“I employ a lot of men.”

“What is it exactly you’ll be needing us to do, Mr. Blossom?”
Cliff sighs.

“On the southside, there—”

“Southside?” One of them cuts in.

“Let me finish. The Southside of town, where all Riverdale’s vermin like to gather. There’s a gang of criminals there that calls itself the ‘Serpents’. It’s them that helped whip all of my workers into a frenzy in the first place. They’re the…brains, and I use that word loosely, behind all of this nonsense.”

“So, what, you want us to go kill a few serpents.”

“That’s a rather blunt way of putting it. But…”

“Right. Not so hard, huh boys?”

“Well, not just ‘a few serpents’. Get a few that matter. Ringleaders. Figureheads. Organizers. That scum is the closest thing this town has to a union. Cut the head off the snake and, God willing, the whole thing will fall apart and Riverdale can return to normal.”

“And how’re we supposed to tell who’s a…ringleader?”

Cliff smiles.

“I’m on good terms with our sheriff. He keeps a file on serpent thugs. I’ll need to work on him for that. Names, addresses. Once that’s done, I’ll hand them over to you and your men.”

“Right. And until then…”

“Enjoy yourselves! Riverdale is a close-knit place, but we’re a welcoming town, too. And please, feel free to help yourselves to all of the maple syrup your hearts desire.”

“But uh…you’ll be paying in cash, correct? Not maple syrup? Don’t misunderstand, I enjoy panca —“

“You’ll get hard cash,” Clifford snaps.

Soon after, the three men with dark clothes and dour faces exit Thornhill. The army of servants necessary to keep the ancient house in order watches with stony silence as they go. So do the Blossom twins.

“The guys who just left…” Jason starts.

“Yeah. Those were dad’s…guys,” Cheryl says.

“I suppose we’ll just sit here while he dispatches assassins across town.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Yeah. Literally anything else.”

“Do you want me to march up to dad and say ‘I demand you call off your dogs and raise your workers’ wages’?”
“No…I…nevermind.”

“Okay, Jason, seriously. What is up with you lately?”

“What?”

“Your conscience has been growing exponentially in the past few months and it’s scaring me a little.”

“Maybe I rediscovered my humanity.”

“That’d be great.” Cheryl shakes her head. “If you weren’t a Blossom. This is not a good family to have a strong sense of morals in.”

“You’re saying you never have any problems with anything this family does?”

“Jason—of course I do. Sometimes. But I’m not dumb enough to say it out loud. Or naïve enough to think I can do anything about it.”

“Maybe I’m not naïve, Cher. Just fed up.”

She doesn’t say anything in response to that. There doesn’t really seem to be much to say. Maybe he is fed up. Maybe he has a right to be. The rest of Riverdale, she knows, is probably much more than fed up with the Blossom family. Maybe she can’t really blame them for that, either.

“Don’t know how much longer we’ll be able to keep this up.”

Joaquin DeSantos stares into his glass of cheap beer. Across from him, FP Jones fiddles with a deck of cards. Shuffling. Cutting. Flipping. The bar is loud enough that their conversation remains private enough.

“No?”

“Strikers gotta eat too, kid,” growls a lanky, grim-faced fellow known only as Rattler. It was a dumb name. No one was going to tell him that, though. Not unless they fancied a switchblade in the ribs. Joaquin certainly doesn’t. He’s rather new around here. Only in town because someone a few counties over had told him a maple syrup (really?) plant was hiring. His place with the Serpents is conditional and precarious. He’s not keen on antagonizing any of them.

“Blossom’s just brought in a few more guys from out of town, I hear,” FP says.

“More blacklegs?” asks Rattler.

“No.”

“Pistoleros.” Joaquin mumbles.

“Huh?” Rattler asks.


“We ain’t exactly a union,” Rattler chuckles.

Not a lie. But for all intents and purposes as of the moment…
The Serpents are a gang. That much isn’t slander. It’s true. It’s an army of those languishing on the margins of polite society. Men without work. Petty thieves. Streetwalkers. Addicts and lushes. Poor laborers. That composition creates within the Serpents a natural sympathy with the plight of exploited workers. For in many cases a serpent and a laborer slaving away in a Blossom factory are one and the same. Perhaps they could be called an informal union, in a sense. It was they that played such a crucial role in organizing for the strike now causing Clifford Blossom so much grief. Though they try to keep mum about that. Wouldn’t be very good publicity for the boys standing out in the cold now.

“No. But we’re a thorn in Cliff’s side nonetheless,” FP says.

“What’s this mean, then?” Joaquin asks.

“Means he’s going to try to scare us back to work. His boys with guns will come after a few us. Once those few are in the hospital or the morgue, he figures the rest of us will take a hint and remember our places. And he’s probably right.”

“That’s murder…” Joaquin breathes.

“Welcome to the collective bargaining process, kid.”

“What do we do, then?”

“We could lay low. Make it hard for Blossom’s triggermen to find us. But…what the hell kind of message would that send to the rest of them? To the rest of the workers on strike? ‘Hey boys, remember the guys that helped organize this? They’re a bunch of cowards who run off with their tails between their legs at the first sight of real trouble’. No. That’d sap what morale we’ve got left. Bring the whole thing crashing down faster than Blossom could ever dream of doing.”

“So…what then?”

FP shrugs, still playing with his cards.

“Well, the only other option—besides folding, that is—is to meet them head on. Show everyone we’re not afraid. I doubt Blossom would risk too much blood spilled. Neither would Keller. Cliff might have sway over the sheriff, but that only goes as far as order is maintained in the town. He won’t stand for an all-out war, and he certainly won’t participate in it.”

FP closes his eyes, allowing his words to sink into the other two men’s minds. He thinks about himself. He thinks of his son. Remembers the look of disgust on Jughead’s face as FP had lain on the couch drowning in drink and misery. It had stung. He’d called him a coward and a failure without even using the word. And worst of all, he’d been right. That was why he was here now. The Serpents had helped to start this. They have a duty to see it through. He has a duty to see it through.


“We’ll go down to the factory tomorrow,” FP responds. “With a few more guys. Stand up. Tell everyone there about the thugs Blossom’s brought in. Remind them of their uh...” He chuckles. "Their rights. That ought to do one of two things, too. Either make Blossom back down, or make him act all the sooner.”

Joaquin nods, jamming down his fear.

“Alright, FP,” Rattler says. “Sounds like fun.”
“That the word for it?” Joaquin asks.

“Turning yellow, kid?”

“Say, Joaquin,” FP cuts in. “You know Keller’s kid, don’t you?” Joaquin tries to hide his shock. He hadn’t been aware that was common knowledge.

“Yeah,” He answers.

“Why don’t you work for us on that front? See if you can figure just how partial Keller is to Blossom. See if he knows about Blossom’s triggermen.”

Joaquin nods. His stomach turns a little.

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“Fantastic.”

At about midnight, a few days before December, Jughead Jones apologizes to Betty Cooper. He’s still not entirely sure he was even in the wrong (and she’s just as uncertain), but more than anything he just wants to see this stupid spat buried and forgotten. He can name a thousand things that deserved more attention than a fight with his girlfriend.

“It’s alright, Juggy.” Betty says, voice laden with relief. She leans into his shoulder. “I don’t care whose fault it is. Or was. Whatever.”

Jughead closes his eyes.

Thank God for that.

“Can I ask why you’re at my house, instead of the other way around?”

Betty sighs.

“My parents got in a fight. Again. So I left. Again. God, it’s getting so predictable. I know when they’re going to start fighting before even they do.”

“What was it this time?”


“Sounds heated.”

“If I hear the words ‘unsubstantiated rumor’ one more time I swear to god I am going to scream.”

“Well, This is what happens when local news is a monopoly." He pauses for a moment. "Maybe tomorrow the headline will be about the state of the milkshakes at Pop Tate’s. He’s been putting less and less malt into them and it’s starting to become a serious problem.”

“God. I can dream, Jughead. I can dream.”

The next morning, the Riverdale Register stands in its rows at the general store, screaming the news in heavy black print. It doesn’t have anything to do Germany or Europe. Or with anything beyond the town of Riverdale, for that matter.
Today, the headline reads:

**Blossom Workers’ Strike Against Inhumane Conditions Continues.**

Jughead smiles. Save for a brief mention when it began, this is the first time the *Register* has mentioned the week-long strike. Hal Cooper must have managed to sway his wife for at least a single day. That couldn’t have been easy. Jughead’s never known the Coopers to be enthusiastic champions of labor before. But he has known them to be the most enthusiastic of the Blossom family’s many detractors. Since the town was founded.

If attacking the Blossoms means coming out in open support of the unwashed masses, then so be it.

Jughead digs into his pockets. Hey, there’s some spare change. Things are looking up. He slips out a nickel.

“Just one paper.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.”
I watched half of Battleship Potemkin the other day, but then I got distracted (probably by something stupid) and didn't finish it. So I had to look up the ending on wikipedia.

I'm such an intellectual.

The Twilight Cinema shows a classic tonight. Even if it is a foreign classic.

*Battleship Potemkin.*

Jughead sits up in the projection room. He slides the reel into place and works the projector until it spits out its beam of light. The glow spills across the far wall. Flickers. The film is about to begin. This is a new one. He’s seen every other movie in the cinema two times at least, but this one’s just arrived. A Soviet film. It’s supposed to be good.

He presses his face to the window and adjusts his stupid hat. They’ve lured in a decent sized crowd tonight. It’s a small cinema for a small town. 90 seats. He figures about sixty-five are filled tonight. Jughead recognizes most of the folks who’ve come in for the night.

The movie begins. A quote from Lenin explodes onto the screen, informing the audience that revolutionary war is the only ‘truly just, great war’. Seems reasonable enough. Jughead shrugs, though there’s no one in the projection box with him.

The sailors on *Potemkin* are restless. The conditions are cramped and unsanitary. Their officers are cruel and capricious. The meat is bad. It’s full of maggots. Revolution is in the air. All conveyed via intertitles of course.

“These are not maggots,” the ship’s surgeon protests, despite the fact that they are very clearly maggots. What a jackass, Jughead thinks.

The meat is bad, come on.

He looks back down into the audience. There’s poor Pop Tate, squeezed into a seat far too small for his considerable bulk. That appears to be Reggie Mantle a few rows up. There’s Miss Grundy. Are those the Blossom twins off to the left? Huh. Doesn’t seem like the sort of film kids of their… status would enjoy. Jughead wonders if this movie is like a horror picture to rich people.

Vakulinchuk leads his fellow revolutionaries against the Tsarist officers. Sadly, he is killed, but his comrades are victorious. Glorious. The ship is taken for the sailors, who form a revolutionary soviet. A detachment of Cossack troops mows down civilians in Odessa on shore. Horrible. Outrageous.

The score climbs, reaching a crescendo. The red flag is raised over *Potemkin*. And there will be no more bad meat.
Jughead finds himself smiling. There’s a reason he likes cinema. Few mediums are more powerful. The artist is an engineer of the human spirit. Directors and screenwriters more than any others.

The audience below actually cheers as the revolutionaries turn their guns upon their Tsarist oppressors and open fire. Jughead’s smile widens.

The film ends on a triumphant note.

Jughead bumps into the Blossom twins as they make their exit from the cinema. He expects a snide comment. He’s half right.

“Out of the way, Oliver Twist,” Cheryl drawls. Jughead’s mind races to think of a comeback.

He’s about to remind her to check the closet for reds tonight when Jason says “Hey, great picture, Jones.” He grasps Jughead’s hand and shakes it.

“Well, I didn’t write it,” Jughead replies, on the defensive. He is primed for some manner of Blossom perfidy. "Or direct it."

“No, but the projector didn’t cut out five times like the last time we were here.” He flashes Jughead a jovial smile. "Your job's pretty important, and you did it well."

Cheryl and Jughead both stare at him like he’s grown horns. When they leave, Jughead spends a good minute contemplating the hand Jason shook with awe and confusion.

He heads back up to the projection room, where he will spend another fitful night. Jughead finds himself thinking on the fact that the Tsar might still be on his throne if the guy in charge of Potemkin’s meat rations had done his damn job.

Jughead pries open a can of spam for dinner.

At least the meat isn’t bad.

Chapter End Notes

Actually, the meat was bad.

xaxaxaxaxa
“Hey, your dad isn’t gonna come home any time soon, is he?” Joaquin asks. He rolls over in bed to face Kevin. Kevin ruffles his lover’s hair and laughs.

“Nah. He’ll be out late.”

Joaquin suddenly has a vision of FP’s face, which is really not what he wants to be picturing at the moment. Right. He’s got a mission. Can’t just enjoy an evening with Kevin. No. Of course not.

“Why?”

“He’s putting together some list. Something to do with the Southside Serpents.”

Joaquin sits up. His blue eyes flash.

“List? He said that to you?”


“Yeah. Some important names or something. Big time thugs, I wager. Look, do you really want to talk about this?”

List of names.

**Big time. Leaders. Important figures.**

**Cliff Blossom’s triggermen.**

Well, shit.

Joaquin forces a weak smile. He kisses him, while his stomach churns and boils.

“Nah. I don’t.”
Lost In The Valley of the Night

Chapter Notes

Some boring history stuff in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Cliff Blossom wants to use his thugs to terrorize us back to work. Stomp us into the dirt like he’s Il Duce,” FP Jones pronounces from his improvised dais atop a pickup truck’s bed. The assembled mass of laborers watches with a single mind. His words feed their already feverish hatred and desperation. “We’re not going to be intimidated by him! This isn’t Germany or Italy. This is America. You’ve got rights and that includes the right to strike. And if Blossom doesn’t like that, he can take it up with the constitution of the United States.” The crowd erupts into rapturous cheers.

Veronica Lodge watches with fascination. This was Jughead Jones’ father, wasn’t it? The one he said was more or less a chronic drunk who could hardly drag himself out of bed in the mornings? The commanding figure before her certainly does not fit such a description. This is a man of conviction. And that, of course, is a dangerous thing to be in a position like this. She’d learned that lesson from her father. Men like this, who tried to rally and organize, tended to end up in coffins or cells soon enough when they crossed Hiram Lodge. She can’t imagine Clifford Blossom operates much differently. Her father at least had to share influence with other men of similar rank and wealth in New York. No one could ever hope to consolidate power in that great Babylon. Cliff Blossom’s power in Riverdale seems to be all but uncontested. It’s like living in a little medieval fiefdom beholden to its lord, she thinks briefly.

She hopes for Jughead’s sake that FP Jones stays out of the boss’s crosshairs. Though he seems to be doing his best to draw fire. Veronica pulls her expensive coat, more practical in a ballroom than a blizzard, tighter around her shoulders. She looks around. Besides the strikers themselves, a considerable number of townsfolk have come out to watch. Not like there’s much else around to draw people’s interest.

FP Jones finishes his rousing speech and steps down from the truck, to be slapped on the shoulders and congratulated by the men below. Veronica sighs, her breath frosting in the December air. She sees the Blossom twins watching from a ridge on high, framed by the forest and the hulking shape of the factory. Side by side. Like always. They’re more like two pieces of one being than anyone else. A shattered spirit desperately trying to mend itself again. The two frighten her in a way. Jason is a rather taciturn boy. Man of few words. It’s hard to make judgments, really. But when she speaks to Cheryl, it’s like looking through a mirror to years past. She sees too much of herself there. It’s uncomfortable. Disturbing. She can relate to Cheryl Blossom, and she’s not quite sure how she feels about that.

She wonders why they’re here. Collecting information for daddy, probably. Then again, she’s in no real position to make any judgments regarding spoiled rich kids and their corrupt tycoon fathers. No, no position at all.

Veronica turns on her heel and leaves.
“I saw your father down at the strike the other day,” Veronica says to Jughead one morning, in the parking lot of Riverdale High School, just before the first bell rings. Jughead sighs. Shakes his head.

“One minute he’s a catatonic drunk the next he’s Big Bill Haywood.”

Veronica shrugs.

“Well, it wasn’t a bad speech. I’ll give him that.”

“Didn’t figure you were the type to sympathize with striking workers and…small-time criminals.”

“No? I’m…multi-faceted, Jughead Jones.” Jughead raises an eyebrow. “Besides, I can’t exactly condemn you for things your father may or may not do or have done.”

Jughead catches the rather obvious note. He smiles.

“Maybe we’re kindred spirits.”


“Very poetic.”

“I’m a writer. One day you’ll see my name in the *New York Times*. Mark my words, Lodge.” He laughs and shakes his head. Bad joke. Even making it gives him that sting that hopeless fantasies always do.

“Listen…” Veronica starts. Her voice brittle, uncertain. “Your father…you…you guys ought to be careful.”

“Uh…are you threatening me?”

“No! It’s just…my father…strikers…He didn’t tolerate it. Men who stood out. Tried to make themselves leaders. Heroes. Things…things rarely ended well for them. I know how these things work, Jughead. Much as I wish I didn’t, sometimes.”

Jughead nods. A knot begins to twist itself up in his gut.

“Hell of a time to be alive.”

“I’ll say. Try having a traitor to king and country in your family. Well…just country.”

Jughead chews his lip for a moment. Considers whether or not he should speak. He is curious.

“Is it true?”

“About my father?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know. Probably. It’s not the sort of thing that’d throw me for a loop.”

“You think he’ll be convicted?”

Veronica shrugs.
“Depends on how relations with Germany and Italy turn. And of course, how many judges and lawyers and witnesses he can pay off. And of course, how convincing Butler’s testimony is. Either way, I doubt he’ll ever be invited to speak at another American Legion meeting.”

“And you?”

“Me what?”

“Are you supposed to testify?”

She is. Technically. Or at least, her mother and father want her to. Really want her to. But she doesn’t want to. It was said lies came easily to Lodges. She’s loath to prove that correct, no matter the betrayal of family duty her parents would be bound to see it as.

“If I do, I’ll tell the truth. Or what I know.”

“Well.” Jughead begins. And suddenly his gaze is across the lot, where the two redheaded scions of the Blossom dynasty are stepping from a sleek black Phantom. Jason offers his sister his hand and gently helps her out of the flashy car. “That’s a lot more than you could say for the Blossoms, I’m sure.”

“Maybe.”

“I was…with Kevin Keller last night,” Joaquin says. They’re in the same booth at the Whyte Wyrm. As usual, it’s packed. Even though it’s mostly Serpents and their allies, the boy can’t help but keep his voice as low and even as if they were speaking in a police station. It’s an ingrained habit. There’s no such thing as ‘too careful’. He’s amazed he ever worked up the courage to actually visit Kevin’s house, even when he was absolutely certain the Sheriff was out.

“Yeah?” FP asks. He pops the cap on a bottle of beer and offers it to Joaquin. The boy waves it away. FP raises it to his own lips instead, and takes a few hearty gulps.

“He told me Keller’s putting together a list of names. Something to do with the serpents.”

If FP feels any fear or shock, it certainly doesn’t register. He takes another swig of his own beer. Wipes a bit of foam from his chin.

“He said that to you? Anything else?”

Joaquin shakes his head.

“I didn’t want to press it. Didn’t want him to start wondering.”

“Well, that’s alright. That’s about all we need to know, anyway. Just like we thought. He’s putting together a hit list for Blossom. Maybe doesn’t even know that’s what it’s for.”

Joaquin’s face looks a little pale.

“Who’s on it?”

“Hell if I know. But after that shit we-the shit I-pulled at the lot the other day, I’ve gotta be one of ‘em. Probably Rattler and Mustang. Viper. A few others.” He notices the boy’s fearful expression. FP claps a hand onto Joaquin’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, kid. I doubt you’re on it.”

“So, what’s going to happen, now?”
“Well, I assume some people are going to die.”

“What, you’re just gonna let them come for you?”

“Maybe. We’ll see. Best case scenario? We’ve called his bluff. We accused the son of a bitch, in public, of hiring paid killers. Maybe he’ll back down. Worst case scenario? Yeah, his goons will come for us.” FP pats his hip. Joaquin doesn’t need to see it to know there’s a pistol holstered there. “If they do. I’ll be ready.”

“Shit…” Joaquin breathes. He runs a hand through his dark hair.

“Rest easy. You did your job, kid.”

Cliff Blossom isn’t as cautious as someone in his position should probably be. His office is an ancient room, built by some stiff-backed colonist back when the British still ruled here. No doubt said stiff-backed colonist had used it for much the same purposes, too. Filing. Business deals scribbled out on endless reams of paper. Balancing trade and purchases. Gotta keep those numbers even. A loss of profit is worse than a bullet in the gut. There are a lot of graphs scattered across the desk. Crazy lines dipping and rising and dipping and then skyrocketing. Where the lines intersect is why poor people should be allowed to starve.


But Cliff doesn’t really lock the study as much as he probably should. It’s less trust than simple carelessness and overconfidence. He’s encountered few obstacles in life not easily overcome. He can’t imagine much of anything would come out of leaving the heavy deadbolt on the big oak door unfastened. It’s not necessary to keep the maids out, anyway. The last ones who’d come in without asking and accidentally thrown out some very important documents had gotten an earful. Then they’d been fired. And for good measure, he’d made quite sure they wouldn’t be able to find another job within the next five miles in any given direction. That was just a public service, really. God forbid someone else be burdened with such incompetent help. People should thank him.

Penelope knows not to come in here. So do his kids. Jason’s probably still smarting from the good thwacking he’d gotten at age seven after entering his father’s office without authorization. That round of punishment served to get the message across to Cheryl, too. They were twins, after all. His pain was hers. Interesting creatures.

Today’s the first week of December. Christmas is approaching fast, but Clifford doesn’t really care much about that. December is important for the reason that this is when the bulk of returns and profit margins flood his desk, and his mood for the next year is decided.

The massive box of papers is brought down upon his desk with a monstrous thud. Clifford pinches his brow. This is going to take a while. But it’s necessary to build and maintain such great wealth. What is the point of building and maintaining great wealth if you don’t have time to enjoy it because you’re so busy building and maintaining? Well…Cliff tries not to think too hard about that.

He looks at the little eagle stamped at the top of the crisp white paper. The black Reichsadler holds a swastika in its talons, its beak turned over its right shoulder, scoping out the nations with imperious hunger.

Deutsches Reich, neunzehn-hunder-fünf-und-dreizig.

That Hitler fellow really knew how to do business, didn’t he? What a relief the Reichstag results in
’32 had been. The social democrats had done their damn best to make Germany impenetrable to enterprise. The Blossoms had held a presence in the overseas market, including Germany, since before the Great War. Of course, the conflict and the ensuing Weimar government had put quite a dent into their returns. And that was a pain, because if there was a modern, advanced nation just begging to be sold American products, it was Germany. So it wasn’t for nothing Cliff Blossom had joined more than a few other foreign industrialists in contributing funds to the National Socialist party’s electoral bid.

And boy, had it ever paid off!

The National Socialists had swept the elections in 1933 (alright, fine so there’d been a little intimidation and tampering. So what?) and formed a government. Then some red goon had gone and torched the Reichstag and given Chancellor Hitler the pretext he needed to suppress the Communists and Social Democrats. What a break! Clifford had met with a representative of the new government last year. Germans liked their maple syrup, too. 230,000 gallons of the stuff per year, tapped from the trees he owned, processed in his plant, bottled and packaged in his factory, bundled up onto transatlantic steamers, borne across the Atlantic, and unloaded in Hamburg. From there the divine nectar was distributed to Berlin, Munich, Cologne, Leipzig, Konigsberg. And all the reichsmarks generated soon morphed back into precious American dollars which then flowed right back into Cliff Blossom’s accounts. It’s all quite elegant. And of course, quite lucrative.

Dealing with dictators is far easier than dealing with democratic governments, really. Why shouldn’t it be? Autocrats can make snap judgments and reason without having to recourse to the howling mob. Every firm is an autocracy, anyway. If it works in the world of business, why not in government? Economy is the backbone of a country.

$1150000 from Germany, all thanks to maple syrup. Wunderbar.

He signs off on another shipping order.

Next up are his dealings with Spain. A business friendly government has been in power there for the past two years, but recent turmoil led to new elections being called. If the so-called ‘Frente Popular’ coalition won with its promises of redistribution and heightened wages, it would certainly endanger his interests in that country. Clifford shakes his head. If only the European market weren’t so damn volatile.

He’s talked a bit with representatives of the CEDA, the largest party challenging Spain’s Popular Front in the upcoming elections. Cliff is funneling them a good bit of cash, in return for promises his interests in the country would be well protected. In fact, it’s in Spain that he’s looking to expand the Blossom empire. The ore mines there are quite a lucrative business. Maybe it’s time to move beyond maple syrup. He’s already got a prospective property under examination in the north of Spain, near Asturias. There’s also the olive market thriving in the south and east of the country. Yes, quite an untapped reserve, that Spain. There are, of course, other reasons for his stake in the country’s government and ultimately, stability. Rather more vital ones. But that’s okay. As long as the CEDA sweeps the Cortes in the February elections. That’s why he’s sending them bundles of cash, isn’t it?

He scribbles a quick letter to Gil Robles’ secretary to that effect. What is the situation of the ore mines in northern Spain? How about the olive trade? How are my accounts? The last bit is particularly important, of course.

He’s drawn out of his reveries and calculations by a knock on the door “Who?”

“Uh…it’s me, Mr. Blossom.” Comes the meek voice of his courier. “Delivery?” The young man
pokes his head into the room, holding an envelope. “It’s from Sheriff Keller.”

Clifford almost jumps out of his seat. He snatches the envelope, mumbles a thank you, and closes the door again. He slides a sharp letter-opener along its seam and extracts the contents. There they are. Just as he asked. Finally. Names. Addresses. Profiles. He’d told Keller they were for ‘security purposes’, which in a manner of speaking, they were. No matter. It’s not like he’ll face any obstructions from the law.

This’ll all be over soon.

When Clifford Blossom is done working for the day, he steps out of his study and gently closes the door behind him.

As usual, he doesn’t bother to lock it.

Fred Andrews has not seen FP Jones for almost four months, when he runs across him outside Riverdale’s general store. He’s not buying beer. He’s not buying anything, actually. He’s simply leaning against the faded, weathered wall of the store, a cigarette hanging from his lips. Fred says nothing. He doubts the man wants to talk to him. He’s about to step past his former co-worker and friend when the other man speaks.

“Hey, Fred.” Fred freezes. He steels himself. He doesn’t think FP will hit him—particularly not in a crowded place in broad daylight—but it’s a possibility.

“FP.”

FP flicks aside his cigarette and takes a step closer. Instinctively, Fred steps back.

“Don’t worry, Fred. I’m not looking to fight. Or...even argue.”

“Well...” Fred says, his voice uneven and strained. “Good.”

“Yeah. I’m just looking to see how you’re holding up, yourself.”

Fred somehow doubts that.

“I’m fine. Scraping by. Like everyone else.”

“Like me.”

“Like you.”

“How’s Archie?”

“He’s good. Still plucking away at that guitar at all hours of the day.”

FP laughs. “Kid’s got talent, I think.”

“Yeah. How’s Jughead?”

FP is good at masking his emotions. It’s a skill he learned early in his life. It’s an indispensable one for a man who’s had to fight and bleed for what little he has. But he fails to hide the hurt in his eyes when Fred asks his question.

“He hasn’t been home much, lately. He’s been staying at the theater. Works there, you know. Hell
of a lot more initiative than I showed at that age.”

“At their age we were dodging German bullets in Europe,” Fred says. Suddenly, the hatreds and tensions of the past few months seem to fall away. He’s speaking to his old friend FP Jones again, not a rival or enemy.

FP laughs. They weren’t unique in that respect. Half the men in Riverdale had answered the country’s call in 1918. Quite a few of those hadn’t come back. Left forever in the fields of northern France. It was funny how far the wounds of war could reach. It was an ugly game. God willing, the world would never see another conflict like that again.

But they’d returned home heroes, for the mere fact that they’d returned with their sanities and bodies more or less intact. FP had even won a cross for distinguished service. Storming alone a Germany battery manned by ten men. He’d sold it a long time ago, of course. Had to. At least, that’s what he tells himself. It’d be easier to believe if he hadn’t spent half the proceeds on alcohol.

“You ever miss it?” he asks, suddenly.

“Miss it?” Fred asks. “The war?”

“Yeah. Felt like we were doing something. Something that mattered.”

“No. Can’t say that I do.”

FP shrugs.

“Maybe it’s because I’ve got precious little now. Wouldn’t have made a hell of a difference if I’d caught a kraut bullet in Belleau Forest.”

“You’ve got Jughead.”

“Yeah.” He pauses. He mulls that statement over. He supposes. Maybe Jughead would be better off otherwise. “Though, in a lot of ways, you’ve been a better father to the boy then I ever was.”

Fred doesn’t respond for a second. He’s taken quite aback by the comment. He could never have imagined the FP he knew would say anything like that. Anything so injurious to his own pride. So self-effacing.

“I don’t know that’s true.”

"I gotta go. Take care of Archie. Don’t let him and Jug drift away. He’ll need his friends more than ever.”

Fred isn’t sure what to make of those words. Or the haunted, mournful spirit behind them.

"Yeah, of course.”

FP waves as he turns and walks off.

“Take care, Fred.”

“Sure thing, FP. You too.”

“Shit, Fred. When have you ever known me to take care?”
We couldn’t have known it at the time, but Clifford Blossom’s list had been finalized. He was readying himself to deal the coup de grace to the strikers causing him so much grief. Capital was about to reassert itself in Riverdale, at the point of a sword. The town was about to be reminded where the real power lay. It would be bloody, it would be awful, it would be intolerable. Most of all, it would be revealing.

“Jughead, you going to the theater?”

Jughead looks up. His bag is half full. He’s returned home to gather a few things.

“Yeah. Until this place is livable again.” He sweeps his hand in a wide arc, gesturing to the squalor of the little Southside residence.

FP nods. He scratches his stubble.

“Yeah. Okay.”

Jughead raise an eyebrow.

“That’s it? No ‘you ought to come home’?”

“Go ahead. I ain’t gonna fight you over it, Jug. Maybe it’s better that way.”

Jughead fills his bag. He nods. Heads for the door.

“Yeah. Maybe it’s better.” He steps out into the winter cold. Stops. Pauses. Turns back to his father inside. “Good luck with the strike.

FP smiles.

“We’ll need it.”

Chapter End Notes

Remember, transparency and honesty in business are for losers.

And lock your doors.
“You’ll be expected to speak in favor of your father at the trial,” Hermione Lodge says in that elegant, clipped tone of hers.

Her daughter, inheritor of every one of her parents more obstinate, domineering qualities, draws herself up to full height and crosses her arms.

“And if I don’t?”

“Then…what kind of daughter wouldn’t defend her own blood?”

“Is he innocent?”

“That’s not the question,” Hermione shoots back. Her eyes go dark, like they sometimes do. They become narrow and predatory. The phenomenon always gives Veronica the chills. “The question is whether or not he’s guilty in a court of law.”

“Always about the letter, never the spirit. I’m shocked neither of you ever went into law.”

Hermione indulges her daughter.

“That’s not where the money is.”

“Right. Why defend crimes when you can commit them?”

So it is that Veronica Lodge determines to discover exactly what it was her father has or has not done.

“Hey, Jug!” Archie calls out. He throws up a hand, hailing his friend.

Jughead steps out of the Twilight Cinema, blinking the streetlights and the moon from his eyes. He slings his pack, full of his meager belongings (a few moth-eaten books, two dollars, three cans of spam, and his journal) over his shoulder.

“Hey, Archie. What’s up?”

“Nothing. Betty and Veronica are down at Pop’s. I was gonna head down and join them. Just seeing if you want to come.”

Jughead kicks at the dust.

“Yeah, sure. But…”

“What?”
“I don’t know. I thought I ought to drop by my dad’s house. Haven’t been in a while. Just want to check everything out.”

That’s a lie, of course. He’d been there just two days ago, when he’d picked up the books now weighing down his backpack. His father’s parting words that day had left him with an uneasy sense of premonition he simply couldn’t shake. Jughead isn’t really the superstitious or suggestible sort. He doesn’t really put much stock into ‘gut feelings’, but this one just won’t let him go. Maybe he won’t even go into the house. Just watch from across the street. Make sure the lights are on. Anyway, no sense in worrying Archie too.

“I’ll tag along,” Archie says, slapping his friend on the shoulder and smiling. “Let’s go.”

“No, it’s fine, Archie. Go on ahead and meet Betty and Veronica. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“I say it’s fine. Come on, let’s go.”

Jughead shrugs his surrender.

“If you insist.”

They start off down the street together. The streetlights-many of them old gaslights, -dim and buzz over their heads.

They cross the invisible line dividing the southside from the northside. Almost immediately the stark difference becomes apparent.

The streets are mostly empty, except for a few vagrants and bums sitting destitute in doorways and gutters. The refuse of a foundering society. A light snow begins to fall. The wretched souls burrow deeper whatever meager coats or blankets they have Some of them won’t survive the season. Jughead tries not to think of just how close he is to sharing their fate.

“Poor fellas,” Archie says.

Poor indeed.

The clean-cut suburban domiciles vanish to be replaced with shabby, run-down shotgun houses and shacks. Weeds rise up to devour cracked sidewalks. Shattered windows are ’repaired’ with a sheet of paper and some tape. There’s nary a vehicle to be seen. Who can afford one around here?

Jughead says nothing. Archie seems rather struck. He’s been here before, but he’s one of the lucky ones in town. The scenes of immiseration will never become routine for him. Jughead hopes so, at least.

They turn a corner, head down an alley, and arrive at Jughead—or rather, his father’s-house.

FP Jones lives alone, for all intents and purposes. Jughead seems to have moved permanently into the Twilight Cinema. His father can’t really blame him. The Jones house is an untidy catastrophe. It’s well they can afford so little, or it would be even worse. A steady decline ever since Gladys left with the girl. FP shakes his head. No use crying. Spilled milk. All that.

It’s good that he’s alone tonight. FP sits at the table in the bare kitchen. There’s a revolver on the table before him. He reaches out and spins it. Spins it again. The night outside is heavy and quiet. There’s only a sliver of moonlight in the sky. It’s almost Christmas. A light snow began to fall hours ago, dusting the world in a coat of light, shining powder. If FP were as poetically inclined as
his boy he might have been moved to compose a verse or two eulogizing the winter’s beauty. But
he isn’t.

All he’s ever been much good at is scraping by.

There’s no alcohol in reach. He’s not going to get drunk. Not tonight. Or tomorrow night. Just as he
did not the night before. He is determined to remain focused. Prepared.

Ready.

Every creak in the night, every gentle whisper, brings all of his senses to full attention.

At a little past ten, there’s a knock at the door. He doesn’t get visitors. He stands up and creeps
slowly to the curtain adorning the door. Every so slowly, he pulls the curtain back, revolver in
hand. The two figures standing there are dressed dark, so that they melt into the night. It takes him
a moment to recognize his own son and Archie Andrews next to him. He breathes a sigh of relief
and holsters the gun.

FP unlatches the door to allow the boys entry.

“Uh…hey, dad.” Jughead says, brushing snow from his coat. Archie does the same.

“Hey, Jughead. Archie.”

“Hey, Mr. Jones.”

FP nods a greeting. “What’s happening?”

Jughead suddenly feels very silly. Everything seems to be in order. Well, in order by the standards
of the Jones family, which for the moment is good enough. His stupid hunch that something awful
is coming is just that: stupid. He shakes his head a little at his own frightfulness. His mind races to
come with an excuse for his being here beyond ‘I had a premonition’.

“I…was just wondering, if you’d heard anything from mom or Jellybean?” He finally says. It’s a
stupid question. FP would almost certainly have told him if he had. And of course, he doubts
strongly that his mother would be inclined to call, anyway. FP looks crestfallen. Understandably.
Jughead does not notice the same look reflected upon his own face.

Archie shifts uncomfortably behind him.

“No, Jug. I haven’t.”

“Oh…” Jughead slips off his cap and scratches his head. God, this was a bad idea.

“You boys want something to drink?” FP asks.

He doesn’t say ‘food’ because there isn’t any food in the house.

“Actually,” Archie says, still shivering a little from the cold. “We were gonna head down to meet
with Betty and Veronica at Pop’s.”

FP nods. Maybe a little disappointed. Maybe not. Hard man to read. He looks over Archie’s
shoulder, towards the window and at the world beyond. He squints. His eyes go wide. The two
boys don’t notice a second pair of dark figures ambling up the street towards the house. Without
warning, FP shoves Jughead and Archie to the floor.
“Dad, what the f—” Jughead cries out in shock.

“Shhh! Hide!” His father snaps. “Now!” He draws his revolver from its holster again.

“Mr. Jones? What’s g—“ Archie begins.

“Quiet! Go! Hide!”

Jughead stands, indignant.

“Tell me what the hell is g—“

There’s a knock at the door. Forceful. Determined. Jughead’s confrontational words die in his throat. FP aims his revolver at the door. A moment passes. No one moves. Breathing dies down. Then the door flies open in a flurry of splinters. Two dark shapes materialize at the threshold.

The next few seconds pass impossibly slowly.

The intruders draw pistols. FP fires. The shot goes wide. The two men draw a bead on their target. Archie leaps to his feet. He sprints forward, muscles burning. Jughead stumbles forward, reaching out to restrain his friend and failing. One of the triggermen fires. Archie tackles FP to the ground, but not soon enough. The bullet finds its mark. FP grunts in pain as the round buries itself in his ribcage, just below his lung. His companion fires, too. This one hits Archie. Blood fountains from his thigh. FP throws Archie off of him, raises his revolver again, and fires. This shot is true. The first triggerman’s throat explodes in a burst of gore. He crumples to the ground, clutching his mortal wound.

The surviving assassin swears. Another bullet strikes FP, this time in the shoulder. He grunts. His fingers flex and the gun falls from his hand. He shoots Archie again. The bullet goes a little wide. It grazes his bicep, tearing open his shirt and leaving a trail of fire along his skin. The next one hits FP in the hip.

Jughead, unseen by the attackers, jumps forward, for his father’s revolver. The gunman stumbles back in surprise. Jughead’s fingers close around the weapon. Half-blind with rage, he stands, aims, and fires the four remaining rounds in the direction of the intruder. Three go wide. One tears its way through the man’s hand. He howls in pain and drops his pistol. Then he’s gone. Sprinting away into the night.

Jughead drops the revolver, heaving. He whirls around to face his father and best friend, who lie together, blood pumping from their wounds.

“Oh my God…”Jughead chokes out. He drops to his knees to inspect. He doesn’t know anything about gunshot wounds. Anything about anatomy. Anything about weapons.

“Jug…” Archie gasps through the pain. “Go…go get help.”

Jughead nods. He stands. Then he’s running. Out of the house, into the night. He doesn’t know where he’s going. The police station is so far. God, what if they bleed out? He runs faster than he ever has. If it weren’t for the adrenaline coursing through his veins, he would probably collapse from exhaustion when he stops. His mind begins to collapse. Coherent thought process is replaced by fragments of names and colors and faces. He needs help. Familiarity. Help.

“I’m supposed to testify for the defense at my father’s trial,” Veronica Lodge complains, ensconced with Betty Cooper in a booth at Pop’s. Betty stirs her milkshake with a straw.
“Are you going to?"

“Not if…I’m not going to stand up in front of a court and lie.”

“Well…” Betty says, uncertain. “Did he…is he guilty of anything. Really guilty?”

“I don’t know…” Veronica sighs. “Probably. All the late night meetings, shady figures coming in and out of our house at all hours, encrypted letters for God’s sake! It’s not as if I’d put it past him. He was never a paragon of virtue, exactly.” She rolls her dark eyes.

“I can’t tell you what I’d do, Ronnie.”

“Look, he’s my father. I love him, I do. But I can’t defend him if he’s really guilty. If the…plot they talk about had come off, a lot of people would have been hurt. Died. It would have turned the country into Germany or Italy. I wouldn’t stand up to defend Mussolini.”

Betty shrugs.

“But I can’t see any way to know for sure if he’s guilty short of a trial.”

“Well I’ve been doing some digging of my own.”

Betty arches an eyebrow. Forgotten images from the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* begin worming their way back into her mind.

“What kind of digging?”

“I’ve been going through old files and papers that the courts…don’t have access to.”

Betty slurps at her drink, very interested indeed.

“What do you mean ‘they don’t have access’?”

“Papers. Files. The police didn’t get all of it. Didn’t find everything. He planned for this sort of thing. My dad’s smart.” Even as Veronica agonizes over her relationship with the man, Betty can hear a tinge of admiration in her voice.

“If you really think you can suss it all out that way, I say go for it.”

“So far it’s pretty boring. All manifests and trade deals. Perfectly legal,” Veronica smiles, and slurps at her milkshake. “Of course…it’s possible I’ll need a helping hand in my digging.”

Betty returns the grin. Before he can respond, the door to Pop’s bursts open, and a wild-eyed Jughead Jones stumbles into the little diner. The front of his shirt is stained red, as are his hands. He’s trembling. He looks half-mad.

“God!” Betty exclaims. “Jughead, what happened!”

“What is it?” Veronica follows up, her own troubles suddenly eclipsed by her friend’s distress.

The story comes in bits and pieces.

“My dad…Archie…they’ve been shot. There were men with guns…they came to my house. Get help! The hospital…I don’t know. Fuck!”

Then he’s gone again, racing back towards his home, hoping something-anything-anyone-can fix
FP Jones and Archie Andrews are not the only ones attacked that dark December night. With them fall the Serpents known as Rattler and Mustang. Victor Karpati, better known as Viper, another prominent figure in the Serpents and former Blossom employee, simply vanishes. He leaves behind only a miserable canine named Hotdog, whining pitifully at his master’s absence when the police arrive.

Cliff Blossom’s calculations prove accurate, as a businessman’s are wont to do. The strike dissolves almost overnight. The lot is quickly emptied of demonstrating laborers. Most of them return to work, cowed. Some disappear. Into gutters. Into workhouses. Into urban jungles far away from here. The Serpents had served as a rallying point for men who dared to fight. The message was clear. Take a stand and you’ll share their fate. There would be no wage increase. No negotiation. Blossom Maple Farms whirs back to life. A revolting normalcy returns to Riverdale. A spark of hope is extinguished by the black hand of reaction.

Archie and FP lie in their hospital beds, suffering the hastily bandaged wounds they might not survive.

FP is unconscious when Jughead arrives to visit, Betty in tow. Archie is awake, and even flashes a smile when he sees their faces.

“Hey, Arch,” Jughead says. He can’t help a sense of overwhelming guilt. If he had insisted. Made Archie go ahead to Pop’s while he went home alone, he wouldn’t be here now. But then, his father might be dead. If he didn’t die anyway. God, it’s all too fucking much. Betty squeezes his hand.

“Hey, it’s my two favorite people in the whole wide world,” He allows a beat. “Don’t tell Veronica.” Betty smiles.

“How are you…” she pauses. “This is gonna sound stupid, Archie, but…how are you?”

“All things considered…not bad. I’m alive, after all.”

A lump builds in Jughead’s throat.

“Yeah…I can’t think of much that could put you out of commission,” he says, eyes watering.

“You…your arm,” Betty says, her voice sweet and caring, as always. “Is it…are you still going to be able to play your guitar?”

“I think it’s just a graze. Don’t worry, I’ll be annoying you with terrible music again in no time.”

“Your music is not terrible, Archie, and you know it,” She exclaims.

“Just fishing for compliments, Betts,” he answers.

She rolls her eyes. Wipes away a tear. Jughead kneels down, so that he can look Archie in the eye.

“I think your dad’s gonna do okay,” Archie says, before Jughead can speak. “He was awake earlier, the doctors said. And talking.” God, Archie’s trying to reassure him? As Veronica had said, once upon a time, ‘what don’t you do?’

“Archie, listen,” Jughead begins. There are tears bathing his cheeks now. “What you did…if you hadn’t been there…my dad…” His voice falters. Betty puts a hand on the small of his back. “My
dad might be dead and… and I might be, too. I just… thanks, Arch. That sounds stupid. It’s… not enough. But… thanks.”

“You would have done the same for me, right Jug?” Archie asks.

A black, ugly rage begins to build in Jughead’s chest. No. This isn’t his fault. He is not going to blame himself. Not for this. He knows exactly who’s responsible for this. He knows because it’s impossible to escape him or his hellish brood. The same man whose shackles enslave the entire town. The same man who grows fat in his palace while Riverdale starves. The man whose wages meant Jughead and his father were lucky if they got to eat a real meal two nights in a row.

Clifford fucking Blossom. That’s whose red work this is.

But rage isn’t what is needed right now. It’s not what Betty needs. Or what Archie or FP needs. Even if it’s precisely what he needs.

Jughead reaches out for Archie’s hand.

“Of course, Archie. Of course.”

“Josie dropped by, earlier,” Archie says. “Says we can work on some songs together when I’m… not dying.”

Betty beams.

“Aces!”

“That’s great, Archie,” Jughead says.

“You know, Jug. I’ve read some of the stuff you’ve written. You wouldn’t be a terrible songwriter yourself, if you ever wanted to give it a shot.”

Jughead has a hard time imagining that. Himself writing songs? Much too airy. Much too cheery. He’s written a few poems, but they’re all terrible. And depressing.

“If I ever lose my fabulous wealth and need a new source of income I’ll keep that in mind,” Jughead jokes.

Archie smiles. “If I didn’t have a bullet wound in my arm, I’d punch you.”

“Do you know anyone who would have had a grudge against your father?” Sheriff Keller asks. He sits across from FP Jones’ only son. The dark-haired boy sneers. He snorts.

“Are we really going to play this game, sheriff? Don’t insult me.”

“Our working theory is a mugging gone wr-“

“And the other two men? More muggings gone wrong? Really, is that the best working theory Blossom money can buy?”

“If you’re sugge—“

“I’m not suggesting anything. I’m just trying to be forward. Justice costs money in this country, just like everything else. I’m sure you’re not a bad man. You got a kid to feed, like everyone else.
Along with yourself. We all have to dance to Cliff Blossom’s tune, right Sheriff Keller? Now, unless I’m being arrested, I think I’d like to go."

Jughead Jones stands. Jughead Jones leaves. Keller says nothing. When the boy is gone, he digs his fingers into his scalp and wonders to himself exactly how it has come to all this.

Jughead, or a piece of him, seems to die with the strike, or at least lie indisposed with his father and best friend.

Betty says he shouldn’t make himself so scarce. That this, more than any other time, is a time for togetherness and mutual support.

“It’s going to be alright, Jughead,” she’d assured him, wrapping him up into a great hug. Betty kissed him gently and spoke as she always did, so soothingly and sweetly that she could make you believe anything.

“Betty…God, what if they die?”

She cupped his face.

“You can’t think like that. We can’t think like that, Juggie. We have…we have to think that it’s going to be okay. Or else…it won’t be.”

He hates that she’s right. But it doesn’t matter if she is. He needs to be alone, anyway. Needs to sort out things for himself. Needs to figure out what, exactly he’s going to do. And about what.

The proprietor of the Twilight Cinema is kind enough to raise his wage. Just a little bit. He wonders if it’ll be enough to keep him from starving while his father languishes in the hospital. Probably not.

The theater is empty today. Jughead curls up in a pile of blankets and pillows tucked away into the corner of the projection booth. The rows of film reels around him provide an odd air of comfort. A thin layer of dust hangs in the air. There’s an old phonograph left here God-knows how long ago, along with a number of decaying vinyls. He plays it sometimes, when no one else is around to hear. It dispels the loneliness. Just a little. It wraps him up in its notes and carries him away from here. Somewhere else. Anywhere else. Somewhere where people aren’t being gunned down over meager wages and where everyone had enough to eat all the time and all the conflicts and hatreds of this world meant nothing.

*Songs of the People*, reads the sleeve of one of his preferred selections. Old labor and popular songs. A little subversive. Just what he needs right now. The words are printed in black, blocky type against a grey background. Beneath the lettering is a stylized depiction of a factory flying a red flag.

Warszawianka. Steady the needle. Play.

*Whirlwinds of danger are raging around us, o’erwhelming forces of darkness assail, still in the fight see advancing before us, red flag of liberty that yet shall prevail.*

The pain dealt to people he cares about is unbearable, of course. He can hardly think about that goddamn hospital without tearing up. But it’s the ultimate defeat it represents. Hundreds of others like him have had what little hope they still nourished stamped out with the cruelty that has done this to him. What a victory.

*Death to the kings and the rich parasites, tremble before our righteous rage. We shall dash the old*
order down, and harvest the crops of the future we will.

Jughead pries open another can of spam.

Then all we workers rightly shall reign all over the skies and the land and the sea! On with the fight for the cause of all nations! March on, you toilers, to set the world free!

He registers the taste of the tasteless meat. It falls apart in his mouth. Rubbery, mass-produced feed little better than that produced for animals. Disgusting.

He savors every bite.

The story of the Riverdale strike came to the same end as the tales of Harlan County, Blair Mountain, and Homestead. Cliff Blossom’s throne stood secure, christened in the blood and sweat of the men he’d crushed and dispossessed. The forces of order were restored, and Riverdale’s was returned by force of arms to the status quo ante.

I, Jughead Jones, watched in anguish as my father and closest friend hung onto life in our town hospital, generously built by the Blossoms a generation ago. Riverdale lost hope. We were plunged back into a mire of reaction without any chance of reprieve or rescue.

Across town, one Veronica Lodge had resolved to discover for herself the guilt or innocence of her father with regards to the conspiracy in which he had been implicated. Just as she had said, Hiram Lodge had long prepared for the day even his money could not protect him from the law, and made certain that papers and records of particular importance remained secure even in the case of his incapacitation. One load of this evidence, as the girl well knew, was secreted away in boxes now tucked into the dark corners of Pembrooke’s cavernous basement. It was there Veronica went to find the truth, a truth she wisely suspected would be less than pretty.

Veronica Lodge hauls box after box of papers from the subbasement of Pembrooke apartments. They’re mostly wooden crates, though a few leather chests are brought up from the darkness as well.

Veronica’s head spins. So many boxes. So many papers. Too many. Christ.

Her mother won’t be home for a while. Still, she wonders how much she can get through. She supposes she ought to just go down to the basement next time instead of hauling its contents upstairs.

Veronica pries open one of the boxes and leafs through the stacks of paper within. Once she determines they’ll hold nothing of value, she shuts it and shunts it aside.

Betty and Jughead are down at the hospital with FP and Archie. She feels a bit guilty. She did visit yesterday, anyway. But this is important. Her father is the centerpiece of a nationally significant trial. Her testimony, or lack thereof, could affect the fates of scores of people. In a purely pragmatic sense, this probably outweighs the tragedy of the shootings.

Fine. Maybe she’s a bit callous sometimes.

Perhaps part of the reason she isn’t as stunned into stupor as everyone else is because she’d more than seen this coming. Just like she’d warned Jughead in the school lot. Cliff Blossom had done exactly what she expected he would to salvage his profits. That was what businessmen did.
She’ll visit the hospital in the morning, she decides. That’ll balance it all out.

Veronica runs a finger along the label affixed to this crate.

*Spring 1934.*

That looked right, as far as date went. She pops it open. There’s another box inside, this one fixed with a lock. Veronica rolls her eyes. A long, thin knife, and some recalled lessons in thievery from trash pulp novels later she’s gotten past that little obstacle as well. The papers inside are bound together in a stack by a thick leather belt. She slices through it.

The papers scatter across the floor. Veronica digs in. Automobile parts to Bucharest. $400,000 dollars for a shipment somewhere in the British Mandate of Palestine. Settlement with the Brazilian government considering some troubles in a Rio de Janeiro factory.

All perfectly boring.

All perfectly routine.

All perfectly legal.


It’s going to a perfectly long night.

Jughead prepares the projector for a showing of *Dracula*, his face an expressionless mask. Betty had dropped by earlier. He hadn’t been able to bring himself to shake the darkness in him. She’d left crestfallen. He’d felt bad. There had been nothing he could do. Just as he could do nothing to help Archie or his father. The circles beneath his eyes are darker than usual. His lips are pallid. Unkempt hair spills from his loosely fitted cap. He holds the film reel in his hand. Tosses it into the air once. Prepares to load it.

The movie begins. He scopes out the audience, as usual. He’s less incensed than bemused to spy the familiar twin red heads of the Blossom siblings. Wonders if they’re going to become regular patrons. Because he isn’t sure exactly how much of them he can stand looking at. He wonders how it’s possible to be so disconnected. How it’s possible to enjoy fabulous wealth while fellow residents of your town are all but starving. How do they live? Are they human? Do they even know what it means to be human? Do they define the word the same as everyone else?

The movie begins.

He retreats to the rear of the room and coaxes Hot Dog into his lap. After the disappearance of Viper, presumably fled to somewhere even Cliff Blossom could not reach, he’d taken the dog in. He needed a home, too, after all. He was alone. The animal purrs in satisfaction and settles in for a nap. So does Jughead. He closes his eyes. The monotonous ticking of the projector lulls him into a light sleep. He’s not supposed to sleep while the projector is running. Liable to start a damn fire. But what the hell. For just a few minutes, he can forget the cavalcade of tragedies that are his life.

The movie draws to a finish about an hour later. Dracula is staked. The fair maiden saved from his vile clutches. A happy ending.

There’s a soft, careful knock at the door that rouses Jughead from his fitful dreaming. He rises, unsteady to his feet, shoving Hot Dog off and cursing. Jughead makes his way to the door.
“Bett—” he begins as he opens the door. The words die in his throat as he realizes his visitors are not Archie and Betty. In fact, they’re the last people in the world he would have expected.

They’re the Blossom twins.

His first thought is if he could get away with murdering them both.

He decides probably not.

The two redheads stand there in silence. Dressed in clothes probably more expensive than half of the property in Riverdale. Cheryl adjusts a boa around her neck. Jason tugs at the lapel of his tailor-made jacket. Jughead is a loss for words. He feels as if the architects of his ever-degenerating life are standing before him.

Finally, Cheryl speaks.

“We…we wanted to say we’re…sorry about…about your father. And Archie, of course.” She adjusts her hair in that, ‘I’m beautiful, but could be even more beautiful’ way peculiar to her.

Jughead’s face doesn’t so much as twitch. His eyes water, just a little bit. Then he laughs. And it’s the first laughter he’s enjoyed in a while.

“You’re sorry? Really? You ought to ask your father to send me a condolences card. Or maybe fix up Archie and my dad. Good as new. He’s got the money for that, right? Did he send you here? Are you here to shoot me, too? Hold up a second, let me just take my hat off. I don’t want to get blood on it.”

“Look, we didn't have a—“ Cheryl begins, indignant.

Jason kicks her gently in the leg to quiet her. Jughead notices.

Cheryl looks down, at her feet. Away from him. Jason maintains eye contact.

Cheryl turns to leave.

“Go on, Cher,” Jason says, voice soft. He hears her footsteps fade away. Jason remains. He sighs.

“I just…you deserve to know. If there was any doubt in your mind…my father was the one who…” He chokes on his words. “Who ordered the hit. I know it. For a fact.”

Then he too, is gone.

Jughead’s mind is suddenly barren. He struggles to make sense of the encounter. Struggles to put his existence into perspective. Hot Dog licks at his hand. He claws at his scalp, as if trying to tear his skull open and get at the horrors in his head.

It isn’t until the next morning he finds the wad of hundred dollar bills just outside the projection booth’s door. Along with them comes a little note, scribbled in gentle, aristocratic lettering.

*I hope this is enough to cover the costs of the treatment, whatever it is. I don’t think I could have taken any more. Sorry.*

Jughead takes a moment to wish things would just be normal again for God’s sake.

He looks at the calendar on the projection booth's wall. It's New Year's Eve.
Press F to pay your respects.
"It is us today. It will be you tomorrow."

-Emperor Haile Selassie, 1936 address before the League of Nations

Jason’s just gotten a letter. It’s the one he’s been waiting for. His narrow, handsome face lights up with joy when he pulls it from the letterbox at Riverdale’s post office. He wouldn’t have it delivered to Thornhill, of course. That would be risky. Insane. If his father intercepted it...he shudders at the thought.

Jason thanks the postman and ducks out of the office with his letter. He decides to head over to Pop’s. The sky is stark blue and relatively cloudless. The New Year has come in glory. Despite the rather dismal happenings of the last few months, it’s a day worthy of cheer. He slides into his and Cheryl’s favorite booth. Three down from the door, against the window. Two down from the bar, to the right. They’ve worn down the leather of the seats, sitting here so often since they were little children. He sighs. Cheryl, poor Cheryl. Really, she’s probably the sole reason he’s still here. If it weren’t for her, he might have slipped away a while ago. Grab a few hundred dollars. Vanish into the night. Let his father find some other heir for his filthy empire. He’d go somewhere else. Paris. Berlin, maybe. Well, not Berlin, anymore. It’d been host to quite the thriving nightlife until a few years ago. The National Socialists had put an end to all of that. But he can’t leave Cheryl alone to the tender mercies of their dictatorial parents. It would hurt to be parted from her. So he stays. For now. But while he stays, he will make himself useful. To something. To someone. To everyone.

He tears the envelope open. Without being asked, Pop brings him a vanilla milkshake. He mumbles a thank you and slips him the proper amount of cash. Plus a hefty tip. The least he can do for a man that’s made so many intolerable lives almost tolerable.

Jason unfolds the letter. It’s typed in even black font over a creamy white paper. At the top of the letter is a little seal, depicting a hammer and a sickle superimposed over the globe of the earth.

To the comrades of the Riverdale branch, Riverdale township, New York State the letter reads. Jason beams. Greetings! Your application for a charter as a branch of the Communist Party of America has been approved and the charter granted.

We welcome you to the comradeship of the workers who are pledged to struggle to abolish the capitalist system and establish the Communist society.

The signature at the bottom of the paper, crisp and simple as a workingman’s should be, reads ‘Earl Browder’. Central Executive Committee.

He sips his milkshake. He can’t wait to tell Cheryl. She won’t be pleased, probably. Okay, she’ll be very unhappy. But he has to tell someone. And there’s no one else he really trusts.

The strike has been crushed. ‘Order’, in the most vulgar, inhumane sense of the term, has been restored to the little New York township. His father’s position is secure. He feels a flash of anger. That doesn’t mean all is lost. All is never lost. Not at Valmy, in 1792. Not on the Neva in 1919. Not in Riverdale in 1936.
He has money. It’s money he hasn’t earned. Money he has no right to, really. But he can use it for good. A weapon can always be turned against its maker.

Jason Blossom looks up.

1936 is inaugurated by gunsmoke and misery.

Across the sea, Italian boots tramp upon Ethiopian soil. The world watches with criminal indifference as fascist troops torture and enslave a free people. Mussolini’s twisted parody of the Roman Empire slowly takes shape. In Germany, the party intensifies its endeavors to excise ‘undesirables’ from the body politic. The Nazi government looks east. *Drang nach osten*. Poland. Ukraine. The Baltic. Russia. There’s still much to be accomplished at home, first. Purification. Rebirth. But one day Teutonic guns will shatter Europe’s uneasy silence. The new Germany will arise to take her inheritance.

A great darkness spreads itself over the nations.

But the sun is shining bright, the snow shimmering beneath its brilliant glow. Tree boughs shake in a gentle morning breeze. Birds sing. A new year is on the horizon. A new age comes with the dawn. There is still hope. There is always hope. It’s time to start anew.

He pockets the letter.

Chapter End Notes

Ever wonder why the Blossoms’ signature color is red?
“I can’t do this anymore, Cher. I can’t!”

“Jason…” She reaches out to lay a comforting hand on his arm. He jerks away.

“No! God, look at what he did! Look at…” Jason’s voice trails off. His eyes burn.

“You can’t fix all of the world’s problems, Jason. It’s… it isn’t our concern.”

“The hell it isn’t!” He jerks at the hem of his coat. “Where do you think the money comes from?” He reaches out and grabs hold of the sleeve of her dress. Yanks it. She gasps in surprise. “That pays for all of this? From him! From what he does! He murdered those people. Christ, Andrews is in the hospital!”

“They were all Serpents, weren’t they? They were criminals. It could be worse. I just mean to s—“

“How can you… they were human beings, Cheryl! Human beings whose crime was to think maybe they deserved to be able to feed themselves and their families! How can you justify that?”

“Jason, he’s our father. We live in his house. We—“

“Why do you always defend him? With the way he treats us? Like we’re chess pieces to move around for the sake of his business? Like we’re just more of his property? And that’s wonderful compared to the way he treats everyone else!”

“I don’t care about him!” she shouts. It startles him. He stiffens. Cheryl places her hands on his shoulders. Looks up into his eyes. “I care about you. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Jason’s face softens. He lowers his voice.

“Cher, what do you think’s going to happen to me?”

“You’re scaring me, lately. I’m scared you’re going to make him mad. If you…if he starts thinking you’re a problem?”

He snorts.

“A problem?”

“Jason, I found your letter.”

“My l—“

“Don’t play dumb with me, JJ.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “The one from the Communists. Are you out of your mind? What if one of the maids had found it? What if… what if dad had found it? Who knows what he would do?” She reaches up and puts a hand to his cheek. “Jason, I love you. Please don’t do anything stupid.”

He hugs his sister. Gives her a brief kiss.
“Cheryl, I’m not going to do anything stupid.”

“If you do, you’ll just deny it’s stupid.”

“Fair point.”

“Please don’t go on this ridiculous crusade you so clearly want to go on.”

He smooths her hair.

“Everything’s going to be fine, Cheryl. Nothing’s going to happen to me. Or you. Or anyone else. But things can’t go on like this. Not anymore. Cheryl, a boy we know is dying and our father’s the one responsible for it.”

“Dad’s guys weren’t there for Andrews.”

“So it would have been better if Jones was made an orphan?”

“That’s not what I meant, JJ.”

He sighs. Looks around. God forbid anyone was listening in. And one could never rule anything out in the dark halls of Thornhill.

“You’re a good person, Cher. You have a good heart. I know that. You know this isn’t right.”

She groans.

“Maybe…God, I don’t know.”

“I do.”

Cheryl hugs her brother.

“No, Jason, you don’t. You don’t know. That’s the fucking problem”

Jughead doesn’t know Joaquin DeSantos too well. He knows he’s Kevin’s friend. He knows he’s a serpent, like his father. But that’s about all that he does know. So when he meets him coming out of the hospital one day in the first week of January, and Joaquin greets him with a ‘Jughead!’ he isn’t quite sure how to respond.

Except with a half-hearted wave and a ‘hey, Joaquin’.

The Serpent offers him a cigarette. He waves it away. Joaquin shrugs and pops one into his own mouth. “Suit yourself.” The winter winds give him a good fight as he struggles to light it, but he manages. Joaquin jerks a thumb towards the squat, sprawling hospital building. Riverdale General. Built by Obadiah Blossom in 1892 as an act of charity. “How’s he doing?”

Jughead pauses. He shrugs.

“Fine.”

Joaquin nods. They’re just far enough from the hospital that it’s not clear whether Joaquin is himself heading there or merely in the area. Jughead doesn’t bother to ask.

“Fine?”
"Well, he’s got a bullet in the ribs. About as fine as can be considering the present circumstances."

“Your dad’s a tough bastard.”

“How d’you know that?”

Joaquin shrugs.

“Spoken to him more than once.” He puff’s on the cigarette. A little tendril of smoke curls from his lips and dissolves into the chilly morning air.

“Right.” Jughead tries to stay away from all of the Serpent shit. More trouble than it’s worth. Though, frankly, he thinks much of it is a lot of bluster. They aren’t near as dangerous or formidable as they’d like the public to believe. That Cliff Blossom’s latest blow has scattered them like so many leaves is evidence enough of that. “Know him well?” He finally asks.

Joaquin pauses. Takes another puff of his cigarette. “Don’t know about ‘well’. Only been in town a few months.” His blue eyes gaze off into the grey cloud-streaked skies distant. “Maybe. Depends on what you consider ‘well’.”

Jughead raises an eyebrow. “Well enough to be afraid?”

“Afraid of what?” Joaquin asks, as though he resents the implication he might fear anything at all. Of course, they both know perfectly well what Jughead means.

“Ending up the same way.”

“Nah. I’m not that important.” Joaquin shoots him a look. Jughead can’t quite read it. Can’t find that glint in the eye that affirms or denies the tongue. “Anyway, I might be more pissed than afraid.”

Jughead chuckles.

“Pissed? Really?”

“Hell yeah. I just got here.” He gestures in the general direction of the Southside. “All the other lowlifes and riffraff in leather jackets-they’re probably the closest thing I got to family right now. Not to mention allies. Which are more important.” He takes one last drag on the cigarette. Plucks it from his lips. Flicks it to the ground and grinds it out with a boot heel. “And this asshole in a shitty wig comes along and cocks it all up.”

Jughead lips curl into a smile.

“You know about Cliff Blossom’s wig?”

“Everybody knows about Cliff Blossom’s wigs.”

“Except Cliff Blossom doesn’t know everybody knows about Cliff Blossom’s wig.”

The Serpent curls his fingers into the shape of a pistol and imitates the sound of a gun’s discharge.

“I’d like to shoot it right off his fuckin’ head.”

Jughead chuckles. It feels nice to laugh, really. It’s become a rather rare luxury lately.

“You and me both, pal.”
There’s another moment of silence. Furtive gusts of winter wind blow withered leaves down Riverdale’s main street. Christmas wreathes, their needles and leaves beginning to decay, still hang from shop windows and doors. A few cheap signboards hang around, reading ‘happy new years!’ in cheery lettering belying the town’s misery. One more blessed year in the U S of A. Welcome to 1936.

“On that note,” Joaquin says. “If you’d really like to shoot the wig off Cliff Blossom’s head… well, you and me ain’t the only ones.”

“No? Who else?” Jughead’s eyes narrow. His defenses go up. His instincts demand he be alert. He has the sudden feeling the next words out of Joaquin’s mouth will be ones of particular gravity.

“Try every worker in his factory, for one. And a few other fellas. That I know.”

“Well…” Jughead says, cautious. “Are you and your ‘fellas’ planning to do anymore than ‘like to’?”

Joaquin smiles, his eyes still locked on the rolling January sky. It’s a conspiratorial, borderline predatory smile. Full of intent and devoid of warmth.

“Maybe. Just maybe.”

Jughead feels his heart quicken, just a little bit. He hopes they put a damn bullet in Cliff Blossom’s head. Or six bullets. He won’t even entertain of that ‘it won’t solve anything’ bullshit, because it absolutely will. No more Cliff Blossom means the people of Riverdale just might have a fighting chance to improve their lot.

“Well,” Jughead finally says. “When Cliff Blossom’s gotten what he deserves, I’ll know who to thank.”

“Why not thank yourself?”

“Hmm?”

“We…” Joaquin begins. His voice drops a few octaves. No one’s listening and it’s unlikely anyone cares, but his voice drops nonetheless. “Well, apparently a few folks who feel more or less the same way are having a meeting on the 25th at about sundown. To talk about…you know…issues. I figured I’d drop by. Thought you might like to, also?” Jughead opens his mouth. Joaquin preempts him. “Relax, it’s not a frame-up. Blossom thinks we’re done. Very confident guy.” Before Jughead can respond, Joaquin passes him a slip of paper. He grinds out his second cigarette. He waves.

“See you, Jones Jr.”

Then he’s off, in the direction of Jughead-isn’t-sure-what.

Jughead checks out the slip of paper. It’s just a scrap from a notebook, with an address scribbled in messy, spidery hand

1905 Maple Lane.

Sundown, right?

Veronica Lodge has just cracked open a box of papers chronicling the flow of money from her father’s automobile construction plant in northern Maine to…well, countless places. It’s incredibly boring for her, a girl to whom business comes easier than most. It must be absolutely hellish for
Betty Cooper, who Veronica has press-ganged into helping her.

“What are we looking for, exactly?” Betty asks. They sit in Veronica’s spacey room on the second floor of Pembrooke, poring over records in the light of a dim desk lamp. Veronica has revised her strategy and decided to bring up boxes from the basement one by one rather than en masse.

“Numbers that make no sense. Money transfers. Money disappearing. Particularly money being transferred into nameless or otherwise suspicious firms or accounts. Look for the names GM or the American Legion in particular.” She runs a manicured finger down another slip of paper. Does some quick calculations. Tosses it aside in disgust. Nothing.

“Veronica…I’m not very good at this…I really don’t think I’ll be much help.” She smiles weakly. Veronica wags a finger.

“Nice try, Betts. You’re not getting out of this.”

Betty sighs in defeat, and they keep searching. The sun slowly sinks beneath the forested ridges beyond town. Darkness springs up. They keep looking. A little past sundown, Betty suddenly makes an odd little noise.

“Huh,” she mumbles.

Veronica looks up.

“What?”

“I didn’t know your father did business with the Blossoms.”

Veronica raises an eyebrow.

“Neither did I.” Without asking, she reaches over and plucks the paper Betty’s examining from her hands. Looks it over. There it is. $25,000 worth of machinery to Blossom Maple Farms. Except, something’s not quite right. The combined costs of the machinery clearly don’t add up to $15,000. They barely break $10000, in fact. So that leaves $15000 dollars unaccounted for.

“See that? Missing money,” she pronounces, more to herself than to Betty. There’s an air of triumph in her voice.

“What does that mean?” Betty asks, blue eyes big and uncomprehending.

“Well, Betty darling. It means that unless Clifford Blossom was giving daddy money for free, something odd is going on here.” Her lips purse. It’s so small. Insignificant, almost. No one would ever notice such a tiny discrepancy unless they were, like she and Betty, specifically hunting for it. She checks the date on the paper. May 1935. “Betty, can you grab me that stack of papers?” She gestures to a messy pile on the floor next to the desk.

“Didn’t we already look through these?” Betty protests as she leans down to grab them.

“Yes.”

Veronica takes them from her. Flips to the one she needs. There they are. The $15000. All gone to an account in Spain. Málaga. Veronica chews her lip.

Her father has always had dealings in Spain. The Lodge family is of Spanish descent, after all. Her father’s father, Ausencio, had decided on a prudent change of surname upon coming to America.
Americans were, he figured, more likely to do business with a Lodge than with a Primo de Rivera. By the same token, he’d christened his firstborn son Hiram. But that did not mean they lost all connection with the mother country. Veronica has been to Spain more than once, with her father and mother (who is herself Mexican, but of partly Spanish descent). So there’s nothing strange about accounts in that country. But still, the moved money…and from Cliff Blossom? Surely that was not a coincidence.

The night winds on. Betty falls asleep in her chair and Veronica gently places a pillow beneath her head. She finds more of the same, and it seems her father and Cliff Blossom maintained quite a healthy business relationship. Selling and buying. Buying and selling. More money shaved off the top of orders. A percentage point here. A few thousand there. Gone into shady, obscure accounts. All quite intriguing.

It leaves her with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. A feeling she is certain will only be alleviated when she’s gotten to the bottom of all of this. She can’t ask her father, obviously. She can’t march right up to Cliff Blossom and demand answers, either.

But she can march right up to his kids.

Chapter End Notes

Veronica canonically comes from a Spanish speaking family (despite Camila herself being Brazilian), so since the actual country of origin is never mentioned, I decided to make them Mexican-Spanish (part Spanish on Hiram's side), since it'll be important to the purposes of the plot. Plus Mark Consuelos (who will play Hiram) is Spanish IRL, so I suppose it works out fine.
This chapter is in no small part a shameless rip-off of episode 1x05 reworked to serve the purposes of my plot.


Today her prey is a redheaded bombshell named Cheryl Blossom.

“So you’re going to try to infiltrate Thornhill all gumshoe-like?” Betty had asked her earlier. “Precisely” she’d responded. “Good luck in the lion’s den, Daniel.” Was Betty’s foreboding answer.

“Relax, Betts,” she'd said. “Daniel came out of it alright, didn’t he?”

“Thanks to literal divine intervention.”

Veronica shrugged. Yeah, it probably wouldn’t be fun. But after poring over another hundred of her father’s papers, she had finally come to the inescapable conclusion that she was not going to glean any further information regarding the connections between Lodge Industries and Blossom Maple Farms that way. The only way to uncover the full story would be to get it from the other side of the transactions. That meant she was going to have do some fieldwork. That meant Cliff Blossom. That meant Thornhill.

Now she only has before her the Herculean task of getting a Blossom twin to invite her to the gloomy mansion. Veronica isn’t exactly tight with either of them.

The plan she finally decides on isn’t particularly sophisticated. In fact it’s rather clumsy and sloppily put together and Veronica has more than few doubts that it’ll work. And it relies largely on the acting skills of Betty Cooper.

The aforementioned blonde sidles up to Cheryl one day as classes let out, her sweet face all sincerity.

“Hey, Cheryl.”

“If it isn't the poor man's Lilian Gish,” she snaps. "What do you want, Cooper?" Betty doesn’t lose her stride.

“I was just making sure you were coming to Veronica’s house this Friday.”

“What?”

Betty pops her blue eyes. Tries her best to look legitimately shocked and embarrassed.

“Oh…she didn’t tell you?”
Cheryl plants her fists on her hips, less than happy. She purses her lips.

“No, as a matter of fact she neglected to inform me.”

“It’s not a big deal, really,” Betty stammers, doing a commendable impression of someone trying to backpedal.

Cheryl crosses her arms and glares down at Betty.

“Oh, I’m sure. Not a big deal. I should just stay home, right?”

“That’s not what I meant. Of course you can come if you w-“

“Who’s invited?”

“Just a few people. Midge, Ginger, Ethe-“

“Ethel Muggs?” Cheryl shakes with fury at the prospect of being left out of something Ethel is not. She pokes Betty in the chest. “You tell your wannabe femme fatale friend that I will be at her pathetic little shindig. In fact, I just might help take it from pathetic to tolerable.”

Then she storms off, leaving Betty to drop the facade and crack a smile.

Too easy.

Phase too comes two days later, and falls on Veronica.

“Cheryl” She whispers in the midst of an incredibly boring Mr. Flutesnoot lecture on Manifest Destiny. “Bad news. I won’t be able to have guests in Pembrooke on Friday, after all.”

Cheryl looks back at her, eyes flashing. Veronica knows precisely what she’s thinking.

*This bitch is trying to pretend her party’s cancelled so I won’t show.*

And that’s exactly what Veronica wants her to think.

“That’s fine. We can relocate to Thornhill.” Cheryl says, with a smile of what she probably thinks is victory.

“Great!”

“Great.”

Jughead looks over the scrap of paper for the hundredth time.

1909 Maple Lane.

It’s a rather desolate part of town. Home to a lot of the businesses that first folded when the Depression came. The moon is high in the sky outside. He hesitates. What if it’s some kind of trick? Some Blossom cunning meant to crush what little resistance remains. He thinks back to the stack of hundred dollar bills Jason Blossom had left him. As if he was going to be able to waltz into the hospital and use them, no questions asked. His sudden benefactor had certainly not put much thought into that act of largesse. Was that also part of some greater plot? God, who knew?

Jughead slips on his jacket and steps out from the Twilight Theater into the cold January night.
Frost and snow crack beneath his feet. His breath crystallizes in the frozen air. He wonders what he’ll find exactly. A few serpents gathered in a basement somewhere? Cops?

He hasn’t been spending much time with Betty lately. He feels a pang of guilt for eschewing her company again in lieu of Joaquin’s mysterious invitation. But the shadowy offer was an irresistible draw. Even the possibility of revenge…of evening the score just a little…

When he comes at last to the address, he recognizes it as a former hardware store owned by a heavy-set man who’d left town some two years prior. The store had sat, dark and vacant since then. Now, there was once again the glow of lamplight streaming through the blinds. Jughead checks the address one more time, just to be certain. He takes a deep breath, approaches the door, draws back a fist, and knocks. There’s a moment of silence. He knocks again. Finally, he hears the steady sound of footsteps within.

“Who is it?” asks a vaguely familiar voice from the other side of the door. Before Jughead can tender an answer, the door swings open to reveal—much to his surprise—the face of Kevin Keller.

“Kevin?”

“Jughead? Oh thank God.”

“What are you…”

“I don’t know what the hell this is. I came with Joaquin.”

Jughead shrugs and steps inside. The sudden warmth rolls over him. He shudders in delight, stripping off his coat and hanging it up. The snow crusting over his boots melts into a puddle at his feet. He doesn’t bother to remove the shoes.

The room is completely empty, save for him and Kevin. It’s long since been cleared out of shelves and stock. But in the rear, there’s a door sitting slightly ajar. Voices and light stream from the little crack between the door and the wall.

“Where-“

“Everyone’s in the back,” Kevin cuts him off, gesturing towards the back room. “Come on.” Kevin motions for him to follow. His voice is heavy. Laden with exasperation. In a word, annoyed. He leads Jughead to the back room and through the door.

The first thing that catches Jughead’s eye is the massive crimson flag pinned up on the far wall. The second thing that catches his eye is Jason Blossom. The boy stands beneath the banner, scribbling furiously into a notebook. Jughead has the urge to turn around and fly back into the night. Or maybe pluck Jason’s throat out. Or maybe ask him if this is some sort of odd modernist art project. A cabaret show sort of thing.

The room is sparse except for a few chairs arranged in a crude half-moon shape. Few are filled. On the far left sits Joaquin, who turns to wave. Kevin sighs and takes a seat next to him.

“Is this everyone?” Jason asks. “Wonderful!” He says, and Jughead can’t quite tell whether he’s being sarcastic or not. If not, he must possess an optimism rivaling Betty Cooper.

Slowly, tentatively, Jughead sits down a few chairs from Kevin. He tenses his muscles. More than prepared to spring into action should something go wrong.
“Okay,” Jason begins. “I’d like to welcome everyone to the first convention of Riverdale’s branch of the Communist Party of the United States.”

“All three of us,” Jughead mumbles.

Jason either doesn’t hear him or pretends not to.

“Joaquin, assured me at least fifteen people would show,” Jason says, annoyed. He shoots the dark-haired lad a look.

Joaquin shrugs.

“That’s what I thought. People are unreliable. If a hundred people say they’re coming, assume 20. Cardinal rule.”

“Fine. I suppose this isn’t that bad for a start. The Bolshevik central committee before the Revolution wasn’t much bigger. I tried to get Cheryl to tag along but…she wouldn’t.”

“We are richer for her absence,” Jughead murmurs.

“Thank you for the input, Jones,” Jason coughs. “I uh…I’d prepared an agenda for today’s meeting but I lost it an-“

“Okay, I have to ask,” Jughead interrupts. “Is this some kind of elaborate gag? Is your father going to jump out from behind a curtain and have Sheriff Keller arrest us all?” Kevin shoots him a look. Jason says nothing. His face goes blank. He actually looks a little hurt.

“I don’t agree with my father on everything;” he finally says. Jughead’s hands clench into fists. This would certainly be a hell of a disagreement, if he takes Jason at his word. He’s understandably leery to trust the son of his father’s would-be murderer. “And I think what he’s done to this town-to you—is monstrous.”

Jughead studies the tone of Jason’s voice. The pitch. The inflection. The break and the flow. He likes to think himself a decent judge of voices. An author without a grasp of human speech is a hopeless one, after all. And try as he might, he detects no trace of deception in Jason’s words. He comes across sincere. Just sincere enough that Jughead doesn’t stand up and walk out of the door.

“Capital is brutal,” Jason says. His gaze swings to Jughead. Their eyes meet. And Jughead isn’t sure whether he wants to keep looking or tear his gaze away.

The rest of the meeting is a disorganized mess, which is ridiculous considering organizing four people shouldn’t be particularly hard. Jason is directionless without his agenda, and moves from topic to topic too rapidly for anyone to follow. He fails to appreciate the fact that his three-man audience isn’t as familiar with Marxist terminology as him, and it isn’t until the fourth time he’s used the phrase ‘dialectical materialism’ that he stops to ask if they know what that is.

Once he’s realized the need to explain some crucial concepts to his new disciples, the lecture becomes a basic introduction to Marxism, and Jason’s language switches from far too esoteric to far too simplistic, as if he is speaking with children.

“So the proletarian-That is, the worker. The guys who physically do the work,” he mimes swinging a hammer to get the point across.

Kevin finally loses it and snaps: “We’re not five!”
“So,” Joaquin inquires. “How do you go about kickstarting a revolution in a little town like this?”

“Well…you can’t really start a revolution. All we can do is organize. See, revolutions are the product of material conditions, an—"

“If you say ‘material conditions’ one more time, I’m gonna clock you, rich boy.”

Jason’s pale face gets a little paler. Jughead snickers. Kevin squirms in his seat.

“Okay. Duly noted. Sorry. But as I was saying, what we can do is organize.”

The rest of the meeting consists of Jason rambling about organization as an abstract concept without actually putting forth any concrete proposals. One ten minute stretch consists of his describing in minute detail the structure of the Petrograd Regional Soviet in 1917.

When the meeting finally lets out, after midnight, he dismisses all three of the attendants with a warm smile and a handshake (which Jughead refuses).

“Comrade DeSantos.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Comrade Jon—“

“No.”

“…Comrade K—“

“I’m the Sheriff’s son.”

“Right. Please don’t tell your dad about this. Or mine.”

Outside of the vacant building-turned communist headquarters, Jughead stops Kevin and Joaquin before they all return home.

“You actually trust him?”

Joaquin shrugs.

“Didn’t at first. Figured his old man was playing some kind of trick. I think he’s honest, though. As incompetent and helpless as he is.”

“Come on. He’s the son of Cliff Blossom. Ho—“

“Hey,” Kevin interrupts, tugging on Joaquin’s arm. “I hate to cut this wonderful conversation short, but I’ve really got to get home. Now. And forget this ever happened.”

He marches off down the street, Joaquin in tow. The latter turns and waves.

“I'll be seeing ya, Jones.”

Probably.

And then Jughead is left alone to make sense of an increasingly absurd world.

Friday comes, and Betty and Veronica stand in the hungry shadow of Thornhill. The house glows
from within in the dim twilight, seeming to pulse and laugh. Veronica shudders. Betty has the sudden instinct to turn and flee. She doesn’t. They each carry a bag full of sleeping clothes. That’s what they’re here for, after all. Just a routine sleepover. All of the other girls they’d supposedly invited had conveniently ‘cancelled’ (Veronica doubts Cheryl will bother to actually check with them and thus discover they’d never been invited to begin with. As long as she remains the center of attention, she’ll be happy) so it’s just the two of them. And the Blossoms.

Betty gestures in the direction of the old house.

“How do we…get in?”

Veronica searches for some opening in the grand wrought iron gate. There’s nothing. The place is a fortress.

“I don’t know. I’m just surprised we haven’t been shot at by archers yet.”

A desiccated tangle of leaves and twigs falls from an oak tree. Betty jumps.

It distracts the girls long enough that they don’t notice the grand door up on the hill swinging open, or the appearance of Cheryl’s familiar red hair. She peaks out, spies the two of them and then ducks back inside.

Moments later, a dour faced groundskeeper appears on the other side of the gate. Betty waves and offers her disarmingly sweet smile. He stares right through her as he undoes the lock and chain securing Thornhill against intruders. The gate creaks open like something from a Karloff picture and the pair enters into the lion’s den.

Cheryl awaits them at the door, her full lips stretched into a smile.

“So glad you could make it!”

“This was my idea…” Veronica replies.

“Yeah, whatever.” She stabs a finger at her. “Don’t steal anything, Lodge.” Veronica opens her mouth to respond but thinks better of it. She wants to do the opposite of antagonizing the Blossoms right now.

“You have a lovely house,” Betty offers, meekly. The interior is absolutely cavernous. The halls and sitting rooms are likely worth a townhouse each. Leather upholstery, velvet carpeting, and polished marble boast of a wealth that seems almost insulting in the face of the Depression.

“Don’t we?”

The next few hours pass with agonizing torpidity. Veronica and Cheryl trade endless barbs and putdowns. Betty mumbles and smiles sheepishly. She also sweats profusely and looks about as nervous as anyone could possibly look. Veronica wonders if it’s possible to appear more suspicious and begins to doubt the wisdom in bringing her along. She searches for an opening that she can exploit to discover the whereabouts of Cliff Blossom’s study or office, where valuable reports and papers are bound to be kept. None presents itself.

At the very least, Veronica thinks, Cheryl hasn’t yet demanded to know where the other girls who were supposed to show are. She seems much too preoccupied with exerting dominance over the two ‘guests’ she does have in her power.

As the sun begins to sink beneath the treetops, the ponderous grandfather clock on the wall of
Cheryl’s bedroom announces half-past six. Cheryl rises, all practiced grace, smoothes out her skirt, and sets aside the box of family heirlooms she’s been trying to impress Betty and Veronica with for the past thirty minutes (the fragment of Sarah Blossom’s skull is particularly disturbing).

“You two will be joining us for dinner,” she announces.

“O—okay.”

Descending the grand staircase to the ground floor, Veronica wonders how it’s possible to live a halfway ordinary life in such a place. She’s no stranger to large houses, of course. Her father owns several. But those are places of light. Mirth. Townhouses in New York. Mansions on the Cuban beach. Lighthearted expressions of wealth.

Not like this. So lonely. So dark. The halls winding and twisting like blood vessels in the body of some great monster. The shadows and lightless corners of this place promising misery and horror. Even the air is cold and hostile. Bursting with the phantoms of years gone by.

*There have got to be skeletons under the house’s foundations.*

At the massive dinner table spanning the equally massive dining room, Betty and Veronica see the other members of the Blossom family for the first time today. No surprise, really. Thornhill is easily large enough that one could go weeks without coming across the house’s other occupants.

Clifford sits at the head of the table, back stiff, hands laid out before him, half-curlid into fists. So still he might be made of wax. His face is at once easy and hard. The kind of man accustomed to control. Stolid and powerful. The picture of old money.

Penelope sits to his left. A thin woman, dressed in greys and blacks. At least she’s livelier than Clifford by a hair’s breadth. The Blossom matriarch cranes her neck to greet her daughter and company with a cold smile. Her red hair is done up in a tight, imperious bun.

Beside her sits an ancient woman with a shock of red hair. Miraculously, it retains color even in her advanced age. Her face, though wizened and weathered with age, has the same sort of commanding, beautiful structure as her granddaughter’s. If Cliff is wax, this woman is stone. Veronica isn’t sure she even *blinks*.

Across from her is Jason. He seems lost in the patterns of the oak table, though he looks up when his sister and company enter the room. He seems the most human of them all, Veronica muses. Though that isn’t saying much. There’s expression in his face. Fluidity. Jason gives a smile that looks half-genuine.

Cheryl takes a seat next to her brother. Veronica sits across from her, and Betty selects the chair to her friend’s left.

The chairs are painfully hard.

Cliff smiles.

“Welcome to Thornhill, ladies. It’s not often Cheryl brings friends over.”

Cheryl shoots her father a look.

“Thank you, Mr. Blossom,” Veronica responds. She suddenly feels quite cold. Exposed.

“This house is amazing,” Betty adds.
“It’s been in the Blossom family for five generations. Since before independence from Great Britain.”

“First building in Riverdale, wasn’t it?” Betty asks, citing half-remembered local history lessons.

Cliff nods.

“Indeed. Built by Samuel Blossom right after his discharge from the Continental Army.”

Before he can go on, the doors to the kitchen swing open. A chef, looking as grim as the groundskeeper who waved the girls in, appears bearing a hefty platter. He sets it down in the center of the table and pulls away the lids to reveal several cuts of roast neatly laid out in a row. He nods to the lord and lady of the house, and then to their children and guests.

“Enjoy your meal.”

Then he’s gone.

Betty reaches out instinctively for a slice of meat.

“Ah!” Cliff snaps. “Didn’t your parents teach you that the host serves his guests?”

“Doubt it,” Cheryl snickers.

Betty glares at her, and slowly withdraws her hand.

A few seconds later, everyone’s plate is filled. The table waits with bated breath for the first person to take a bite. Cheryl takes the initiative, cutting herself a dainty scrap of roast and nibbling on it like a rodent. That opens the floodgates. The rest dig in, in morbid silence.

“So, Veronica,” Penelope says, after a minute or two of continued quiet. “You’re new in Riverdale. How are you finding our quaint little town? It must be quite a shift for a big city girl like yourself.”

The scorn is not lost on Veronica.

“It’s charming!” She answers with congeniality as false as that of her hosts. “I grew up hearing stories about it.” Half-truth. None of them were stories that painted the town in a particularly charming light. The words her mother had always used to describe Riverdale were words like ‘cruel’, ‘stifling’, ‘deceptive’, and ‘little slice of hell’. “The big city isn’t exactly the place to be as of now, either. What with all of the…trouble.”

“Mhm,” Cliff chews and swallows a bite of roast. “Nasty business, this downturn. Of course, might be over sooner if that clown Roosevelt were out of the White House.”

Veronica smiles.

“You and my father would get along,” she finally says.

Cliff Blossom bristles. Stiffens. The knife in his hand stops moving. She notices.

But he recovers and says: “You don’t agree?”

Veronica shrugs.

“Maybe Roosevelt could be a little softer on enterprise. But he’s just trying to keep things from falling apart completely, I suppose.”
“The way to keep things from falling apart is to allow enterprise to operate. We can’t do that if we’re being smothered by regulations.”

“You think if they were left to it every business would pay its workers fair wages?” Betty cuts in. All eyes swing towards Betty. She sinks into her seat.

“A fair wage is a wage someone will work for,” Cliff says.

“People will work for crumbs if they’re starving,” Betty responds.

“And those crumbs are a hell of a lot better than nothing, Miss Cooper,” He snarls.

“How much do your mom and dad pay the paper boys?” Cheryl chirps.

“Don’t be rude, Cheryl,” Penelope says. “I’m sure the Coopers pay what little they’re able.” Her lips curl into a teasing smile.

Betty grips her fork like a dagger. Her knuckles go white. The air over the table hangs heavy and oppressive.

“Roosevelt is the first step down a slippery slope,” Cliff says. “He’s a Kerensky. It begins with a ‘New Deal’ and it ends like Russia. A country plagued by terror and murder.”

“Kind of like Germany and Italy,” Jason, thus far silent, spits.

Clifford jabs his fork in his son’s direction.

“The Fascisti and the Nazis might be a bit brutal in their methods, Jason, but they’ve saved their countries from the nightmare people are living in Soviet Russia.”

“Being beaten to death by blackshirts in the street sounds pretty nightmarish to me.”

“You believe everything you read in those red New York papers, Jason? Hitler and Mussolini have simply cracked down on the Communists and other rabble-rousing filth. That’s all.”

“And the social democrats. And the socialists. And the liberals. And the trade unionists. And the-”

“Different countries work differently. Germany and Italy were very nearly destroyed by Bolsheviks only just a few years ago. They can’t afford to allow all the nonsense dissent we do here. As I said, perhaps you can call them harsh. But if it’s a choice between the barbarism in Russia and a government like Hitler’s that respects order, I’ll go for the latter without a second thought.”

“Well, you do have to stand by your business partners.”

A bite of roast stops halfway to Cliff’s mouth.

“Excuse me?”

“Stormtroopers like their maple syrup too, right? All the goose stepping and saluting is probably just a big sugar rush. Do you think they put it on the pancakes at Nuremberg?”

Cheryl snorts.

“The roast’s really good,” Betty murmurs in a voice barely above a whisper.
She’s ignored.

“What I think, is that the Germans are a jot easier to do business with than anyone in our own country these days. And maybe if our government took a few cues from the new Germany, we wouldn’t be in the fix we’re in.”

Jason stabs his roast.

“What kind of cues? Like strike-breaking?”

Cliff’s face goes a little red.

Cheryl sees an opportunity to defuse the hostility between her father and brother.

“Well, our strike’s finally over. Are numbers recovering?”

Cliff scowls.

“Just beginning to. Seems the problem more or less solved itself.”

“The way a firing squad solves a stomach ache.” Jason mumbles. If his father hears, he gives no indication of it.

“New York is one place,” Veronica offers. “But it was odd seeing a strike in a small town like this.”

“It’s something all businessmen have to deal with,” Cliff says. “Even ones that don’t employ nearly as many men as your father does.” He pauses. “Well, did. How is Hiram?”

Veronica stops. The question is mocking, as she expected. But there’s also something else in Cliff’s words. Something that almost sounds like genuine concern. Odd. She files away that little observation.

“Still himself. Still defiant. He’s not giving an inch.”

“If you ask me, the whole thing’s nothing but paranoia. A puppet show to make this administration look good.” Cliff says.

“Well” Veronica responds. “Thank you for your support.”

“Roosevelt can’t trample the constitution without a half-decent justification. If he can fabricate some evil fascist conspiracy to overthrow the government, well…he can do just about anything he likes in the interests of ‘national security’, can’t he?”

Everyone falls silent again. There is only the sound of chewing.

Veronica's fairly certain Grandmother Blossom has yet to move.

At about 9:00 PM, Cheryl heads off for her shower, leaving her two guests alone in her bedroom.

For a moment, neither says anything, as if they fear speaking will summon the Blossom clan.

Finally, Betty opens her mouth. She turns to Veronica, eyes big and wide.

“V, this place is terrifying, but…this is kind of exciting, isn’t it? It’s like we’re detectives on a
mission.”

Veronica nods mechanically.

“I just need to get into Cliff’s office. Or…wherever the hell he keeps his dirty secrets.”

“Do you have any idea where that might be?”

Veronica plays with a lock of her dark hair.

“Well…no. I was hoping one of them would let something slip.”

“Does that mean we have to go door to door peeking in until we find the right room?” Veronica hesitates, but before she can answer Betty continues. “Because that would just beat all!” She beams, eyes glowing with excitement. “It’ll be like the *Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew*!”

Veronica fixes her friend with an exasperated stare.

“You are enjoying this far, far too much, Betty.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't know how I feel about this chapter. It feels a bit off for some reason. I like some parts, others ehhhh
Far From Home

Chapter Notes

Why does summer end why do classes begin why can't I just sit here and write fanfiction forever it's an injustice

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alright, it’s nearly 10:00 and I’m stuck in my own home with my two least favorite dames in the world, considering the suspicious failure of anyone else to show. I suppose a good host, which I assuredly am, would keep you entertained. Should I jangle keys?”

“Only if they’re the keys to the front gate.”

“Hilarious.”

Cheryl sits down next to her two guests. She glares at Veronica. A horrible tension infects the air.

“What’s this?” Betty asks. She retrieves a binder from the open bottom drawer of Cheryl’s nightstand. “Is this a photo album?”

Cheryl reaches out and snatches it away, eyes burning.

“No. It’s an iron lung,” she snaps. “And apparently table manners aren’t the only kind your parents forgot to teach you.”

Betty glowers, but has no retort. “Can we…look at it?” She asks, eyes great and pleading.

“In lieu of a better idea, I suppose.” The album’s cover reads ‘far from home’ in a font far too cheery for the Blossom family. Cheryl gingerly opens it to the first page. “They’re just vacation photos. These aren’t all of them, though” She is certain to note, as if afraid the two will judge her for having too few such mementos. As if Betty’s ever been out of Riverdale. “These are just the ones I took.”

The first photo has her and Jason, a good few years younger, holding hands in front of an ancient temple held up by Corinthian pillars and crowned with a pediment defaced by the Roman eagle. From the temple’s walls hang massive, billowing banners blazoned with the fasces.

“Where’s this?” Betty asks.

“Rome. 1930. I think it was the anniversary of…something. Hence the flags everywhere,” she says, gesturing to the banners. “I remember that day! Jason got lost somewhere on the Capitoline Hill. It was a laugh.” Cheryl smiles at the memory.

The next picture depicts Cliff Blossom clasping hands with another man, both facing the camera with full-hearted smiles. His companion is a grim, entirely bald figure with a neatly trimmed mustache and a sour, meaty face.

“Who’s that?”
“Emil Puhl. He’s one of my dad’s acquaintances. Supposed to be some sort of big shot in Germany.”

“My mom’s partial to Germany too.” Betty offers.

“My dad’s not partial to anyone,” Cheryl bristles. “If you’re buying, he’ll sell. And vice versa, of course.”

“Of course,” Veronica echoes.

Cheryl glares.

“Your dad worked differently?”

She doesn’t respond.

Fair point.

The next picture is that of a torero. One tight-clad leg is positioned forward, the other angled to his right, as if in a fighting stance. His rigid, gold-embossed jacket glints in the sunlight. A brief cape conceals his left arm. His montera, lined in velvet, shadows a lean Castillian face. On either side of him stand Cliff Blossom and his two children. Veronica takes it for a recent photograph. None of the Blossoms look much different. Cheryl smiles into the camera, wearing a loose white sundress, her hair tousled by the breeze. Jason has one arm around his sister’s waist and the other around the torero’s shoulder, smiling just as wide. Even Cliff, on the other side of the Matador, is smiling.

Veronica can’t help but think how happy they all look.

“Where’s this?” Betty asks.

“Salamanca. Just last summer, actually.”

Salamanca.

Veronica’s ears prick up at the name. Her grandfather’s home city. The one she’s visited time and time again with her father. The one Hiram always calls ‘mi hogar lejos del hogar’. Home away from home.

“Who’s the dashing bullfighter?” she asks.

“Who knows? This wasn’t really a pleasure trip. We’d been in Paris and dad had to go take care of some business in Spain, so we flew down to Salamanca and caught a train right back. He took us to a bullfight to make up for our stay being so short. I don’t consider ritual animal slaughter to be much of an apology, but that’s my father.”

Veronica nods.

Just last summer. Summer 1935. The summer her father was arrested and charged with seditious conspiracy. The summer the downward spiral began. The summer Cliff Blossom took care of urgent business in Salamanca. In her father’s beloved Salamanca.

The very same Cliff Blossom who, as it turns out, had maintained such a vibrant business relationship with her father.

Veronica Lodge always thought people who said they didn’t believe in coincidences were a bit silly. She absolutely believes in coincidences.
This isn’t one of them.

Chapter End Notes

I'm just realizing I've basically forgotten about the existence of Polly Cooper.
The Hall of the Mountain King

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure if listening to the eponymous orchestral piece while reading this would add to or detract from the experience (probably the latter).

You decide!

Also I updated the story summary a little because I had literally no outline for this when I started but now one's sort of taking shape so I wanted the synopsis to reflect that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Betty falls asleep first, as is expected of her. In a very inconvenient, splayed out position that takes up about half of Cheryl’s bed, too. The other two girls gently roll her onto her side.

Cheryl falls next, a little before 1:00 AM. Not before showing off a few dozen more vacation photos and gloating over how well-traveled she was in comparison to either of her two guests (at one point she had, with an impossibly smug grin on her face, asked Betty whether she spoke any Italian. In Italian.).

Veronica waits a few minutes. She pokes Cheryl. Then she hisses “Cheryl!” Then she examines Cheryl’s breathing to make certain it’s consistent with a sleeper and not someone feigning sleep. And of course, that’s a distinction she knows how to make.

When she’s absolutely certain their hostess is unconscious, she places a hand over Betty’s mouth. Then she grips the blonde by the shoulder and shakes her. Shakes her again. Taps her on the head. Hisses ‘Betty!’

The hand over the mouth turns out to have been quite a good idea, for Betty at last awakes with a terrified gasp, clawing wildly at the air.

“Shhh! Shhh! It’s me, Veronica. Be quiet.”

Betty calms. Veronica stands, careful to set her feet down as gently. Audible footfalls must be avoided at all costs. Betty follows, directed each step of the way by her friend. Veronica leads her out of Cheryl’s room and into the darkened hallway, and the girls soon find themselves quite chilly. Thornhill’s ventilation system, Veronica decides, could use some modernization.

“Veronica, wha-“

“Keep your voice down! Come on, the search begins.”

Betty yawns. Far too loudly. She rubs sleep from her tired eyes.

“Shhh!”

“Bu-“
“You wanted to be like Nancy Drew, right? Well, let’s go be like Nancy Drew.”

Veronica fishes in her pocket. After a moment’s search, she emerges, triumphant, with something in her hand. A pack of matches. She strikes one. The resultant light is pathetic. It’s better than nothing. She starts down the hall, motioning for her friend to follow.

They creep through Thornhill’s great corridors, breath low and shallow. The shadows of the house extinguish what moonlight manages to penetrate. Veronica swings the match to and fro, to illuminate as large an area as possible with her pitiful torch.

“This place gives me the heebie jeebies,” Betty complains.

“Makes two of us, love.”

“Where do we even start?”

Veronica pulls open a door at random and peaks inside. Guest bedroom. She shuts it.

“Good question.”

The aimless trek through Thornhill’s shadows continues. The match flickers once. Dies. Veronica strikes another. From the walls of corridors, the faces of Blossom patriarchs from ages past glare down from canvas, illuminated in the dim glow of Veronica’s match, or in recurrent flashes of moonlight. Betty cringes at a mounted buck’s head. Its glassy, dead eyes seem to track her steps through the gloom. She shivers and draws closer to Veronica.

“Didn’t Cheryl say her parents sleep on the third floor?” Betty inquires.

“I think so.”

“Maybe his study is right around there?”

Veronica opens yet another door. Slow. Cautious. She groans and shuts it again. Not even a guest bedroom. Just a closet.

“Worth a shot.”

Stumbling through the dark, the girls make their way to the stairwell.

The steps climb upwards, lit by a shaft of silver moonlight stabbing through a bay window and downwards into the darkness. Dust hangs thick in the air. All this needs, Veronica thinks, is a good thunderstorm and regular lightning strikes over the forest outside.

“Have you ever read Dracula?” Betty inquires as they ascend the staircase.

“No. I’ve seen the Bela Lugosi picture, though.”

“The novel is far better. The movie leaves too much out. But anyway, this reminds me a lot of Harker in Dracula’s castle.”

“Except there was only one Dracula. There are five Blossoms.”

The pair reaches the third floor and starts down another sepulchral hallway. They pass a pair of great, oaken double doors they take for the master bedroom, take care to be particularly silent. There is no outcome to this fool adventure worse than awakening Cliff and Penelope Blossom. Likely it will end with them drawn and quartered in the mansion’s garden.
Betty opens a door. It leads her into a sprawling library to rival those intended for entire towns. She feels a pang of desire as she seals the room off once more and continues the search. Maybe she can convince Cheryl to let her snoop around in there someday. There have got to be all sorts of priceless volumes filling those shelves.

“Yes!” Veronica half-cries, half-whispers.

“Shhh!”

“I think I found it!” Comes Veronica’s excited commentary. Just as Betty had anticipated, only two doors down from the master bedroom. The girls slip inside.

They don’t dare turn on the light. Veronica lights more matches, so that each girl holds three. It’s cumbersome and probably dangerous in an office filled with wood and paper, but it’s all they have.

In the dim light of those matches they appraise Clifford Blossom’s workspace. It’s like standing in the vacant throne room of a mighty despot. Though he is absent, the power and the terror he wields like weapons remain, sharp and heavy over the girls’ heads.

There are two bookshelves, packed with the sorts of volumes one might expect a businessman to have. Betty removes and then re-shelves a compendium of Dearborn Independent publications. A glossy, gold-leafed copy of Clausewitz’s On War stares at her from the top-shelf. Mounted on the wall behind Cliff’s desk is an old Brown Bess musket. The flint and the primer and the other metal components still glint after all these years. It looks prepared. Ready. As if it could be plucked down from its place of honor and turned on an intruder at a moment’s notice. Beneath the musket a great window opens out onto the forests that surround the town, and onto Riverdale itself. The faltering light of the moon forces its way through the suffocating clouds and sends weak, silver shafts through the glass panes.

A globe supported by a bronze Atlas sits to the right of the window. Veronica spins it as she walks by, trailing a finger over the face of Europe, across the Ural mountains, and down the length of Asia to the Yellow Sea. Globetrotting.

Cliff’s desk is a bit of a mess. Papers here, binders there. A bust of Louis XIV glares back at them, his face dark and mighty. Veronica flicks him in the nose. Shakes her finger to dispel the sharp pain. It is made of marble, after all.

She digs right in. Betty licks her lips and turns to watch the door.

“Ronnie, make sure you put it all back like you found it.”

“Right, right.”

Veronica tears through the room in a strangely orderly way. It’s quite impressive really, how quickly she can move and still replace things perfectly when she’s done. She scatters a stack of papers, and then re-organizes them just as rapidly. Empties a shelf and restores all the books to the same positions she found them in. And of course, she does it all one-handed, the other occupied with three matches.

She’s good at this. Practiced, maybe. Betty considers helping. Decides she’ll probably just cause a mess. She’ll remain as lookout, instead.

Veronica yanks open Cliff’s drawer. She rifles through a few yellowing sheets of paper found there. Looks them over, eyes glinting with hope. Finds nothing. Replaces them. She’s looking for keywords. The kind that pertain to
She hasn’t found it, yet.

“I really don’t think we should stay too much longer,” Betty whispers.

“I haven’t found anything yet.”

“Well, you definitely won’t find anything if we get caught in here.”

Betty turns to the door, then back to her friend. She licks her lips, anxious. Then, by sheer happenstance, she looks down. The big oaken desk looks…off.

It’s a massive thing, some ten feet in length probably. Its legs are fashioned in imitation of lion’s paws. It’s squat and stolid, looking as if it could crush the world. The desk's face is composed of four wooden panels side by side, set in a frame.

Betty pinpoints the oddity.

One of the panels is protruding. Uneven. Betty leans down, while Veronica begins to pull books from a shelf. She pokes at the panel. Only, it isn’t a panel. It’s a little door.

“Betty, what are you doing?”

“V…I think I found something.”

Veronica abandons the shelf and joins her friend.

“Wow,” Veronica says, poking at the door. “A secret compartment in a writing desk? God, could Blossom be any more of a cliche?” She jokes. With a deep breath, Veronica pulls the little door open.


“Huh.” Betty breathes.

“Yeah. ‘Huh’. Damn it!”

There’s a moment of silence as they process the disappointment. Then Betty speaks again“Maybe he—maybe someone took what was in there?”

“Or, a more likely scenario, there was never anything in here, and he’s never used it. Maybe he doesn’t even know it’s here.”

Betty shakes her head.

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not.”

“Because, see. The door locks.” She fingers the little deadbolt to demonstrate. “It locks with a key. I found it open, but just barely open. I would never have noticed it if we weren’t in this room specifically looking for something unusual. It’s as close to closed as can be without actually triggering the lock.”

“So?”

“So, it’s as if someone wants to make it appear as if it’s closed but couldn’t afford to actually close
it. That couldn’t be cliff, because he would have a key. It would have to be someone who doesn’t have the key, but needs to get back in later. Why would they need to get back in? Because they need to return whatever they took before Cliff realizes it’s missing. So someone took something from here, and almost certainly still has it.”

Veronica looks at her friend. She grins, almost proud.

“Well, Betty. Maybe you are Nancy Drew after all.”

Betty smiles in self-satisfaction.

“Just trying my best.”

“Unfortunately, Ms. Holmes, I don’t know that this helps us all that much. Whether…whatever secret and incriminating thing was in here is gone or never existed, it’s still lost to us, and so we’re still up the creek.”

“Unless we know who took it?”

Veronica is a moment from saying ‘but we don’t’ when she catches Betty’s suggestion.

“And…do we?”

“Maybe.”

“Well?”

“Well, who has access to this house? And of those people…”

Veronica’s mind whirrs. Searches. Comes back empty.

“I…”

“Jason Blossom!”

“Jason? What? Why would he…”

“Okay, Just…follow me. There’ll be time to talk about this later.”

This time, Betty takes the lead. They slip out of the office. With her in the lead, they retrace their steps through the ancient manor house.

Back down the groaning stairwell, to the second floor again. A gust of wind extinguishes their matches.

Jason occupies the room across from Cheryl’s, to the surprise of precisely no one. Betty pushes at the door. It’s closed.

“You think he’s asleep?”

“What is it, 2:00 AM? I sure hope so.”

Veronica grips the doorknob and twists. The door slides open, slow and careful. She peeks inside. Gets her bearings. Bed there. Bureau to the left. Shelf to the right. She strikes another match. Then another. She shoves it into Betty’s hand. Creeps over the threshold and into Jason’s bedroom.
The lump of blankets on the bed that is Jason Blossom appears to be fast asleep. Betty inches towards him. Brings the match up towards his face. Veronica tries to wave her away. Her friend ignores her, waves the light to and fro, illuminating red hair and pale skin and confirming that Jason is, indeed, good and unconscious.

“V, go check out that bureau.”

Committed to speaking as little as possible, Veronica nods and obeys. She pulls open the top drawer. Clothes. Second drawer. More clothes.

Jason shifts. Betty stumbles. Drops her match. It arcs through the air, down onto the carpet. Instinctively, she moves to stomp it with a bare foot. Yelps in pain as the head presses into her soft skin. Veronica whirls around.

“What?”

“Ow…ow…nothing. I’m fine,” she assures, rubbing her injury.

“There’s nothing in these drawers.”

“Nothing in this nightstand, either.”

The room is fairly sparse. Soon, most every plausible hiding spot has proven itself vacant. Betty sighs.

“Wait a minute.” Veronica says.

She creeps back towards Jason’s bed. Feels along the side of the mattress. Finds the crease where the mattress meets the frame.

Betty mouths ‘what are you doing?’

Veronica gently, tactfully slips her hand into the gap between mattress and bed frame.

“Veronica!”

She gropes around, face pressed uncomfortably close to Jason’s elbow. A few moments pass. Betty begins to inch back towards the door. Then Veronica’s eyes light up, and she lets out an involuntary hiss of victory. She jerks her arm free, and with it a small stack of papers.

Betty cheers in silence.

As quickly as they came, the girls slip out of the room and back into the hall.

“How’d you know he’d have anything, anyway?” Veronica asks, high on victory.

“I don’t know. Just the way he was talking at dinner. And…”

“What?”

Betty shrugs.

“Jughead told me that…right after his dad was…you know, Jason showed up at the cinema and gave him a bunch of cash. As in, hundreds of dollars. For hospital bills, I guess it was meant to be.

“Really?”
“Didn’t exactly seem likely to me either, and believe me, I know the Blossoms far better than you do. But unless Jughead was lying, and I don’t see much reason for him to do that.”

“Well, why?”

“I…he felt bad, I suppose?”

“Blossoms have feelings?”

“They aren’t a collective. He stole these from his father, didn’t he?”

“We don’t know that. We don’t even know what these are,” Veronica retorts, shaking the papers, illegible in the darkness.

“We know they’re something important. We know Cliff sure didn’t give them to him. People don’t become their parents, Veronica. Not necessarily.”

Veronica doesn’t answer to that.

“Even if giving Jughead cash was a sincere gesture, it wasn’t very well thought out. A kid from the Southside with a couple hundred dollars? Yeah, that won’t raise suspicion.”

“I suppose. But it’s the thought that counts, isn’t it?”

“No,” Before Betty can press on with this topic, Veronica continues. “Now, where are we going to go that we can read these?”

They stand in silence. Alone in the heart of Thornhill. Themselves, the shadows, the and a stack of papers that damn well better have been worth this amateur investigative work.

“Do we have to read them now? Can’t we wait until the morning?”

“Yes, we have to read them now! I am not waiting five hours to find out what these are and whether they’re worth anything to me.”

Betty chews her lip.

“Maybe…maybe if we go out to the cemetery, just in front of the house, the moonlight will be strong enough to read.”

Veronica hesitates. They’ll have to walk a good long way. And then come all the way back to Cheryl’s room when they’re finished. And the prospect of wandering through Thornhill’s cemetery by moonlight is less than appealing. She runs another dozen ideas through her head. All of them involve turning on a light somewhere, and that’s something she won’t risk. And she sure as hell isn’t going to read through all of these by the light of matches. Even if she weren’t out of them, which she is.

So Veronica nods, and the two girls begin their winding journey. They descend into the inky blackness of the house, moving as quickly as they can while remaining silent. They exit through a servant’s entrance in the kitchen, not daring to utilize the massive oaken doors at the front of the manor.

The ground outside is damp and muddy. Blades of grass tickle their bare feet and grime worms its way between their toes. A great hedge towers over them to the right. It sings gently in the midnight breeze, twigs and leaves rustling. Ancient trees and freshly sprouted flowers flash their colors in
the moonlight as the two girls stumble through Thornhill’s garden and towards the cemetery, where, if Betty is correct, the moon should strike in full force.

Their feet find a little stone path that shoots straight ahead like an arrow, flanked on either side by hideous gargoyles. The path traces a rise, and when Betty sees the black silhouettes of tombstones on the horizon, she lets out a little cry of victory. It’s quite a strange moment.

But just as she’d predicted, the moonlight is strongest here. Still not mighty. Still blunted by the black clouds massed in the heavens. But just strong enough. It won’t be easy to read, but it’ll be possible.

The pair crouches over the papers, next to a towering tombstone whose epitaph commemorates a long dead Blossom patriarch. It takes a few moments for the documents’ lettering to come into focus.

Veronica begins at random.

The first is a typed notice. Dictated, probably. More like a memo than a letter. The words are short. The sentences clipped. It conveys a sense of urgency. Veronica’s eyes lock onto the page. Betty’s hot breath steams her shoulder as she begins to read.

Mr. Blossom. As you are aware I have found myself dispossessed. I will assume that the resources of our associates are similarly affected, or else frozen. If this means the Spanish gold must come into play, then we are faced with a new problem. The upcoming election in that country. Should the outcome prove unfavorable, then we will be forced to yoke our cause to that of the Director and his friends. Either way, Pelley and the Legion must get their money, or else it will all come to naught. Please be prepared for the likelihood that our deliverance and our fate will be inextricably linked with those of Spain.

Regards,

Below, a grand, florid signature spills across the foot of the page. Veronica recognizes it immediately. It’s her father’s.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this was the cliched 'oh we have to steal this super important thing but we can't wake up the guy while we're taking it oh no' scene.

Fight me on it.
“Considering the…extent of our membership.” Jason looks from Jughead to Joaquin and back again. One gets the sense he wants someone else to say something. Not one of the three-man party does. The red flag tacked up behind him sags sadly. “I think we can probably dispense with the formal meeting structure. Probably more trouble than it’s worth. But since we adhere to the principal of democratic centralism, I-“

“We do?” Joaquin cuts in.

“Yes,” Jason says through gritted teeth. “We do. And that being the case, we’ll put it to a vote. All in favor?” Joaquin and Jughead lazily raise their hands. Jason sighs. Jughead looks to the young Serpent sitting next to him. Then to the Blossom boy presiding over this ‘council’. It’s a bit like a comic parody of an epic drama. Instead of the grand, sweeping tale of romantic revolutionaries warring against tyranny, it’s the tale of clueless, inept teenage boys hiding in a storage room. If only he were writing a comedy. “Great,” Jason says. “Motion passed.”

“Can we go home, now?” Jughead asks. Jason glares at him. He steps out from behind the cheap podium. The assembly loses what sense of professionalism existed.

“I didn’t make you attend, Jones.” He waits a moment. Jughead doesn’t respond. Jason kicks a box at his feet. It was there when they arrived, and Jughead didn’t find himself curious enough to inquire. Jason forges on. “In any case, I’ve gotten together a list of writings I think it would be a good idea for us to cover. So….” He reaches down and flips open the box. “Principles of Communism. Engels. The German Ideology. Marx & Engels. Revolution and the State. Lenin. Fascism: What it is and How to Fight It. Trotsky. That one’s not canon, but I think it’s useful. Don’t tell the CEC.” As he names the texts he extracts copies from the box and lays them out on the floor in neat little piles. In the end, there are two copies of each. One for Joaquin, one for Jughead. Jason, Jughead assumes, has long since acquired publications the books for himself.

“You…you expect us to read all of these?” Jughead asks.

“I…it’d be nice if you would at least give them a once-over,” Jason says.

“We don’t all have the luxury of limitless free time,” Joaquin asserts. “And as for myself, I’d much rather do something than sit around reading theory, anyway. But if you insist, comrade Blossom.”

“Well, sound theory is the basis of good practice.”

“God, you talk like a manifesto.”

Jughead snickers. Jason looks wounded. He rubs his head.

“Just…when you fellas get the chance. Just read a little. I’ll be happy to answer any questions.”

Jughead collects his copies of the texts. For the moment, he’ll leave the admittedly fun task of needling Jason Blossom to Joaquin. It’s been quite a while since Jughead’s had the spare change to purchase a new book. Even if these are all nothing but red propaganda, they’re still new books. He sorts them from the thickest to thinnest, as he’s always liked to do. Principles is brief. Probably
written exactly for this purpose, he thinks. ‘Educating’ initiates. He can likely run through it in a
night. It’s not like he’s got much else to do at the Twilight after hours. Betty’s made herself rather
scarce, lately, too. They must both be busy, he justifies.

“I’ll cut you a deal,” Joaquin says. “I’ll read a little of these, if you promise to come up with a plan
for actual, concrete action. Prove to us you’re for real and this isn’t just a fucking glorified book
club. If not, we walk, right Jones?” Jughead answers with a half-hearted shrug, which Joaquin
seems to take as an affirmation. “What do you say?”

Jason looks a little pale. Paler than usual, that is. His lips twitch. Turn down. Finally, he says:
“fine.”

Joaquin’s blue eyes glint. He smiles his roguish smile. Strides forwards, and reaches out for
Jason’s hand. Jason takes the offer. They shake, though really it’s more Joaquin gripping the
Blossom boy’s limp hand. “Great,” Joaquin exults. Jughead can’t help but smile. Joaquin looks up
at the clock on the otherwise bare wall. “Well, if that’s all for today, I’ll be taking my leave.” He
gathers up his books and nods at the other two boys. Then he stalks out into the night. Jughead
turns to follow.

“Wait. Jones.” He stops. Looks Jason in the eye. For the crown prince of Riverdale, he looks rather
pitiable. The storage room’s dim light casts his pale skin sallow, and turns his blue eyes into sad,
shallow pools. Despite his exceeding six feet, he even looks smaller. Jughead feels something twist
in his chest. He suppresses it.

“What, Jason?”

Jason looks over Jughead’s shoulder to see if Joaquin is gone. He’s satisfied with whatever he does
see. Jughead doesn’t turn around.

“I just wanted to ask…how’s your father?”

“Shot.”

“Yeah. I’m realizing the money I gave you probably isn’t much use. You wouldn’t be able to use it
without people asking questions would you? But…it’s alright. I think I can pay for it through other
channels.”

“Does that mean you want the cash back?”


“What ‘other channels’?”

“I can explain some other time.”

“Explaining doesn’t seem to be your forte,” Jughead shoots back. “Considering all of this.” he
sweeps his hand in a wide arc, gesturing to the entirety of the room. The sagging red flag on the
wall. The dim, flickering light. The lonely rows of chairs optimistically anticipating a great
turnout.

“You must want something more than to mouth off at me, right? Or else…you wouldn’t come
here?”

“Maybe. Maybe I just think watching you play Lenin is hilarious.”
“Well…will you still be a part of this? Even if all you get out of it is a chance to watch me make a fool of myself?”

“I’m with Joaquin. Come up with something other than pontificating on theory and assigned reading and I’ll think about it.” He turns once again and heads for the door.

“Right.”

“Later, Blossom,” Jughead calls as he exits into the night beyond. Again, he pauses. He doesn’t turn around this time, but he speaks. “The doctors say…he’ll most likely be alright. Him and Archie, both.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. It is.”

And Jason is alone.

Chapter End Notes

You know those movies and shows about teens that are supposedly in High School, yet never actually go to school and seem to have all the free time in the world?

That's this story.
Veronica sleeps little tonight, for a litany of reasons. There is the fact that she’s just robbed the most powerful man in town, a man who’s not above killing those who inconvenience him. There is the fact that she’s now sitting on explosive documents that could implicate dozens in high treason. There is the fact that she has dragged into this debacle a good friend of hers who has no place in such intrigue.

There is the fact that she has come into nigh-incontrovertible evidence of her father’s guilt. She is not surprised. But there was a part of her that had hoped against hope this would all prove, as Cliff Blossom had said, to be nothing. Smoke and mirrors. A simple manifestation of hysteria and paranoia brought on by the Depression and its resultant instability. That her father would be cleared and return home and she could believe that he was, despite his myriad flaws, a fundamentally good man. Yes, she had hoped. But she doesn’t hope anymore.

It was true. Her father had been party to (if not the primary architect of) a plot to bring to these shores the same terror that reigns in Germany and Italy today. For what? A few hundred thousand dollars more? As if the Lodge clan had not enough wealth to last seven lifetimes. Veronica’s stomach turns.

The rest of the papers had only confirmed the awful suggestion of the first. The second was a manifest detailing deliveries of several hundred thousand dollars from her father to Cliff Blossom and from there to the Silver Legion. The Silver Legion. An American answer to the Stormtroopers of Berlin or the Blackshirts of Rome, its militants parade in grey jackets and campaign hats and openly espouse their desire to erect a fascist government in Washington. Their membership is not great, numbering only some 20,000, but it is precisely the sort of paramilitary one would need to imitate Mussolini’s March on Rome here in the states.

There is a list of men, evidently all holding high rank in the military. She can presume only that it is a catalogue of generals and majors and colonels hoped sympathetic to a regime change.

There is another list of men and women. Those expected to oppose such a coup. Those expected to put up resistance; to cause trouble. Slated for 'elimination'.

And of course, more and more mentions of the ‘Spanish gold’. Whatever the hell that is.
The conclusion is inescapable. Not only was the supposed fascist putsch a reality, her father was and is among its chief directors. And so was Clifford Blossom.

There are other names here, too, of course. Names much weightier than either Blossom or Lodge. Morgan. DuPont. Remington.

But none of those twist the knife quite the same.

Next to her, back in the relative safety of Cheryl’s room, Betty has lapsed back into sleep, her thirst for detective work evidently sated for the moment. Veronica envies her. She tosses on the pile of blankets that are her bed. The papers crinkle beneath her.

Before leaving the cemetery and coming back into the mansion, she and Betty had a long discussion over what to do with them. Unfortunately lacking a camera, there was no way to record their contents and then replace them without anyone being any the wiser. They would be forced either to make off with the papers, or else restore them and surrender all evidence. And she sure as shooting did not sit through that hellish dinner and creep through the halls of a haunted mansion for two hours for fun. So, Veronica decides, she’s going to take them.

What will she do then? Well, she’ll have to improvise from there.

Outside, the night winds on.

Veronica very nearly doesn’t sleep at all and it seems that as soon as she does, she's awakened thanks to a literal kick in the side from Cheryl Blossom.

“Rise and shine, sleeping beauty.”

She rouses with a start, slapping at Cheryl’s legs. Veronica nearly reaches beneath her blankets for the papers but then remembers that Cheryl is looming over her. Instead, she reaches over and jerks Betty awake as well.

“Ronnie…got the papers?” Betty mumbles in a daze.

Veronica freezes. Her muscles seize up. Oh God. She looks up into Cheryl’s eyes. The redhead glares back down at her.

“What papers?” Veronica asks.

“Mmm…nothing.”

“God, you even have boring dreams,” Cheryl intones. The two girls rise and dress and pack their things, with Cheryl watching all the while. “Will you be joining us for breakfast?” She asks.

“We should probably get going, actually,” Betty stammers.

“Right. Back to your hovels you go.”

Betty and Veronica hurry out of Thornhill as quickly as they can go without arousing suspicion. The cold, almost preternatural gaze of Cheryl Blossom chasing them all the way. Veronica prays to God they don’t run into any other Blossoms on their way out. Her prayer, for once, is answered.

The iron wrought gate clangs shut behind them. A gust of wind hunts them off of Blossom property and back into the land of the living. They don’t turn to see Cheryl watching them go.

“That was…harrowing,” Betty says.
Veronica shakes a bag of luggage, the papers concealed within.

“Harrowing’s a word.” Veronica doesn’t smile. Her face set.

“Well, Ronnie? What are we going to do?”

“We…I’m sorry. God, Betty. I should never have dragged you into this in the first place. It’s just…insane and really, it’s not your burden to bear.”

“The hell it isn’t. Hey, I just helped you steal incriminating evidence out from under Cliff Blossom’s nose. Not to mention I live in this country. She pats Veronica on the shoulder. “That does make Fascist national conspiracies my burden to bear, unfortunately.”

Jason Blossom grips a Leica camera in his hand as he ascends Thornhill’s stairs to the second floor. He’s in a good mood today. In fact, he’s been in fairly good humor for the past couple of weeks. His party branch has…well…it hasn’t been growing, but it’s stable. It exists. Jones and DeSantos actually returned for a second and third meeting. And, no, they still have yet to take any sort of concrete action, despite DeSantos constant insistence upon it. But still. The branch exists. He passed issues of Science and Society, and he was in talks with the CEC on receiving shipments of the Daily Worker (which, as it turns out, does not publish in Riverdale). He hopes they actually read them.

On the international side of things, the Frente Popular coalition in Spain has just swept the elections, and ousted the country’s three-year old right-wing government. The Daily Worker had excitedly announced that the PEOPLE’S FRONT WINS IN SPAIN. With just as much enthusiasm, he’d displayed the headline to DeSantos and Jones. They didn’t seem quite as thrilled as him, but that was okay. Spain’s a small country, but it’s a great victory. It means the advance of fascism is not inexorable. It’s been checked, even if only momentarily. It’s a glimmer of hope.

But he’s cheery for another reason, as well. He’s just struck a major blow against his father, and the old man doesn’t even know it. A search through Cliff’s Blossom had revealed a secret compartment within his great oak desk (the same one he’d been beaten for touching some ten years past. There is an element of vengeance to all this). It’d been a hell of a thing to crack open, and he’d doubted his ability to unlock it again, so he’d left it ever so slightly unsealed while he retrieved and rifled through the contents. Which, as it turned out, were documents of greater value and magnitude than he might have ever imagined.

He grips the camera tighter. Just a few pictures. Indisputable proof of the documents’ existence. Then he’ll replace them in their safe, and his father will know nothing until it is far too late.

He bounds up the last few steps and into his room. Closes the door. Looks around once more, just to be sure. Slips his arm beneath his mattress. Gropes around. Reaches further. They are there. He stashed them there. He checked and checked again. Jason licks his lips. Checks the corners. Checks beneath the bed itself. His mouth becomes cotton. He tears the comforter and the sheets away. His heart begins to thunder against his chest.

“No…no…no…no…no.”

In desperation, Jason yanks away the mattress. It tumbles to the carpet. The bed’s frame lies open and exposed. There’s nothing.

Against all reason, he tears his entire room apart. He knows it won’t be in his drawers. Or his closet. Or behind a fucking picture frame. He checks anyway.
And only standing amidst piles of clothes and displaced furniture and a shattered vase does he finally accept this awful reality.

The papers are gone.

Cliff Blossom picks up today’s issue of the New York Times, and sets himself down at the table with a cup of coffee in hand. He snaps the paper open. Unfolds it. Takes a sip of his coffee. Outside, it’s a calm morning graced by a brilliant February sun and a gentle easterly breeze. Things are beginning to look up. Blossom Maple Farms is beginning to recover from the effects of the strike. Productivity is climbing again. Profit margins are growing. His firm’s great machine grinds to life again. An uninterrupted river of gold flows into the Blossom empire’s coffers. Jason’s little episode at dinner was disconcerting, but he supposes it’s just youthful fulmination. He’ll get over it. And if not, there’s always Cheryl.

When he sees the headline, he very nearly hurls his mug of coffee at the far wall.

RIOTS SWEEP SPAIN ON LEFT’S VICTORY

It is suddenly not a very good morning anymore.

He swears. Loudly. In the next room, maids freeze before returning to their labors. Clifford Blossom is a man of composure. Rarely does he break. Rarely does he knuckle under stress or pressure of any sort. He is a Caesar, not a ranting Caligula. Whatever has upset him, it must be truly unfortunate.

Cliff stands, slamming his coffee aside and hurling the paper to the floor. He flies up the stairs, a veritable human storm.

This is the worst possible obstacle fate could have placed in his path. Now to see all this completed will be all the more difficult if not impossible.

No.

Not impossible. There is no ‘impossible’. Not for a Blossom. He will overcome this too and emerge victorious in the end. He always has and always will. He just needs to look over his files. Needs some time to think. He’s got to contact the rest of the Fraternity, of course. And one man in particular. Plans—there are outlines, but concrete plans—must be drawn up. They will need to speak to the Director, of course. Cliff hates the prospect of putting his own designs into the hands of another, even in part. But today, there is no choice. He can hardly believe the survival of their cause has become so inextricably linked with an insignificant, backwards country like Spain and its farcical political theater. Unbelievable. Ridiculous.

He comes to his office. Throws the door open. Storms to his desk. Drops to one knee. Cliff slides the key from his pocket and rams it into the deadbolt. Turns it. There’s that satisfying click. He pulls open the door of the little safe.

Cliff’s face goes red. Lightheaded. He grips the key in hand so firmly it imprints in the skin of his palm. He suppresses a cry of rage.

The papers are gone.

Veronica returns to Pembrooke in a mood. After departing from Thornhill, she had entrusted the papers to Betty. In the event they were sought, it seemed less likely the house of modest, middle-
class Betty Cooper would be the first targeted.

Hermione Lodge meets her daughter in the lobby. Fortunately, Veronica has become practiced in dissembling emotions and betrays little inner turmoil to her mother. A doorman watches them. Veronica has questions for her mother. She won’t ask them though.

Well, she will. But she’ll do it in such a way her mother will not realize they’re questions. Or perhaps she will. Because it’s her mother from whom she’s learned that tactic, after all.

“How was Thornhill, *mija*?” she asks, in a voice that expects a less than positive appraisal of the place.

“It was fine. A little awkward.”

Hermione smiles.

“Hardly surprising.”

“I’m struck by the suspicion you don’t like the Blossoms very much.”

“But you knew that, Ronnie,” Hermione replies. She and her daughter begin the walk upstairs to their own quarters. Veronica shrugs.

“They aren’t the worst people on earth.”

Hermione opens the door to their penthouse and ushers her daughter inside.

“Neither is your father.”

Veronica opens her mouth. She says nothing at first.

No, maybe not. She thinks. But I’d say he’s probably sharing a spot on the list with Cliff Blossom.

“Where were you, just now?”

“What?”

“You were in the lobby, right?” Veronica asks, stating the obvious as a question. “You were coming home?”

“Oh. I was just at the post office.” Hermione shakes her head. “Some missives related to…your father’s case.” Veronica doesn’t press the issue. Not yet. Instead, she laughs. A low, quiet laugh. Tailored to sound natural and offhanded. It’s hard to tell if her mother buys it. “What is it?” She asks.

“Nothing, mom. It’s just…I was remembering the winter in Spain, three years ago. In Toledo. Remember, that street vendor who tried to sell dad those saint’s relics that turned out to be pig’s bones?”

Hermione laughs at the memory. It’s genuine laughter. Or sounds like it to Veronica, at least.

“Yes. I don’t recall your father being too pleased about that.”

“We haven’t been to Spain in a while. I miss it.”

Hermione hugs her.
“Ay, mija. I don’t think we’ll be going back for a while. Not until this mess is good and sorted out. But I promise you, as soon as it is, we’ll go back to Spain and buy all of the street trinkets and garbage you like. The three of us.”

Veronica forces a smile.

“I’m sure dad would like to go back just as much.”

Hermione smiles. “He would always say: *Siempre nos queda España.*”

There’s always Spain.

“What did that even mean?”

“Spain’s a contingency. That’s what he meant. The second line of defense.”

*Spain’s a contingency.*

Spain is a contingency.

Spain is a backup plan.
“See, this right here is my favorite part,” Jughead proclaims.

On the silver screen, Henry Hull’s werewolf, having completed his transformation, stalks out into the night in search of unwitting victims. The beast makes certain to put on his cap and scarf, first.

Jason chuckles.

“At least he’s a fashionable werewolf!”

Jughead smiles. Reaches into the bucket of popcorn.

“God knows what the director was thinking. A monster in evening wear is hardly chiller material.”

“I don’t know, Jones. Folks in fine dress can be pretty damn frightening. Take it from me.”

Jughead turns to observe his companion. The boy doesn’t look at him. Jason’s eyes are fixed on the screen, a smile on his face. He looks quite at ease. Jughead decides he’s just adaptable. Whether it’s an inborn gift or simply the natural result of growing up without fear or want, he can’t say. But he looks just as comfortable here in the dingy theater as he would at a ball in a three-piece suit.

“I guess you’d know.”

“I have to say, this is a pretty neat job you’re holding down. Can you just show a picture any time you want to?”

“Sure. The owner doesn’t give a damn as long as the money keeps flowing in. And this is probably one of the few businesses in town not floundering.”

“People need something like this to take their minds off of the troubles. Hard times.”

The two boys sit alone in the Twilight Cinema. It’s a late February evening, a Monday to be exact, and the patronage would be at a crawl anyway. Jughead had elected to close up early and save himself a lot of work for nothing. Then Jason had shown up. Jughead couldn’t quite wring a reason for his unexpected visit out of him. He’s damn good at non-answers. When it became clear Jason didn’t particularly want to leave, Jughead gave up and conceded. He’d just thrown Werewolf of London onto the projector, and they’d settled in to watch.

The werewolf chases down a nubile young woman on the foggy streets of London. Pouncing, he tears out her throat (the audience mercifully spared gory detail).

The actress’ shriek of terror gets a laugh from both boys.

“Artists are engineers of the human soul, right?”

Jason smiles.

“Josef V. Stalin. So you have done the readings.”

“Some. That one I already knew, though.”
“Well, what do you think?” Jason inquires.

“About what?”

“The materials I gave you and DeSantos to read.”

“It’s like most things, really. Not a lot of things are all lies or all truth.” He shrugs. “A lot of it makes sense to me. And some of it doesn’t.”

“Like what?” Jason asks, aghast at the idea that the writings of Karl Marx and V.I Lenin might suffer from imperfections.

“I don’t really buy into vulgar materialism. There’s more to the world than hard matter. And communism’s ‘inevitability’? I’m not the most educated guy in town, but there’s not much that’s inevitable. I know that. And I still can’t wrap my head around whatever the hell the value form is.”

“I can explain that,” Jason begins. “The value form i—“

Jughead holds up a hand, gesturing for silence. “Please. Try to rein in the Marxism. Just a bit. At the end of the day it’s just another ideology.” Jughead challenges. Jason smarts at his words. As if it were a personal slight.

“Marxism is a science.” Jason responds. “Not just another ideology.”


Jughead cracks a wry smile. Stuffs a handful of popcorn into his mouth.

“That’s what every ideology says for itself.”

“But if you look at Russia, and all of the good that the Soviet government has d—“

“Look, I’m with you for now. I suppose. Just don’t expect me to become some…ardent Bolshevik with a shrine to Comrade Stalin in his bedroom. Actually, the owner wouldn’t appreciate pictures of Marx and red flags in the projector room, anyway.”

“That’s fair.”

Jason’s red hair and blue eyes catch the light of the projector in the theater’s darkness. Pallid skin almost translucent in the glow. For a moment, he looks ghostly. A phantom. He looks…smooth. And clean. Angular. Like one would expect the scion of Riverdale’s wealthiest family to look. Free from the blemishes of struggle or privation. If a cartoonist were asked to depict an archetypical rich young man, he would return with a sketch of Jason Blossom.

“I have to ask. What’s the story behind all of this? What’s the appeal of…of hammers and sickles and revolution and Marx to someone like you?”

“Someone like me?”

“You know what I mean.”

Jason falls silent. He takes another handful of popcorn. Jughead notices the muscles at the corners of his jaw twitch. A sign of anxiety. A little one. But jughead notices these things. Finally, and without turning to look him in the eye, Jason speaks.

“I have a memory. About you, actually.”
Jughead raises an eyebrow. Amused.

“About me?”

“Yeah. Cheryl and I had just come home from a summer abroad. Sailing the Mediterranean.” He laughs and shakes his head. “Cadiz. Marseilles. Ostia. Corinth. Tyre. Can’t help but think back and wonder how much that one trip cost. Anyway, we went into Pop Tate’s for a bite. And you were there. We must have been, what, eleven? You asked us where we’d been. You were just curious, you know. We told you, and you said you’d never been out of Riverdale. So we laughed. We called you a bum. We said if your father—“

“That if my father wasn’t so lazy, maybe he’d work harder and we could afford to go on trips too. You said maybe if I wasn’t so poor I could buy new clothes and I would look so disgusting all of the time.”

Jason winces. Keeps his attention on the movie. Refuses to make eye contact. His left hand fingers the armrest. His lips flatten into a thin line.

“You remember that?”

“You think I’d forget?”

“No. No, I guess you wouldn’t. I didn’t.”

“That wasn’t the only time, was it?”

“No.”

“I also remember being teased when I didn’t have lunch to bring to school. And being tripped into the mud, consequently ruining one of the few shirts I owned.”

Jason shakes his head. Angry or disgusted. Maybe both.

“God, I’m sorry. You were just a kid. We were just kids. And we were cruel because…why? Because you didn’t have as much as us? Because we grew up thinking that made us better?”

“I can’t tell you why.”

“No. It took me a while to figure out why. And you know…my father’s the same way. He doesn’t trip other men or make fun of the holes in their shoes…but it’s really not different on a fundamental level, is it? It’s the same sort of hatred. The same sort of conviction that you’re superior because you’ve got more to your name.” He looks almost pained now. Or discomforted. Or contrite? Jughead finds it suddenly harder to read his face. “I suppose I decided I didn’t want to be that sort of man. I didn’t want to be better than anyone.”

“So is this a particularly dramatic form of atonement on your part? Is that why you’re here? To apologize?”

“If I was, what would you say?” he asks.

Jughead is silent for a moment.

“I’d say I’ve already attended three of your ridiculous meetings. I’ve already read half of the impenetrable literature you’ve given me. And now, I’ve escorted you to a free showing of the finest werewolf picture on the market.” He smiles again.
“So, what? You forgive me?”

“I’m not sure I’ll ever *quite* forget you and your friends calling me Eponine for half a year when we were thirteen. Do you know your sister actually gave me a copy of *Les Miserables*? It was done sarcastically, but I enjoyed the book immensely. So…pass on my thanks.”

“Alright, I was a son of a bitch, Jones. I won’t argue that.”

Jughead regards him with dark, careful eyes. What an evening. In a darkened cinema, alone with the son of the richest man in town. Chief of his childhood tormentors. Now a self-professed Bolshevik. Now asking to bury the hatchet. Or at least aim it towards someone else.

Life truly is full of wonder.

“You’re not, now?”

“Maybe not quite as much.”

“Maybe not, huh?” There’s another span of silence. On screen, the protagonist confronts his nemesis, a fellow doctor and werewolf, and the man responsible for his curse. A not-so epic battle begins. “So is that really all you came for? A movie and a darling heart-to-heart?”

Jason’s lip twitches. He looks as if he’s been caught in a trap.

“Not exactly.”

Jughead grins, victorious. Knew it.

“No?”

“You’re going steady with the Cooper girl, right?”

“Yeah. Why? Jealous?”

“Not exactly. See, I…came into possession—“

“You ‘came into possession’?”

“I stole, alright. I stole some papers from my father. Papers that I really needed get a hold of. I was storing them in my room. And then someone stole them from *me.*”

“Papers? What sort of papers.”

Jason shakes his head.

“Nothing important, really.” Jughead marvels at how poor a lie he tells. He supposes even the famed Blossom skills of deception are liable to lapse at times.

“If they’re valuable enough for two different people to steal and risk the wrath of the Clifford Blossom for, I have a hard time believing it’s ‘nothing important’,” Jughead shoots back.

“Okay, maybe they are important. But that isn’t the point.”

“What does this have to do with Betty, anyway?”

“I was getting to that. She…she and the Lodge girl…my sister invited them over to Thornhill a few
nights ago. The morning they left, the papers were gone.”

“And you think they took them?” Jughead asks, his voice hovering between amusement and incredulity.

“I’m not accusing anyone.”

Jughead laughs.

“No offense, Jason, but it sounds like you are. And in any case, what motive would my girl or Veronica have for stealing some business documents you were hoarding?”

“They weren’t—look, the Coopers run the Register. My family and theirs have always hated each other, you know that. What if…what if her parents had her steal them? For a story? Some sort of exposé?”

“Hey. Betty is…she’s the last girl on earth who’d pull something like that. She has a moral code strong as iron, believe me. It’s quite annoying at times, actually. She isn’t her mother. She would never commit theft for the sake of a scoop.”

“How well do you know her?” Jason asks, his voice grave.


“Okay. Fine. Maybe—probably, it wasn’t her. I just…I need those papers back, or else things are going to get ugly.”

“How do you know your dad didn’t just find them and take them back?”

“Because if my dad knew I stole them, I wouldn’t be sitting here with you now. I’d be floating in Sweetwater River with a bullet between my eyes.”

The words chill him. It’s an exaggeration, of course. Must be. Even Cliff Blossom wouldn’t murder his own children, Jughead’s sure. But still. That a son could fear his own father so disturbs him. FP Jones known around town as an irate drunk. Sometimes even a violent one. But he’d never hit Jughead. Never hurt him. He’d done all he could to keep him out of harm’s way, and now he’s riddled with bullets, lying in a hospital bed for it. For the first time, Jughead considers there might be downsides to the life of a Blossom.

“God, Jason. What the hell is in those papers?”

So I sat, and I listened as Jason Blossom, rebel prince of Riverdale, told me a story that belonged on the pages of a cheap pulp thriller. In the darkness of the Twilight Cinema, he told of the documents he’d discovered. The documents that proved Clifford Blossom’s collusion with a cadre of businessmen, military elements, and pseudo-fascist ideologues for the purpose of overthrowing the American government in favor of a regime in the mold of Mussolini’s Italy or Hitler’s Germany.

The very same plot that had seen Hiram Lodge, Veronica’s father, arrested for conspiracy. And if what Jason said was true, the plot was not only real, it was a plot that reached further and rested on firmer foundations than the media or the authorities ever suspected.

Hiram Lodge might have been behind bars, but not so for any of his fellow conspirators. The architects of the yet-unfulfilled putsch were still, by and large, at liberty. And if Jason spoke truth,
the papers he'd been deprived of held the evidence that could verify this and bring the greatest traitors since Benedict Arnold to their knees.

These papers would be worth more than gold. Worth the survival of the United States themselves.

But they were missing.

And Jason believed Betty Cooper, my sweet, all-American, small-town girl Betty Cooper, had them.

Chapter End Notes

I wanna acknowledge cooperjones2020 and village-skeptic, who are awesome and whose comments/feedback have been so instrumental in motivating me to keep this fic going.

They're also both fantastic writers. If you haven't already, check out 'an art as lawful as eating' (village-skeptic) and 'What's Past is Prologue, What to Come' (cooperjones2020), my personal favorites of each of their stories (actually, check them all out. They're all great.).

Also, I encourage everyone to watch Werewolf of London (1935) if you get the chance. It's hilarious.
If you think I forgot about FP and Archie who got shot and almost died and ended up in the fucking hospital well that's exactly what I did.

So here's a chapter about them.

“I’m afraid that’s a checkmate, red. You lose.”

Archie scans the board. Desperately looks for an out. The little pawns and rooks grin up at him. FP’s right. His defeat is absolute. He sighs.

“No offense, but you aren’t much of a chess player,” FP chuckles.

“Not much of a strategist, at all,” Archie sheepishly concedes.

The hospital’s lounge is mostly empty, save for the two at their chessboard and a few old men in various states of unconsciousness.

“God willing you won’t need it with whatever it is you do. What is it you’re aiming for? Guitar, right?”

“I wish. But no one’s making much money these days. Especially not two-bit musicians.”

FP shrugs. He smiles a wry, weary smile. Archie realizes he looks a lot like Jughead. Or rather, Jughead looks a lot like his father. Not so much in the physical structure of the face, but in the manner. In spirit.

“Don’t worry about it. This won’t last forever.”

“What won’t?”

He raises a hand and sweeps it in a wide arc. As if to gesture to everything beneath the sun.

“This. The depression. The downturn. Whatever they want to call it. It’s the not the first and it won’t be the last. Remember 1907?” Archie looks suddenly guilty. No, he does not remember that. “I’m joking. Of course you don't. I barely do. My point is that everything ends, eventually. Good and bad. You can trust me on that.”

“I sure hope you’re right. If you ask Jughead, this is the end of it all. Everything’s going to come crashing down around us in flames. Rock bottom.” He reaches out and knocks over a few chess pieces. A knight spins and falls. A rook and a pawn come to rest against each other.

“Jughead’s…got a dark heart,” FP says. “That doesn’t mean bad. Just that things weigh on him a little heavier than they do for most other people.”

“Yeah,” Archie agrees. “He hasn’t come by in a while has he?” It’s true. It’s been some days since
Jughead’s last visit to his friend or his father in the hospital. What he’s been doing, no one’s quite sure. Likely, Archie assumes Jughead’s spending most of his in time at the Twilight. Writing. Betty hasn’t seen much of him, either.

“He processes things in his own time. I don’t think he’s forgotten about you just yet. Anyway, you get out in what, two days? You can go and talk to him then.”

“Yeah.”

“He’s still with the Cooper girl?”

“Betty. Absolutely. I don’t think they’ll be splitting anytime soon.”

FP nods. Satisfied.

“I think she’s good for him. Balances him out. As long as she’s not too much like her mother.”

Archie chuckles.

“I don’t think so.”

“How about you? You have a girl?”

Archie shakes his head. No, he doesn’t. For the longest time, it seemed inevitable he and Betty would one day find themselves in each other’s arms. But the world as of late seems bent on derailing expectations.

“No. Not now.”

“The bullets shouldn’t hurt. Girls like scars. Especially ones with a heroic story behind them.” He gestures to the crazed map of bandages crisscrossing the boy’s body. “And hell, you saved my life. I guess the Andrews’ debt is finally repaid. Speaking from experience. This isn’t the first time.”

“You’ve been shot before?”

FP laughs.

“I fought in Europe. You know that.”

Right. His father had told him the stories of the war in France. Or rather, he’d wrung them out of Fred when he was younger and couldn’t understand his dad didn’t really want to talk about it.

German gas and shells. Slogging through miles of mud and gore. Summer of 1918, just in time to meet the Kaiser’s boys on their last great offensive. Pushed them back straight into the Rhineland. Blood and guts and glory, right? Archie looks back to the chessboard. To the pieces ranged sadly and reluctantly against one another.

“With my father, right?”

FP nods. He pulls up his sleeve to reveal an ugly scar about the size of a quarter just below the left shoulder. It’s rough and faded now, but still starkly visible. A depression patched over with grey, mottled skin. Archie winces. He sees his own wounds some years down the line.

“I got that one somewhere in Belgium. Never saw the guy that gave it to me. But I spent the next month in a surgeon's tent with an angry Frenchman named Michel. I couldn’t understand a word he said, just that he was pissed. They say ‘war is hell’, right? That’s what Jug tells me, anyway, from
the books he reads I suppose. I think that gives it a little too much credit. It’s not hell. Just boring, hard, and painful.”

“Why’d you go? You and my dad, I mean.”

FP laughs again. He’s tired. His face creased and lined, marred by age and trouble. But his eyes are still bright. For a moment, Archie sees FP twenty years younger, sharp and quick-witted as his son. Marching through a field somewhere in northern France with a rifle on his shoulder. Ready to kill and die. For what? Who knew? Who knows?

“What? We were young men. Not even men, really. Boys. Like you and Jug. Boys do stupid things, right? But we had different reasons. Me and your father. You should have seen him when we set out.” FP shakes his head and smiles, wistful. “Starry eyed. All ready to fight for democracy and homeland. Ready to make his family and country proud.” He pushes together two chess pieces. Two pawns. Brothers in arms. “Me, I just wanted something to do. I didn’t give a damn for dukes and empires and democracy or President Wilson. Whatever the hell that whole mess was even about.” He chuckles. “They’re all rich men’s wars and poor men’s fights, right? That’s probably why me and your father saw things different. Don’t think I’m speaking poorly of him, your father’s one of the best men I’ve ever known. But he grew up comfortable. More comfortable than I did, at least. Your family had money. Not too much but enough. Enough to be proud of. They had tradition and honor and all of those words that never meant anything to guys like me. The only tradition the Jones family has is one of being squeezed dry and used to soak up bullets by men like Cliff Blossom. I guess your father just had a stake in this world I didn’t.”

Archie processes FP’s words. He’s never quite thought about all of that before. He’d always known Jughead had less than him, of course. Less food. Less money. Less luck.

That’s why his father always told him to be kind. To share what he had with people who didn’t. To remember that having more doesn’t make you better than anyone. But he’d never quite considered that how much you had mapped out the road you took in life and dictated how you traveled it.

“You regret going? To the war,” he finally asks.

“No. It was a world of shit and I saw things I wish I hadn’t, but I don’t regret it. Even if I didn’t do anything for some great cause of peace and liberty, maybe some men lived who wouldn’t have if I’d stayed home. I think that’s enough. Besides,” he laughs again, tinny and hollow. “I just might be the only Jones to have ever left the country.”

“Not if Jughead has anything to say about it. I don’t think he’ll be happy until he’s been to at least three countries on each continent.”

“And I hope he does. Lord knows I haven’t made much of myself, but if he does, I won’t have been an utter failure.”

Archie shakes his head.

“Don’t say that, Mr. Jones. Jughead’s a good guy. You’re his father. You must have had something to do with it.”

“Maybe, huh?”

Chapter End Notes
I really adore the idea of doughboy! FP Jones and Fred Andrews for whatever reason.
“So, you’ve got an idea, then? Besides a read-along of the *The Civil War in France*?” Joaquin asks, skeptical.

“Yes,” Jason asserts. “Well, actually, it’s Jones’ idea, but it doesn’t really matter.” He elbows Jughead in the shoulder. Giving credit. Not totally true. Lately, Jason's thrown himself into the work of organizing direct action. It helps him take his mind off of the papers. He doesn't have any leads on them, anyway, though Jughead's promised to tell him immediately should any information come his way. But until then, he can do little more than try to ignore the fact that he's just lost quite possibly the most valuable compendium of information in the country.

The dim light of the projection room at the Twilight casts sickly glow over the boys’ faces and adds an air of conspiracy to the proceedings. Which there is of course. The theater is empty today, as Jughead had effected. Joaquin lights up a cigarette. Jughead gives in and accepts one of his own from the Serpent.

“It’s pretty straightforward,” Jughead says.

“Well,” Joaquin prods. “Cough up some details.”

Jughead takes a long drag on his cigarette. He smiles. He’s feeling…not good, but better. A sense of control has been restored to his life, however slight. That’s something to celebrate. Every victory counts in times like these.

He sketches out the plan, rough and simple but effective in its conception. Jughead even gets hold of a napkin and a pen and draws a pseudo-military diagram of the steps they’ll have to take to carry out the mission. Next to the little blueprint, he jots down a list of materials. It’s not much. A few basic tools and instruments that can be found lying about anywhere, even in a little town like Riverdale. They can be prepared to go into action in less than a fortnight. Jughead periodically sneaks glances at Jason to gauge his reaction. The plan concerns his family, after all. To his annoyance, Jason’s stone-faced, stonewalling Jughead’s efforts at reading him.

Joaquin listents intently, puffing on his cigarette. Occasionally he’ll nod or make a small, barely intelligible grunt. Sometimes he’ll raise his eyebrows and its hard to tell whether it’s in mockery or approval. When Jughead finishes explaining, he folds his hands and awaits a response. Joaquin plucks the cigarette from his mouth and breathes out a cloud of curling smoke.

“Okay,” He says, quiet. “Straightforward, like you said. Simple. Yeah, we can pull that off.”

Jason nods.

“Yeah. We can.”

“Well, great,” Joaquin says with a smile. “Sounds like fun.”

“We could send them to a major newspaper. Like the *New York Times*.” Betty offers.

Veronica grimaces. She stirs her shake with a straw. They’ve chosen the darkest, most remote of Pop’s booths for their rendezvous tonight. Mercifully, there are few other patrons regardless and they have the place mostly to themselves. It doesn’t stop either girl from sparing a cautious glance around and over her shoulder every few minutes.
“Did you see the names in there? Men a dozen times more powerful than Blossom or my father. They could easily have any paper that tried to publicize this crushed.”

“They couldn’t have them all crushed, though,” Betty counters.

“No,” Veronica concedes, voice low and hollow. “I suppose not.”

Betty shrugs.

“I just don’t see what else we could do. Where else could we go with them?”

Veronica doesn’t seem to hear her. She’s lost in the swirling pattern of her milkshake. A few strands of shiny raven hair dip down into the drink. She doesn’t notice.

“Guess I won’t be testifying on my father’s behalf,” she mumbles, faintly. Lost.

“Well…of course not, Ronnie. I hope not.”

“I hoped. God, I’m sorry. It’s just…it’s only now sinking in. What my father tried to do. I had a sliver of hope that he was innocent. That this would all turn out to be some big error. The only think worse than having a jailbird for a father is knowing he deserves it.”

Betty reaches out. Puts a comforting hand on her friend’s arm. Veronica looks into her companion’s great blue-green eyes. God, how is it possible for someone to have such expressive eyes?

“I know it’s hard. I’m really really sorry you’re going through this, Veronica, bu-“

“Where are the papers now, Betty?”

“Now? They’re in my bedroom drawer.” She takes a moment to savor the humor in that documents with the power to determine the nation’s future are stored in the bedroom of a middle-American teenager. It doesn’t seem lost on Veronica, either. She smiles. The first one today.

“Elizabeth Cooper. Girl next door. Savior of the american republic.”

“It is a bit silly isn’t it?”

“Just a little.” Veronica’s smile grows ever so slightly. Then it evaporates again. “But…that isn’t all.”

“What?”

Veronica sighs.

“It’s my mother. I don’t know…I’m scared she has something to do with this. The way she was talking the other day, about Spain and contingency plans? I don’t know what to think. I’m terrified that if…if we expose all of this…” Her voice trails off. Breaks a little.

“You’ll lose her too?”

Veronica nods. Thankful to have the words taken from her mouth.

“I-well, I can’t say I understand, but I empathize.”

Veronica squeezes her friend’s hand.
“Thanks, B.”

“But we can’t just sit on these, Veronica. They’re…well…important. They could affect a lot of people’s lives. It wouldn’t be right to keep something like this to ourselves.”

Veronica nods.

“I know. Just…give me a little time, okay? Look, the plot-putsch, whatever it was, it’s dead now, right? With my father arrested? There’s no great urgency. Just give me some time to see what else I can wring out of my mother. To find out where she fits into all of this. Then…”

“That?” Betty encourages, eyes luminous with anticipation.

“That we’ll do whatever we need to do,” Veronica asserts. She keeps the tremble from her voice that time. Just barely.

It’s been more than a few weeks since Jughead Jones and Betty Cooper last went on a date.

It begins with the usual formalities. A walk down Riverdale’s ancient main street, Jughead occasionally doffing his whoopee cap to passerby. A detour onto the dirt path that leads from the relative bustle of the town into the peaceful quiet of the woods. A meadow on the banks of the Sweetwater River where nascent spring flowers challenge the blue-black winter.

The conversation follows its script, too. At first. They play catch-up, and fill one another in on their respective lives in the past few weeks. It’s largely lies, of course. Neither is keen to share the details of their more clandestine activities. The poisonous word ‘Blossom’ does not come up once. They revel in the good news that both Archie Andrews and FP Jones are expected to make more-or-less full recoveries. It’s only when they’ve fallen into a silence, watching the dying sun play on the churning river, that things a turn for the abnormal. Betty reaches out and takes Jughead’s hand in hers. She doesn’t look at him. Her jaw sets. It doesn’t take a particularly sharp mind to deduce there’s something wrong.

“What’s wrong, Betts?” He finally asks. He hates the question. Hates hearing it fall from his tongue. There’s plenty wrong. Even if not with her, than with Riverdale. With the world. The last few months of his life have been a ridiculous parody play intent on turning all reason and order on its head. There’s plenty wrong. He shouldn’t ask.

“I have to tell you something, Juggy.” She finally says. Her voice is strong, determined. But she still will not look to him.

“What is it?”

She tells him everything. She tells him of Thornhill and Veronica’s father and the papers. She tells him of stealing them quite literally out from under Jason Blossom. Of Veronica’s agony over the implications for her and her family. Of the long-time collusion between the respective empires of Blossom and Lodge. Jughead listens with rapt attention, and tries mightily to feign surprise. Some of what she tells is indeed new to him. Much of it is simply a grim confirmation of what he already knew or suspected. Jason was right, he muses. Betty really had taken the papers. At least, she’d been party to the theft. She tells him how Veronica swore her to secrecy but she simply couldn’t take the burden weighing upon her mind anymore and had to tell someone, even if it made her feel like a filthy traitor. Betty speaks and speaks until her tongue won’t serve her anymore, and she collapses, exhausted, against her boyfriend. He cradles her head and stares intently into the swirling river. Trying to process it all. Trying to fit it all together. He has to act shocked, of course. Can't let
on he's had any prior knowledge of any of this. Jughead isn't quite ready to reveal his own part in Riverdale's collective madness, yet

He thinks of his father. Archie. In the hospital.

“You and Veronica should be careful,” he finally says.

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean! You don’t want to piss off guys like Clifford Blossom.”

“It’s fine, Juggy. He doesn’t know we took anything, an-“

“It’s not fine!” Jughead snaps. Harsher than intended. Betty flinches a bit. “Sorry…it’s just…my dad and Archie almost died. This is not the time to play detective.” He recognizes he’s being ever so slightly hypocritical in light of his own nocturnal activities. But that’s different, isn’t it? He’s more or less expendable, anyway.

“Jughead, we’re going to be okay. We did a good thing. Those papers could help bring justice to a lot of people.”

“What are you planning to do with them?”

She chews her lip.

“We don’t know yet. We’re trying to decide on that.”

“Nothing that can be traced back to you, I hope?”

He thinks of Jason in the theater. He’d been worried, downright scared by the prospect of those papers falling into anyone else’s hands. Jughead wonders if Betty and Veronica grasp exactly what it is they’ve gotten hold of.

“No. Jughead, can you really not trust me not to do something stupid-“

“Not when the ‘something’ in question are earthshaking documents people would kill for! I wouldn’t trust anyone to make unilateral decisions on that!”

Betty stiffens up. Crosses her arms.

“It’s not unilateral. There’s Veronica.”

“That isn’t-“

“We’re not children Jughead.”

“You’re also not spies!”

She draws herself up so that she’s sitting ramrod straight. Lifts her chin a little. Blue eyes glowing indignantly.

“Maybe not. But we’re the nearest thing in this town.”

Veronica’s good at spying. It’s a skill honed over the past seventeen years through trial and error. It’s essential to surviving in the cutthroat world her father was intent on thrusting upon her. Listen
without listening. Watch without watching. Disregard nothing. Every word from someone’s mouth has meaning. Never think anything less. Information and secrets is the most valuable of all commodities. More precious than gold.

When Hermione Lodge has an important call to take or make, she repairs to the sitting room towards the rear of their Pembrooke apartment. The one with the Persian carpets and the Ottoman and the framed portrait of her father commissioned from some Italian artist. Hermione’s never actually admitted as much to her daughter, but it’s a clear enough pattern to Veronica. Calls of little significance are received or put out in the dining room or even in the lobby downstairs. Calls of import are reserved for the sitting room.

So when Hermione ducks into the sitting room tonight, Veronica follows, footsteps light and careful. When she hears the door shut, she emerges from the hall’s shadows and creeps up. The little crack between door and wall is tiny, but large enough to provide a useful listening port. Veronica crouches beside the doormame. She steadies her breathing to an almost imperceptible level, like she’s trained herself to do. She stiffens her entire body to prevent involuntary movement that might cause unwanted noise.

She listens.

Inside, Hermione is already engaged in conversation with whoever it is on the other end of the line. She’s speaking in Spanish. Veronica takes note of that. It’s clue number one. This caller is another Spanish speaker. It’s unlikely to be her father himself, for his calls, ingoing and outgoing, are closely monitored by prison guards. But one of his associates, surely. A Spaniard, probably.

“You say the reds have already frozen the funds? It’s been hardly three weeks! No…yes…yes, we did know this would happen…or, expected it at least. Well, how soon can they be unfrozen? I know! That’s why we’re relying on you to clean out the Bolsheviks in Madrid and fix this! No…well what devils is General Mola doing? Twiddling his thumbs? Colonel Yagüe, after all of the generous assistance we’ve lent to your little ‘crusade’, all we’ve asked is that you hold and protect our…don’t cut me off you clown! Soon! Now! July? Is that the fastest you can operate? Payments need to be made now! God’s sake! July 17th? That is what you want me to tell my husband? Now!” There’s a lengthy silence, as the man on ther other end speaks. “Yes, you’d best keep in contact, colonel. Adios.”

Spanish gold.

The first thing Veronica does, as always, is zero in on names. Those are bound to tell much. A name is a person. It’s always a person at the center of things in the end.

*General Mola.*

*Coronel Yagüe.*

Both military men, obviously.

Yagüe’s name touches off an obscure little bell in her head. It’s one of those names that rings with familiarity but eludes specific identification. She’s certainly heard it. Probably. But until her powers of recollection return, she’ll have to content herself with the knowledge that his name is Yagüe and he is a colonel.

Mola on the other hand, she’s heard of. Emilio Mola. He’s an old general. An *Africanista*: a veteran of Spain’s vicious colonial wars in Morocco and a dour reactionary. He is no friend of the Spanish republic or of this new, progressive Popular Front government. A highborn gentleman
with only contempt for rabble clamoring for land and heightened wages. Exactly the sort of man her father gets on with.

And what her mother wants from them? Or more likely, what her father wants from them? Money, it seems.

*All we’ve asked is that you hold or protect our…*

Our what? Money?

Veronica remembers the papers. The funds sent to Spain. Secured in accounts in Malága, Sevilla, Burgos. Funds sent for what? Safe-keeping, it seems?

She tries to slow her mind. To build a mental image. Put everything into perspective.

Her parents sent money into Spain for security purposes. And not only their money. That of the Blossoms as well, she thinks, recalling the myriad transfers. And likely other firms too. Now they want it back. Now. It is a matter of urgency, for whatever reason. Only the accounts have been frozen by the ‘reds’. By the government of the Spanish Republic. And her mother wants these men, Yagüe and Mola and likely others, to do what towards having them unfrozen? Something, clearly. What?

Whatever it is, they are not acting swiftly enough for the liking of Hermione or Hiram Lodge.

*July 17th.*

She burns the date into her brain. She won’t forget it.
Archie Andrews’ welcome home celebration is a subdued affair. The only pomp consists of a hastily constructed banner strung across the entrance to the Andrews’ house. It reads, aptly: “Welcome home Archie!”

He walks a little slower than he did, but by the grace of some power, the bullets have done little lasting damage. The doctors predict a full recovery, barring any further misfortune. Archie comes home in a neatly tucked doublet, a pair of slacks, and some worn loafers. As his father helps him out from the car, he’s greeted in the yard by Betty Cooper, Jughead Jones, Veronica Lodge, and Kevin Keller.

Truth be told, it’s as much a reunion as a celebration of Archie’s survival, for in recent days the group of friends has spent much more time apart than together. Each hugs their returned comrade in turn, and true to himself he graciously accepts each embrace.

They find themselves in the Andrews’ kitchen, seated round the dinner table like Arthur’s knights. Just as stony and stalwart, too. Conversation doesn’t come so easy today. What does one say to a boy who’s just barely escaped a botched assassination with his life? It’s hardly a sport or work injury. And what does one say when their minds are consumed with thoughts of fascism and communism? Backroom plots and conspiracy? Dictatorship and liberty? For those are the problems that plague this unassuming table, though each of the youths concerned thinks the others blissfully ignorant.

Veronica asks if Archie’s brawn has not diminished after weeks in a hospital bed. Betty gives him a warm, lengthy hug and insists he return to music as soon as possible. Jughead teasingly refers to him Archibald Lincoln. He fears he’s crossed a line for a moment, until Archie smiles, laughs, and claps him on the back. Kevin rather tastelessly inquires as to what it’s like to be shot. Archie’s response of ‘painful’ seems to quell his curiosity for the moment.

But the exchanges are awkward and stiff. All minds are elsewhere. It doesn’t go unnoticed by Archie. When he offhandedly mentions the recent elections in Spain, Veronica reacts as if she’s been stabbed. She recovers quickly, because she’s good at that, but not quickly enough to pass without comment.

“You okay, Veronica?”

“Yeah.”

Jughead asks how his father is in the hospital. Archie assures him FP is fine, and right on his heels along the road to recovery. That seems to satisfy Jughead. Though the ever present haunted look in his eyes never quite vanishes.

Betty and Veronica leave first, each excusing themselves with the respective lies of duty calling at the Register and mother having set a curfew. Kevin trails them out of the house.
Soon, it is only Archie and Jughead.

"So how’ve you been holding up?" comes the question.

“Fine.” Is Jughead’s unsatisfactory answer.

“That doesn’t really tell me a whole lot.”

“There’s not a lot to tell,” Jughead lies. Considering how rapidly everyone he knows is being dragged into this web of lunacy, there’s no reason to add Archie to that number. “I’ve just been writing, for the most part. Making good time.” He mentions nothing of his late radical activities, or of those planned for the future. The near future.

“I can’t wait to see it in print,” Archie says.

“Don’t get your hopes up. I’ll let you read the hand-scribbled first edition, though.”

Archie smiles.

"I think that’ll be something in itself.” A moment of silence. Then Archie speaks again.
“Sometimes I think you’re right, Jug.”

“About what?”

“That this town’s just falling apart.”

“It isn’t just Riverdale, Archie,” Jughead expounds. “The whole country. The whole world. Frankly, we’re lucky. Things are worse in other places. But it’s all linked together. Capital is a global system.” The last few words sort of die in his throat as he realizes that Jason Blossom’s voice is coming out of his mouth. Archie doesn’t seem to notice. Jughead resists the urge to slap himself in the face.

“Yeah…” Archie says, unsure how to respond to the sudden dose of Marxism. “I just hope…things can get back to normal soon enough.”

Jughead shakes his head.

“There’s no going back. That’s not how history works. But we can always push forward. Try for something better.

“Yeah. I like that.”

Jughead leaves a few minutes later, but instead of heading down the street towards the Twilight, he loops around and creeps into the Andrews’ dark backyard. He feels a pang of guilt as he snatches two cans of red paint from the side of a shed. But it’s not a big deal, really. There are countless more there. Mr. Andrews won’t even notice it’s missing, probably.

Anyway, sometimes we must all sacrifice for the greater good. Whether it’s a life or a can of paint.

“Cheryl? Princess?”

Her father’s words drift through the halls of Thornhill, and Cheryl puts up her guard. He hasn’t called her ‘princess’ since she was seven. In fact, fatherly pet names went out the window around that time in general. Along with the affection they conveyed. It was all Spartan austerity from then on. Or as Spartan as the wealthiest family in town could get. Cheryl creeps towards her father’s
study. The place has accrued for itself an aura of mystery and danger over the years. It is a forbidden cavern. The place one does not venture unless they desire pain and woe. That goes for everyone. No exceptions. Blood doesn’t come into it. She knocks on the door, light and easy.

“Daddy?”

“Come in, Cheryl.”

He’s not behind his desk, rigid and upright like a king. Today, he’s seated in a velvet chair centered-off by the window. A book sits in his lap. He smiles. But it feels off. Wrong. As if he’s trying to suggest a state of ease. Too intentional.

“Hi, daddy,” Cheryl says. She gives her best daughterly smile. He waves her over. She takes a seat next to him.

“I haven’t really spoken to you—or spent any time at all with you—in a good while, Cheryl. I’m sorry for that. You know, I’m busy, but that’s no excuse.”

Cheryl smiles. It’s a smile as fake as his.

“It’s not a problem, daddy,” she assures.

“Think of this as a doctor’s well visit. Talk to me, about whatever you like. Father to daughter.”

Cheryl shrugs.

“There’s not much to tell. My grades are up, as always.” Cheryl smoothes out her skirt, face flush with pride. Clifford nods his approval. “I’m…tolerating friends and acquaintances, as always.” Cheryl tries to put on as innocuous a face as she can while she tears into her father’s façade. He wants or expects something. He must. ‘Well-visit’. Does he think she’s that stupid? She really must be the least favorite child.

“How’s your brother?”

“Jason? Jason’s…well, you know. Actually, he hasn’t been around too much lately.” That part’s true.

“Out with friends, I suppose? That boy will need to learn to focus someday soon. I just thank God that was never a problem with you, Cheryl.”

The buttering up begins.

“You know me. Dutiful daughter.” Damn. Did that come across as sarcasm? It was, but it wasn’t supposed to sound like it.

“Yeah. Just gallivanting around with his friends, I suppose. He doesn’t tell me too much.” That’s a blatant falsehood, of course. They share most everything with each other. Cheryl hopes it wasn’t too obvious. He is out with friends, more or less. He’s out chairing that ridiculous Bolshevik club he’s slapped together. And will not be dissuaded from this course, no matter how hard his dear sister tries. And no matter how well he knows just how his father would respond should he find out. It turns her stomach every time she spends a bit too much time thinking about it.

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about you both quite a bit lately,” Clifford says. His voice is a bit distant. Opaque. He’s been thinking, sure. What about them, exactly? Cheryl scans his hard, well-worn
Hard as she tries, her father is more than a match for her when it comes to concealment of intention.

“I’ve been thinking about me a lot, too,” Cheryl says. Her father chuckles. She can’t quite tell if it’s genuine or not, and it drives her mad.

“More specifically, I’ve been thinking about your futures.” Clifford closes the book. He sets it aside. Things are serious, now. Cheryl stiffens. It’s time to batten down the hatches. “I simply don’t think Jason is preparing for his future the way he ought to.” Clifford spreads his hands. “Frankly, I don’t think Jason takes our family business seriously.” Cheryl remembers her brother’s hour-long rant about surplus value two nights ago. She suppresses a smirk. He absolutely takes the business seriously. Just not in the way Clifford might like.

“Of course he does.”

“He’s a very smart boy. You and him, both. But he’s also very…prone to flights of fancy. He gets ridiculous ideas into his head and won’t let them go. He just can’t focus on matters that matter. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with your brother, only that his disposition might not equip him for a position like the one he’s in line for.”

Cheryl bristles a bit on behalf of her brother. A lot of pretty words to call him incapable. She prepares a defense for him.

“What-“

“What do you think of running the company someday?”

The question, despite all her youthful cynicism and wiles, catches her off-guard. She’s never considered that to fall within the realm of possibility. It’s laughable, really. No girl or woman has ever been so much as given a second thought when it comes to the question of appointing an heir to the Blossom throne. Especially not her, who has, as long as she can remember, been only the unwanted corollary to Jason. A necessary burden. She imagines he’s not serious, at first. She wants to scoff. She shouldn’t, so she doesn’t.

“Really?” she asks, voice quiet and cracking.

“I’m only asking. It’s always been a distinct possibility,” he lies.

“Has it?”

So this is his plan to straighten Jason out. He’s banking on the likelihood she’ll tell Jason everything, as she’s always done, and that the threat of losing his place in the sun to his sister will galvanize him into shaping up and coming back into the fold. Simple enough.

“It’s a massive responsibility, of course. But you’ve never shared your brother’s propensity for distraction.” More buttering up. “I think, with the right training and guidance, it would be something you could handle.”

Despite her determination to resist all her father’s bids at winning her over or softening her up, Cheryl finds herself swelling up at his words. How could she not? Even the suggestion that she might be capable, might be good enough to one day represent the Blossom name, cannot but trigger something in her. After seventeen years of being not good enough?

She curses herself for naivety. Of course it isn’t a serious offer.
Probably.

But if it was…her father might think he’s undercutting or threatening Jason by making her into a competitor, but that can’t be further from the truth. She knows Jason would want nothing less than inheriting Blossom Maple Farms. In reality, she would be taking a burden from his shoulders. There would be no loser.

She smiles, again. This time, there’s some genuine mirth.

“I would be honored, daddy.”

He smiles back. Again, she cannot read it for authenticity or insincerity. Again, it upsets her.

“Which brings me to another, more pressing matter. Something I think you could help me with.”

Cheryl almost rolls her eyes. Here it is. This is why he called her in here. For some sort of favor. And he really thinks she won’t notice.

“What’s that?”

“As I’m sure you recall, a few days ago, you had two of your friends over to stay the night.”

“‘Friends’. Yes.”

“Well, I have reason to believe they may have…taken something of ours.”

In a moment, Cheryl’s agonizing over her father’s manipulation disappears. She’s spent the past week trying to divine exactly what Veronica and Betty were up to. They might think she was stupid enough to fall for that ‘oh everyone else cancelled’ nonsense, but that only showed who the real fools were. They’d come for something and it sure as hell wasn’t her company.

Still, she notices the use of the word 'ours' rather than 'mine'. Create a sense of collective loss. Convince that his problems are also hers.

“Really?” she asks, blood boiling.

“Mmm. I discovered some papers of mine missing very soon after they left.”

“And you think Lodge and Cooper took them? Why?” She knows why, of course. The Coopers. The Register. They live for the chance to heap mud onto the Blossom name. Of course they would send their daughter to snoop around Thornhill for sensitive material. Cheryl kicks herself for not putting that one together a little earlier.

“I suspect Ms. Cooper may have been acting under direction of her parents.” Her father says, his face alight with tranquil fury.

“What did they take?”

“Some papers detailing certain transactions our company’s conducted.”

“Important?”

“Important in that it will be very difficult to balance accounts without them. Unfortunately for the Coopers, they won’t find any journalistic bombshells in a lot of numbers and manifests. But I will need them if I don’t want the company to fall into disarray this quarter. The strike caused more than enough damage. I can’t afford to have that compounded.”
Cheryl runs her father’s words through her mind’s sieve. She has a suspicion, too. A suspicion he’s full of shit. She knows well enough that Blossom Maple Farms keeps more than one copy of each and every transaction, transfer, or calculation it makes. In more than one location.

And she also—much as she’s loathe to admit it—doesn’t think the two girls were dumb enough to mistake a simple list of numbers and names for something of earth-shattering importance. Betty, maybe, but not Veronica. There was a girl who knew more about this world than any kid her age had a right to. She’d know what they were looking for and what they’d found.

So perhaps what’s missing is more than a dry catalogue of sales and purchases.

“Well, how are we going to get them back?” Cheryl asks. She’s very careful to throw that ‘we’ in there. She has to plant into her father’s head that she’s certainly on his side. Has to make herself look reliable. Loyal.

“That’s where I was hoping you could. You’re…close to these girls,” Cheryl guffaws.” Well, closer than I am, at least,” he elaborates. “If you could retrieve those papers for me, I’d be more than grateful. And I don’t think I need to mention that it would more than prove your competence to me.”

Cheryl grins again. This time it’s completely real. What a golden opportunity. Here’s a chance to undercut her two nemesis’ amateur attempts at espionage and get her hands on sensitive information all at once. If it’s really nothing but a bunch of number sheets, then she’ll hand it back in to her father, no harm done. It will certainly increase her status in his eyes and maybe turn that offer into a real one. If it’s something of rather greater importance, well, she’ll decide to what to do then.

“I doubt snatching anything back from those two moppets will be much trouble.”
“What the fuck is taking Blossom?” Joaquin hisses. He and Jughead crouch in the shadow of a crooked oak tree. To the west, the bulk of Blossom Maple Farms’ manufacturing plant looms squat and heavy. Like a great monstrous toad. Behind its angular roofs and tapering stacks, the town’s lights blink and flicker in a chilly March night. Stars glitter overhead. Joaquin holds a crowbar in his practiced hands. When they arrived, he’d taken a few practice swings at the big oak. Chunks of bark and wood litter the ground around them.

Jughead’s answer to his companion’s crowbar is a heavy stick about three feet in length. He’d simply picked it up on the walk through the forest. Because he’d forgotten to bring, as agreed upon, a ‘blunt, heavy instrument’. But he isn’t telling anyone that.

Two cans of red paint sit at their feet.

“He probably had to tuck Cheryl into bed,” Jughead answers, a wry smile on his lips.

Joaquin snickers.

The young Serpent’s tied a bandana around his mouth, leaving only a strip of olive skin and his bright blue-green eyes exposed. Just as Jason had asserted, on their first patrol around the factory, they’d caught sight of only a single guard anywhere on the premises. He was an older fellow, a former deputy, with a flashlight. A stopwatch had determined it took him something like thirty minutes to complete a circuit around the sprawling complex. Shouldn’t pose much of a problem.

Now they’re just waiting on Jason.

Jughead had been persuaded to remove his whoopee cap for the mission, though just barely. He’s clad in one of his father’s old leather jackets (he’d had to return to his father’s house for the first time since the shooting to retrieve it. It had been a rather uncomfortable experience), a pair of tattered black pants, and worn black workman’s boots.

Two cans of paint rest in the dirt at his feet. He gently nudges one with the toe of his boot.

He suddenly feels a bit silly. Dressed in his father’s dark clothes and cradling his stick like a rifle, he feels like a little boy again, playing soldiers in the woods with Archie.

“Hey.” The voice spills out of the darkness, preceded by a beam of golden light.

“Christ!” Joaquin leaps to his feet and grips his crowbar. Plants his feet firmly into the ground and assumes a fighting stance. Jughead stumbles backwards and rises shakily to his feet.

“Calm down!” Jason hisses as he emerges from the forest shadows. “It’s me.”

He steps towards them, holding a flashlight in his left hand. His right grips an aluminum baseball bat. The light bobs gently.

“Welcome to the party.” Joaquin says.

Jughead grips his stick tighter. He nods at the new arrival.

“Shall we go?”

The slapdash strike team moves. The factory grows as they advance into its shadow, until it towers
over the trees and submits only to the moon in the sky. It ought to be brought low. Cut down.

Storm the castle. Rip down the king’s banners.

It’s time to hit back.

We couldn’t have known it at the time, but our actions that night were the first battle of a war that would consume our world in entire. We were a latter day Black Hand. Entirely ignorant to the fire we’d just set. Battle lines had been drawn. Whether they knew it or not, people were choosing their allegiances. Soon, the guns would speak.

We didn’t know that across town, a raven-haired young girl and her blonde best friend were fighting the same war on our side. We could not have known that we were, in effect, volunteering ourselves as soldiers. Nor could we have known just how far the conflict would spread. Could not have known that we would soon find ourselves fighting far beyond the bucolic tranquility of Riverdale. Under distant, stormy skies and upon distant, blood-drenched soil.

Veronica invites Betty over to Pembrooke at a little past nine. The time doesn’t matter, really, since her mother’s gone back to New York for a few days. There’s business to attend to in relation to her father’s case. That’s fine with Veronica. In fact, it’s exactly the sort of privacy she needs.

It’s time to do a little more digging. And, Veronica can feel, she’s quite nearly at the bottom of all this. The pieces are falling together, if slowly. Tonight, she expects, she will win herself another piece of the puzzle, and she wants her friend her to share in the victory.

Betty ascends the lobby stairs with a careful gait. Veronica greets her on the landing. She opens the door and ushers her inside. Though it’s not much bigger than the Coopers’ modest middle class dwelling, the penthouse manages to make much more efficient use of such little space. The sleek, marble walls recall imperial grandeur and make the visitor forget that the place really isn’t all that large. The strategically placed furniture and decorations, each so beautifully carved and molded, hide the fact that the rooms are in fact quite sparsely furnished. A thin veneer of gold over an unseemly core of dross.

Fitting.

“Ready to do some more detective work?” Veronica inquires.

Betty nods, stripping off her jacket. Veronica starts towards a back door and motions for her to follow. Betty trails her friend into a narrow little hallway carpeted by a lovely faux-velvet. They turn left and enter into a circular room outfitted with rather tacky flower-patterned wallpaper, two or three armchairs, a sofa, a phone at the far end bolted to a table at the far end. Veronica approaches the device cautiously, as if it might lunge out and bite her.

“Betty, I’m going to need you to be entirely quiet. Mum’s the word, okay? Mute!” Betty puts up her hands in mock defense.

“I got it, no worries.”

Veronica pulls a wrinkled scrap of paper from her pocket. A number is scribbled there, the hand shaky and rushed. She’d jotted it down herself, earlier, copied from her mother’s directory of important contact information, each number recorded beneath its owner’s name. It had been a bit difficult to find the right number. In fact, it had been hidden, albeit rather poorly. She passed over the name on her first two perusals of the directory. ‘John lago’.
On the third, it had clicked that this was the rough English equivalent to the name ‘Juan Yagüe’.

Of course.

She spins the rotary dial and enters the appropriate number. Veronica can do a decent impression of her mother. She thinks. Certainly not good enough to carry in a face-to-face conversation, but she hopes the distortion of a trans-Atlantic telephone line will do the rest for her.

The phone rings once.

Twice.

Three, four, and then five times. Veronica taps her toe.

“Buenas tardes?” Comes the voice. Gravelly. Harsh and worn. She pictures a man with calloused, hard skin and brutal eyes. “Señora Lodge?”

“Buenas tardes, Coronel.”

Betty watches silently, wishing she could understand a lick of Spanish.

“Como esta, Señora? Ha hablado con su marido sobre el dinero y las preparaciones por el movimiento? Lo vamos a necesitar si hemos de derrocar a los rojos.”

“I’m calling on behalf of my husband. I’ve spoken with him since we last spoke, and he’s none too happy about…operations being delayed until July.” Veronica’s voice catches. She reminds herself she doesn’t know what the ‘operations’ actually are, and hopes to God Yagüe doesn’t ask any questions she can’t answer. “But if we’re going to indulge you with such patience, he would very much like to know what specific preparations are being made for July 17th.” Nice and vague. Let her speak with enough conviction to override the lack of specificities in her words.

On the other end of the line, Yagüe sighs.

“Madame, are you certain it’s wise to discuss this over a telephone?

“Yes, yes,” Veronica snaps, effecting her mother’s impatience. “The line is secure, I promise you.” She doesn’t know that, and in fact hopes it isn’t secure, but in all likelihood it is. That’s not the sort of precaution her parents would overlook. Especially not in light of her father’s recent troubles.

Yagüe’s voice drops an octave. “I can predict that much of the military, particularly enlisted men, will remain loyal to the red government. But we will surely have the Army of Africa. The finest of Spain’s soldiers. As long as General Franco remains true.”

Slowly the picture is illuminated.

What is being planned-what is set for the 17th of July, is nothing other a military uprising. Not that this is a particularly surprising development.

The pronunciamento—a ‘pronouncement’, or army coup against the government—is a tradition as Spanish as corridas and dark-haired beauties. Since time immemorial the military has viewed itself as the guarantor of Spain’s security and stability. Whenever a new clique of politicians or ideologues seems to threaten the established order, some general or another takes it upon himself to rise, throw out the current regime, and ‘save Spain’. Invariably, they are funded with the gold of wealthy caciques and financiers alarmed by social upheaval. Say, a man like Hiram Lodge.

“And weapons? Arms?” Veronica snaps.
“Superiority in armaments will be necessary to triumph over Bolshevism.” This man has a penchant for theatrical language. “Talks with the Germans and the Italians in regards to supporting our cause have proven fruitful. Their aid will be invaluable.”

So Hitler and Mussolini are in on the little power play as well. Naturally.

Veronica wishes Betty spoke Spanish. Then she could have her stand by and take notes.

“Of course. It’s good to know Spain hasn’t been left alone in this hour.”

“There will be difficulties. But I am confident with the invaluable assistance of allies such as yourself and your husband, we will emerge victorious. We have on our side all that is good and holy. The very soul of Spain. We will sweep this Marxist rabble from the halls of power. I can promise you that. And you have my word that as soon as we have liberated the fatherland from the Muscovite hordes, the wealth your husband has so graciously entrusted to us for safekeeping will be unfrozen and released back to him.”

God, he speaks like a propaganda reel.

‘The very soul of Spain’?

Who the hell talks like that? Veronica wants to gag.

“Thank you, colonel. Good fortune and God be with you.”

“Thank you, madame. Arriba España!”

“Arriba España!” Veronica echoes. The line falls dead.

“So…” Betty begins quietly. “Can you translate…all of that?”

Veronica smiles. It feels good to smile.

“I am going to need some paper and a pen or pencil. But first, I am going to require a drink. My mom keeps wine in the kitchen, come on.”

“I…I don’t really drink.” Betty stammers.

“Well I do.”
Sheriff Keller sighs.

Cliff Blossom’s production plant looms over him. It’s oppressive. Heavy. Crushing. Like a weight on Riverdale’s breast.

He isn’t on the take, like half the town thinks. Cliff Blossom doesn’t pay him a cent. And he wouldn’t let him.

It’s only that he is sworn to keep peace and order in Riverdale. That is his mission. His reason for being. Even if it meant bowing to powers greater than him. Even if it meant letting Cliff Blossom rule the town like a barbarian chief, and turning a blind eye to his depredations. Painful as it is to admit, the law is not impartial nor is it all-powerful. It simply does not apply to men with that sort of power. If he were to step out of line, then he’d be done. In Riverdale. Maybe in this life. And he’d be replaced with someone more compliant. Better to do what he can with the hand he’s been dealt.

Today, he’s been called to serve as the Chieftain’s personal gendarme once again.

All Riverdale has heard already. One of Blossom’s maple storage tanks had burst.

No, not burst.

Exploded.

It blew out every window in the factory. Pulverized stone and left metal twisted and warped. Inundated everything in sticky, cloyingly sweet, Blossom brand maple syrup.

Production won’t resume for a good while. Profits won’t recover for a good while.

Keller watches his deputies hunt the scene for evidence. Kneeling to poke through shattered glass and broken brick. Recording each detail of the disaster on their little pads of paper.

It might have been an accident. Accidents happen. Perhaps the tank was not pressurized properly.
Perhaps a pipe was compromised or someone forgot to pull some lever or there was a fire. An unfortunate little mishap.

Save for the watchman’s testimony, which had him catching three dark figures in the act of the destruction, and pursuing them to the edge of the property, whereupon they vanished into the wood.

Save for the matter of the windows. Specifically, those not shattered by the blast. Those broken from the outside in.

Keller squints into the sunlight. He shakes his head.

Save of course, for the triumphant slogan scrawled across a factory wall in bright red paint. Still wet.

Keller reads it for the hundredth time in an hour.

**Long Live the International Soviet!**

Just above that, a crude hammer and sickle gleams mischievously in the morning sun.

Chapter End Notes

the amount of communism is directly proportional to how many windows you break

~Georgij Dimitrov, seventh congress of the comintern
News of the vandalism hits Riverdale like a barrage of artillery shell. In fact, the force of the blast quite literally shook the town on its foundations.

It’s unthinkable. As if someone had defaced the royal palace. The word is that Keller’s thinking of bringing in outside help to assist in solving the crime, considering the scale and gravity of the destruction. Cliff Blossom, naturally, is apoplectic. Someone must be guilty, and when he finds the person or persons responsible, they’re going to wish their fathers had never romanced their mothers.

Keller’s deputies had first assumed some sort of explosive had been used to wreak the destruction. It had quickly become clear this was not the case. Instead, a pressure valve on one of the maple syrup tanks had been tampered with and the resultant loss of integrity had caused the container to rupture, showering everything with a few hundred gallons (and a few thousand dollars) worth of the sweet nectar. That meant the culprit or culprits had to have knowledge of the factory’s inner workings, which in turn casts suspicion upon any of the many laborers Blossom employs. And with the suppression of their failed strike, they’ve all ample reason to be unhappy with the boss.

Riverdale talks. Riverdale likes to talk.

Fred Andrews’ skeleton of a crew talks over lunch, enjoying a vicarious thrill.

“I hear the whole factory was flooded with maple syrup,” says a sturdy Hoosier who’s wandered halfway across the country searching for work and just barely found it here.

“They said it were like a goddamn bomb went off in there,” chuckles a Riverdale native who once ran a small mechanic’s shop before the Depression forced him to close down and go out looking for a wage.

“It’ll be a long, long time before Cliff Blossom’s milking the golden goose again,” sneers a third man.

“But I don’t go in for all that Russian nonsense,” objects one more, in reference to the evident communist sympathies of the vandal or vandals. “The country’s gone to shit but it’s still our country, right?”

“Hell with this country!” says the former mechanic. “At least the Russians are trying something new.” He curls a finger. “No grifters like Blossom getting rich off our sweat in Leningrad, let me tell you!”

“If someone don’t stand by their country when the going gets tough, he's got no right to call it his.”

“Look,” says the Hoosier, eager to defuse things before they get tense. “The fella who did it could’ve been a communist, or a Nazi, or a democrat, or a damn moon man. As long as he gave the boss a black eye, I say, a toast to him.”

They can all agree on that.

The students of Riverdale, with much time to spare considering the school’s drastic reduction in staff and materials in response to financial distress, talk too.

“I can’t believe someone actually had the balls to do it!” Reggie Mantle cackles.
Archie Andrews shakes his head and says: “this is just going to make everything a whole lot worse.” Frankly, though, he’s glad something else has come along to keep people from asking about his brush with death. It isn’t the sort of thing he’s keen to adopt into his identity.

“Where’s your sense of fun, Andrews?”

“This isn’t a damn gag!” snaps Jason Blossom, who’s making a great show out of his loyalty to the family business. “My family built this town, and this is how people show their gratitude?” Yes, he puts on quite the indignant public face. Secrets are fun. Not a lot of kids catch the subtle smiles he trades with Jughead Jones when they pass each other in a hall or a courtyard.

Ah, yes. Jughead Jones.

No one needs to ask Jughead Jones how he feels.

The dark joy is practically palpable. In fact, a few go as far as to joke that he’s the one responsible. Of course, no one truly gives any credence to that wild idea.

Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge don’t seem too invested in the happening one way or another. They’ve been quite distracted as of late. Teachers and peers alike have taken note. If asked, they’ll likely mumble something about being tired or having a lot on their plates. If you were to eavesdrop on one of their private conversations, you might hear the words ‘fascism’, ‘conspiracy’, ‘coup’, ‘funds’, and ‘Spain’ bandied about. Probably nothing.

In Riverdale’s police station, they talk, too.

Keller hasn’t made much headway. Truth be told, he isn’t particularly invested in whether or not the responsible party is captured. This is the first time in a long time Blossom’s been hit anywhere as hard as the rest of them. Let him squirm a little. The sight of a honest-to-god maple syrup flood in the factory was pretty damn funny, in all honesty. Still, it is his job.

The culprit, he’s determined, is clearly someone who knew their way around the factory and possessed at least a working knowledge of its machinery. So, likely an employee, or someone close to one. But that hardly narrows it down. Maybe a Serpent. In view of their part in unofficial organizing of local labor, that seems likely.

His deputies laugh and joke about the whole thing.

But there’s no face to the crime. Not yet.

In Thornhill, you’d best believe there’s a lot of talking.

Cliff Blossom summons his family together like some sort of council (don’t call it a ‘soviet’).

He harangues his children and demands that, should they happen upon any information pertinent to this travesty, they let him know immediately. Not Keller, not his deputies, not anyone else. Him.

His children nod. Cheryl looks a little pale.

“Sure thing, dad,” Jason offers.

Cliff stalks off to ruminate and rage in peace. He’ll recover. The syrup will be cleaned out, the factory restored to its former glory, and production resumed. But this is more than a simple matter of numbers and profits. This is a strike at his pride. It’s a declaration of war. And he fully intends to accept that declaration.
Yes, in Riverdale, there is a whole lot of talking, but little more action.

Well, for the moment.
Democracy vs Cheryl Blossom

Chapter Notes

I've been trying to right the next section of this accursed story for damn near a month now, and I finally spill all this out in the space of an hour or two.

I'm really not very happy with the next three or so chapters, but I have to get past this point in the narrative.

I sort of wrote myself into a corner, because this story started out as just a collection of 1930s!Riverdale flash fics with little connection, but then it somehow grew a plot when it was never built for one, so it's sort of shambling about as I hastily try to keep it from falling apart.

I don't know if people said 'on the clock' in the '30s but fuck it it's like 2 AM and I'm too lazy to cross reference it.

Veronica has the epiphany while staring at her conspiracy board one night, a cup of coffee in her hand, eyes blurring.

The conspiracy board is what she’s dubbed the great section of plywood covered in countless pictures, annotations, maps, and citations all relating the disparate pieces of the grand plot she’s uncovered to each other. There’s a hastily hand-drawn map of Spain (sweetly colored in for her by Betty Cooper), a photograph of her father, one of Cliff Blossom, one of Pierre DuPont, one of General Emilio Mola, one of General Francisco Franco. There are a few note sheets covered in hasty calculations.

The board hangs up on her bedroom wall, though it comes down whenever her mother is in the area.

She’s got it all figured out, she’s pretty sure.

The architects of the business plot, a shadowy group of wealthy men who referred to themselves in the notes she’d stolen as ‘The Fraternity’, her father and Blossom included, had set aside a store of funds with which to pay the various persons and entities they would need to carry out a successful coup, most prominently the fascist Silvershirt militia of William Pelley and numerous sympathetic officers in the military.Courtesy of her father and his connections in the mother country, the funds had been stored in various accounts in Spain, then under a friendly right-wing administration and out of the reach of the United States government. Then her father was arrested, and the plot fell apart.

Except…if the plot fell apart, then why was her mother still trying to access the money they’d stored in Spain on her father's behalf? For what purpose? Why were they bankrolling the impending military rising?

Unless the plot hadn’t fallen apart.
Unless The Fraternity had perfectly duped everyone.

With her father in prison and soon to shoulder the blame for the entirety of the conspiracy, the rest of the plotters had a free hand to continue acting free of scrutiny.

That’s it, then.

The plot isn’t dead.

The guns of high finance are still trained upon the American Republic. And if the coup in Spain comes off and the ‘Spanish Gold’ is delivered into their hands then the Fraternity will strike, and bring to these shores the same terror that reigns in Rome and Berlin.

So Veronica was wrong. She and Betty don’t have all the time in the world to decide what to do with such incriminating material. In fact, time is quite clearly running short. She feels sick. She rubs her temples. She stands and stumbles down the hallway and into the sitting room, where she’d made the call to Colonel Yagüe as her mother only a few weeks ago.

Veronica picks up the phone and dials the Cooper house with shaking fingers.

“Thank God, she picks up in seconds.

“What? Ronnie have you lost your marbles, it’s 10:00 at-“

“I don’t care what time it is! We’re on the clock!”

“What do you mean we’re on the clock?” Betty asks, voice subdued and sleepy.

“The plot’s not off!”

“What? What plo-oh…oh God…oh…are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure, get over here! And bring the papers.”

Betty arrives, haggard, at a few minutes before 11:00.

Veronica drags her inside and explanations the conclusions of her tireless investigation.

“I had to crawl out of my window and creep across town t-“

“I’m sorry but I don’t care! We don’t have any more time to waste! We have to do something with the papers now. I don’t know when this whole thing is set to come off, but it’s soon.”

“What do we do?”

Veronica sighs.

“We’ll just send them in to the New York Times, like we talked about.”

“But you said they might not even print them. That the Fraternity would put pressure on-“

“I don’t have a better idea, I’m sorry. We’ll just have to hope they value a good scoop more than whatever money is thrown at them…” Veronica buries her face in her hands. “I’m so sorry, Betty. I should never have dragged you into this. Never.”
“Hey,” Betty says. “That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Yeah. Let me see the papers.” Betty reaches into her bag and retrieves the stack. She hands it over. Veronica pores through them for the thousandth time. She cross-references with names on her board, refreshing her memory. Her face grows ever more grim. “Betty, can you tell me the date?”

“It’s…July 10th,” Betty answers.

“Are you ready to find out how much can happen in the space of a week?”

The knock at the door preempts her answer.

Cheryl has spent weeks putting together and discarding a myriad of plans for retrieving the papers her father needs from the indomitable duo of Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge. They’ve involved everything from disguises to the use of primitive incendiary devices. And she’s rejected everything in the end. To complex. Too harebrained.

She decides simplicity is the way to go.

That’s why she’s standing outside of Pembrooke, an M1911 pistol with pearl grips secreted away in her purse. Taken from her father’s extensive collection. It’s quite a nice firearm.

Most likely, the papers would be kept at Veronica Lodge’s residence. She’s probably the brains behind the operation.

Cheryl lets herself through the wrought iron gate and storms into Pembrooke’s lobby.

“Excuse me, I’m here to see Veronica Lodge?” she sweetly informs the doorman.

“I’m sorry, miss, but I’m not supposed to allow anyone in without clearance. Anyone who doesn’t live here, that is.”

Cheryl reaches into her purse and retrieves the pistol. She levels it at the doorman. It’s actually unloaded at the moment, but he doesn’t know that.

“Wh-“

“Do I have clearance, now? Where are the Lodges?”

He swallows.

“Up the stairs, first door.”

“Thank you!” She bounds up the stairs, a spring in her step and a gun in her hand. Cheryl slides a few rounds into the gun. She doesn’t have much intention of actually gunning down Veronica Lodge, but it’s nice to have the option.

The doorman won’t call the police. Even if he did, they wouldn’t dare arrest her. And if they did, her father would get her out of it of course. God, it’s good to be royalty.

Locating the door, she raps on it roughly three times with the pistol grip. Raps again. Begins to grow impatient. “I know you’re in there, Veronica!”

An entire minute later (a minute during which Cheryl’s finger grows increasingly itchy) Veronica
Lodge opens the door a crack, peeking out into the hall. As soon as she identifies her redheaded caller, she tries to slam the door shut again. Cheryl shoves a foot in the way.

“Who is it?” comes a voice from within.

Betty Cooper. Two for the price of one.

“Cheryl!” Veronica shouts over her shoulder.

“Tell her to go away!” Betty yells back.

“You know I can hear you, right?” Cheryl cries back.

There’s no response.

“Cheryl, what do you want?” Veronica snaps. Cheryl slips the pistol through the gap in the door, leveling it at Veronica’s chest. The dark-haired girl reels.

“Entry.” Slowly, Veronica steps away and allows her assailant inside. Cheryl smiles as she steps inside, though she keeps the gun trained all the while of course. “Woah” Cheryl wonders with mock-awe as she takes in the Pembrooke’s interior decoration. “A gullible person might actually believe you were rich!”

“What-Veronica why did you let her i-“ Betty catches sight of Cheryl’s gun. “Oh. This is a new low, Cheryl. Even for you.”

“So, I’m going to get straight to the heart of it, doll.” Cheryl chirps. “I’m here for something that belongs to my family and which you have stolen.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Veronica responds in a mechanical fashion that betrays a sentence practiced time and time again.

“Yes you do. The papers you took from my father, like the filthy thief you are. Hand them over. Now.”

“Cheryl, we didn’t steal anything!” Betty protests. Cheryl whirls around and points the pistol at the poor blonde.

“I’m sorry, say that again?”

Veronica snorts. “You’re not going to shoot u—“ Cheryl fires the gun into the floor inches from Veronica’s foot. “Oh my God!”

Betty covers her mouth with her hands. “You’re certifiable!”

“That may be so, but I’m also armed, so I’d advise you two to cooperate.”

This time, she presses the barrel of the gun, still hot against Veronica’s forehead. She winces as the burning metal sears her flesh.

“Veronica, just give them to her,” Betty says in defeat.

“I knew it!” Cheryl cries, triumphant.

“Really, Betty?”
“Hand them over.” Cheryl growls.

“You don’t understand!” Veronica cries. “What did he tell you they are? Do you know what’s in those papers?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does! What your father and my father are trying to do—“

“I’m sorry, just because your father is a traitorous criminal, doesn’t mean mine is, too.”

Betty takes the papers up from the table. With a deep breath, she holds them out to Cheryl, hand shaking.

“Here, take them.”

“No!” Veronica cries. “Cheryl, if you give these back to your father, the whole country is in danger.”

Cheryl laughs.

“That’s so cute. You two think you’re the protagonists in a bad mystery novel.” She snatches the papers from Betty’s hands. “Thank you, dear. And I didn’t even have to shoot anyone! I’d say tonight was a resounding success.”

She turns to leave.

"Cheryl, please!” Veronica calls after her. “Read them before you do anything. I know what it’s like to trust someone wh—

“You don’t know anything.” Cheryl snaps.

When she puts the documents back into her father’s hands, he beams.

“Attap girl,” he says, pulling her into an embrace. Those are rare. She takes a little time to appreciate it.

The entire way home, Veronica’s words stewed in the back of her mind.

Read them. Read them.

So she had. Just before stepping back into Thornhill, she’d gone through all of the papers, top to bottom. There was uncomfortable material there, certainly. It sure wasn’t the mere accounting balances her father had claimed, but she’d known that wouldn’t be the case.

Money funneled into secretive overseas accounts in Spain and Portugal. Correspondence with that fascist William Pelley in Georgia. A few thousand dollars worth of rifles and pistols to his Silvershirts. A list of names: journalists, senators, governors, writers. But it was all just business, right? Cheryl knows her father is ruthless, but he isn’t that ruthless. A plot to overthrow the American government? Ridiculous. The stuff of fiction, just like all of the papers had said. Hiram Lodge, maybe. Her father? No. She shook it off. Lodge and Cooper were letting their imaginations run wild. Veronica in particular should know better. They came from the same world after all. She should know that business is often grimy but rarely so fantastic.

So she sets aside the niggling concerns in the back of her mind. And she hands the papers back to
their rightful owner. Back to her father.

“Thanks, daddy.”

“Cheryl,” Cliff says, solemn. He places his hands on her shoulders. “I’m proud of you.”

And she really can’t help but smile at that.

Chapter End Notes

Betty and Veronica are (two of) the protagonists in a bad mystery novel, as a matter of fact.

Mine.

This has literally turned into a trashy mystery novel and I don’t even feel that bad.
Nadir: or Clifford Blossom and the Four Insurgent Generals Ruin Everything

Chapter Notes

More happens in this chapter than has happened in like the last six combined.

Also the last bit at the end, feel free to skip that if it bores you, I got a little carried away. It has pretty much nothing to do with Riverdale and is just me recounting some boring historical facts. The short version is: "The war started". That's all you really need to know.

And Cliff Blossom is basically a supervillain now.

Anyhoo, enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In retrospect, one cannot help but think that we shouldn’t have expected anything different. If we were soldiers, we were shoddy ones. We were drunk on idealism and righteous indignation. We thought we’d prepared for everything. We’d prepared for nothing. This was no riveting adventure novel or nickelodeon. And were no heroes. We were fallible boys of flesh and blood and we were about to be reminded of it in the ugliest of ways.

“I’m sorry Cliff,” Sheriff Keller pronounces, shrugging. “Not much else to do.”

The maple syrup kingpin sits in the sheriff’s office, livid.

“What do you mean ‘not much else to do’? How many people have you spoken to? Have you picked anyone up?”

Keller shakes his head in exasperation.

“We can’t just go round arresting people without any cause because they look funny.”

“The hell you can’t!” Cliff thunders back. “That’s your damn job! This is…” Cliff leans forward, planting his hands on the sheriff’s desk. “This is the worst crime this town has seen in years, and you’re telling me there’s ‘not much else to do’?”

“Without any suspects to speak of, yes, that’s what I’m telling you.”

“Why don’t you start with anyone that associates with that…Southside serpent trash? Anyone with a damned snake tattoo or a leather jacket is fair game if you ask me.”

Keller’s face stiffens. He wishes he could throw the man out of his office. He wishes he could tell him to go build himself a new factory without any of the aforementioned ‘trash’ and see how far he got. He wishes the letter of the law meant anything.

“Look, as much as you might wish it were, this isn’t Berlin. I can’t haul a man into a dark cellar and torture him till he tells us what we want to hear.”
Cliff sneers. Something cruel and ugly, even moreso than usual.

“No, no I suppose it isn’t Berlin,” He says. “But it is Riverdale. And my family built this town. You’re wearing that damn badge by my grace, Keller. I want to see justice done.”

Keller leans back in his chair. Let Cliff flounder a little.

“You want to see justice done? Then point me to the culprit.”

Cliff chews his lower lip. His eyes roll up towards the ceiling.

“How about the Jones boy?”

“Jughead?” Keller snorts. “He’s harmless. He’s friends with my son. The kid’s a bit of an oddball, but he’s harmless.”

“Really? Who’s his father?” Rhetorical question. “In fact, I’ve got a suspicion. FP Jones stirs up trouble and is shot by…unknown parties.” His lip twitches. “He blames it on me because I’ve got the gall to stand up for the enterprise I’ve built. So while he’s rotting in the hospital, he has his son go and get a little revenge on his behalf.”

Keller nods.

“You have any proof of that?”

“Proof? No, I don’t have any proof. That’s why you’re going to find me some.”

Keller freezes. He bristles. He thinks about Riverdale. About his job. About America and the state of the world. He thinks of how small and insignificant he is in the end. How he’s in no position to demand or command anything.

He knuckles under.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Hey-you need a warrant!” Jughead protests, vainly, as a bull-necked Riverdale deputy shoulders his way into the Twilight’s projection room.

“Good luck finding a lawyer, kid,” The deputy snorts.

Three other men follow in his wake, two carrying a leather truncheon of the sort you see thugs in the pictures wield. These are not officers of the law. They’re dressed in plainclothes. Tan jackets and slacks, uniform colors. Discount brownsirts. He wonders for a moment whether they’re here on the authority of Sheriff Keller or Cliff Blossom, and then remembers that all-too often there’s no real distinction. One of the men grips him tight round the bicep. He winces in pain.

The other three busy themselves tearing what amounts to his home to pieces. Hot Dog lurches from his spot in the corner and leaps towards the nearest of them. The man readies himself and meets the poor creature with a swift, harsh kick to the side. The dog crumples to the ground, yelping in pain.

“Hey!” Jughead cries. The man unsheathes his truncheon and whacks the dog across the head with it, hard. “Stop!”

One of them lifts up the pile of blankets and rags that is his bed and flings it about, shaking loose
nothing but a few pillows and scraps of papers on which he takes preliminary notes for his book. The man grunts in disgust.

His companion kicks over the rack of old vinyl records in the corner to reveal the stack of books hidden behind. Jughead cries out in protest as the records spill to the floor and shatter. The tough holding his bicep only tightens his grip. His companion kneels down and rifles through the books. Lifts one up and turns it over in his hands as if it’s some sort of arcane object.

“Hey!” he shouts. “Check this out, boys. The German Ideology by Karl Marx.” He reads in a painful attempt at some sort of vaguely European accent. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves a bolshie after all.”

The man holding Jughead leans down and sneers into his ear: “I bet you’re shitting your pants now, huh, comrade?”

In the corner, Hot Dog cringes, blood trickling down the side of his head and matting his fur. The Deputy overseeing the raid stalks across the room, his boots crunching the remains of Jughead’s records underfoot. Jughead bites back tears. His lip quivers. The deputy kneels down at the pile of books his tough has scattered over the floor. He ignores the fresh, glossy copies of The State and Revolution, The Foundations of Leninism, and The Communist Manifesto. Instead, he fixates on a non-descript little leather-bound journal tied together with an old piece of twine. A lump of terror forms in Jughead’s throat. God, why hadn’t he destroyed the last few pages of that damn thing?

Idiot!

The deputy flips through the pages, his face lighting up. Jughead knows what he’s seen. The rough blueprint of the Blossom Factory. The short, bullet-pointed list of requisite materials. The timetable.

He’s done.

“Well, looks like this is our man,” the deputy says. He turns to Jughead, smiling. “Did you really think you were going to get away with it?” He storms across the room. He towers over Jughead, and brings his face low, to within inches of the boy’s. The man holding him in place grabs his other arm as well. “This is not fucking Petrograd, you little shit. This is Riverdale.”

“Yeah, the wanton violation of civil rights could’ve fooled m-“

The deputy socks him in the stomach. Hard. Jughead doubles over, sucking in air. He gasps. The pain explodes through his guts and stabs upwards into his chest and head. He heaves. His mouth hangs open in shock.

“Courtesies of Mr. Blossom,” one of the toughs growls.

“Come on,” pronounces the deputy. “Let’s get ‘im out of here. And bring those red books with you.”

Though they toss him into a police wagon, they don’t bring him, as he expects, to Sheriff Keller’s station.

Staring through the vehicle’s dingy windows, Jughead’s heart sinks when he lifts up his eyes to see the sprawling mass of Thornhill looming on the horizon. His heartbeat quickens. What an idiot he is. How is it he ever thought they’d get away with this? He’s a child. A stupid child. And now he’s going to suffer for it. What’s Cliff going to do? Beat him into a coma? Kill him?
The wagon’s doors open swing open, and the deputy grabs him by the arm, yanking him clear out of the vehicle. One of the toughs produces a length of black cloth and blindfolds Jughead.

He marches, blind, lead along by the rough grip of his persecutors through the gardens and weeds that smother Thornhill’s grounds. He trips over roots and stones and once, he’s pretty sure, someone’s foot. One of them laughs a throaty laugh at that.

Jughead hears a door creak open, and there’s a rush of warmth as he’s ushered into a room. Even through the blindfold he can tell its dark. The men shove him down into a chair and bind his wrists to the armrests. He doesn’t struggle. There’s no purpose. This is the price of his foolishness. This is what he gets for listening to an insane rich boy who thinks he’s Lenin. And now he’s likely going to die for it.

Time dilates and slows until someone yanks the blindfold from his face. The three toughs and the deputy line up behind him. He takes stock of his surroundings. Barrels, large ones, line the walls as far as he can see, stacked as much as twenty deep. A great, vaulted roof hangs over him, creating the impression of a grand cathedral. He quickly comes to the realization that he’s in the cellar where the maple syrup stores (or a portion of them) are kept. Jughead wonders what it would do Blossom’s pocketbook if someone were to set fire to all of this. He almost manages a little smile, through the pain and the terror.

At the peak of the stairwell leading up to the ground floor, the door jiggles. Voices come clear through the other side. The first he recognizes. It’s Jason. He mutters something unintelligible, though the tone is indignant.

The second is his father. And Cliff’s voice comes loud and clear, even through the oak door, down the stairwell, and into the cellar.

“I want you to see how we deal with trash like this,” he snarls.

The door swings open and the terrible, dark form of Cliff Blossom appears at the top of the stairs, glaring down at him like an executioner of old. Behind him, looking less than enthused and even paler than normal stands Jason.

Cliff stalks towards his prisoner. He grabs a fistful of Jughead’s dark hair and yanks his head around.

“I have to say, I never thought I’d be invited to Thornhill,” Jughead quips. Cliff’s free hand balls into a fist.

Jason concentrates on his feet. Jughead glares at him.

“Did you think you were going to get away with it?” Cliff demands.

“I’d hoped, but frankly the look on your face is worth it.”

Cliff sneers.

“I should finish with you like I did with your old man.”

Jughead snorts.

“You couldn’t kill him. What makes you think you can kill me?”

Cliff hits him. Hard. Jughead grunts. The blow pops his head backwards. The skin of his lower lip
splits wide and blood pours down his chin. Jason flinches. Cliff hits him again. This time the pain explodes in his eye. He sees a kaleidoscope of glittering stars and swirling rainbows. Moans in pain. Cliff sighs with satisfaction.

“I could shoot you.”

“Do it, then!” Jughead snaps, ignoring the vicious pain in his split lip and his eye. “Show everyone that you’re such a coward you need to tie a teenage boy to a chair to kill him!”

Another blow. A strand of saliva mingled with blood dribbles from Jughead’s mouth. His breath rattles.

“I want to know who helped you. I know you didn’t do it alone.”

Jughead throws Jason a quick glance. He still won’t look up from the floor. Jughead sucks in a few deep breaths, concentrating on his hands. On his legs. On his chest. Anything but the stinging pain in his face and stomach. And the terror squeezing his heart to the point of stoppage.

“No one…” he mumbles. “No one helped me.”

“Bullshit!”

This time, the punch lands in his gut, still sore from the identical beating the deputy had given him earlier. Jughead lets out a half-moan half-gasp as the air is driven from his body. A few tears fall, even as he struggles mightily to contain them. They roll down his cheeks and mingle with the blood on his lip and the sweat of fear that breaks out on his clammy skin.

“Just me. All alone. I’m a criminal mastermind.”

“Did your dad put you up to it?”

“Yeah my dad, who you tried to murder, orchestrated this all from the comfort of his hospital bed.”

“We found all of that Marxist trash at the theater,” Cliff declares, triumphant. “I know you didn’t buy it all yourself. Not at any store in this town. So who gave it to you?”

“I sent a letter…” Jughead forces out, despite the agony clawing into his stomach anytime he speaks. “To Comrade Stalin.”

Another punch.

“You’re just like your lowlife of a father. Human refuse. You look at your betters and you just can’t stand it, can you? Because trash like you can’t create. All you can do is destroy.”

Jughead’s head hangs low. Blood drips from his mouth. Tears from his eyes. Sweat from his skin. He takes a few more rattling breaths, gathering his strength. The fear begins to subside. In its place comes an indignant fury.

“We created it all,” He forces out.

“What did you say?”

“I said we built it all. Your factory. Your house. Your empire. Every cent of wealth that you have, we made it! People like us. People who work while you sit in your castle and get rich off of us like a damn leech!”
The next punch is the hardest one yet. Jughead feels a tooth towards the back of his mouth loosen. Even the deputy and his toughs, standing in silence near the far wall, seem a little uncomfortable.

“You know, it doesn’t matter if you talk,” Cliff says. “We got your little journal. That ought to tell us everything we want to know, right? So here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to go down to Sheriff Keller. You’re going to admit that it was you who destroyed my factory, and that it was your father that put you up to it, understand?”

“We’re gonna win.”

“From where I’m standing, it looks a whole lot like you’ve lost.”

“You fight us, we fight you. We win. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. That’s the essence of the dialectic.”

Jason catches his eye for just a moment.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Try reading a book sometime.”

Cliff crouches down to look Jughead in the eye.

“You’re supposed to be smart. I shouldn’t have to tell you what’s going to happen if you don’t cooperate.”

“No, you shouldn’t, so just save your breath.”

He hardly feels the next blow.

FP Jones was supposed to be discharged from the hospital in a day. He was supposed to go home in a day.

He never gets there, because the day before his release, two of Keller’s men show up and place him under arrest for aiding in the wanton destruction of private property.

He goes straight from the hospital to a jail cell.

Cliff Blossom settles in to read the Jones’ boy’s journal. It ought to be illuminating. He almost laughs at the kid’s florid prose. It’s composed like a damn novel. It reminds him of the sort of thing he might have written during his Princeton years, decades ago.

But the writing quickly spirals towards nonsense.

His son Jason isn’t a communist. He’s become a bit rebellious and incalcitrant as if late, but he’s no red. He certainly wouldn’t start a damn underground chapter of the Communist Party here in Riverdale. The Jones boy has quite an imagination on him. The stuff of fantasy. It’s too bad he won’t be able to make much use of it in prison.

Joaquin DeSantos. That Serpent from out of town who’d worked at the factory for a while? Sure he could see him being party to this crime. He makes a note to have Keller bring him in, too. Even if he weren’t guilty, one more thug off the streets.

But Jason didn’t help them. Jason doesn’t associate with rabble like those two. He’s raised his son
right. The way generations of Blossom men have been raised. Proper. A worthy heir to a legacy stretching back beyond the founding of the republic.

But—someone knew exactly where to break into the factory. Someone knew how to tamper with the silo so that it would explode. Someone had quite an in depth knowledge of Blossom Maple Farms’ inner workings. Cliff pinches the bridge of his nose. He sets the journal down. He stands, uncertainty and fear washing over him. He stumbles down the hall to his son’s room. Jason’s not home right now, thankfully.

He steps into the room. Everything looks perfectly normal, just as it should. There’s his son’s bed, neatly made. There’s his bookshelf, filled with the classics that every young man of breeding ought to be familiar with. There’s his closet, half open, with the upscale clothes Cliff’s spent a small fortune on hanging neatly in rows. He stalks over to the boy’s cabinet. Yanks it open.

He lifts the copy of Capital from its rather poor hiding place. He hurls it to the floor. Next comes Economic Theory of the Leisure Class by Nikholai Bukharin. In a fit of rage, he tears the first few pages from the binding before throwing it to the ground with the first. So many of them. Marx. Engels. Trotsky. Lenin. Stalin. Even more red trash than they’d found in the Jones lad’s hovel at the theater. Cliff feels himself, for the first time since he’d discovered the papers missing from his desk actually trembling with fury.

But the next discovery blackens his vision and nearly sends him into a swoon.

It’s a little red bifold, that at first he takes for a wallet. Upon the red leather binding is stamped the image of the hammer and sickle superimposed over the globe of the earth, and below this an inscription shouting: “Workers of the world, unite!” He opens it with unsteady fingers.

His son’s signature.

Jason Blossom, literal card-carrying member of the Communist Party of the United States of America. Cliff almost laughs. He’s wandered into some absurdist continental play. The kind they used to put on in Berlin before Hitler cleaned Germany up. That must be it. There’s no rational explanation for this. No explanation for the boy he’s nurtured and raised and cultivated for eighteen years now inflicting such a rank betrayal upon him. He has a sudden image of himself firing a bullet into Jason’s head and the thought calms him for a moment. Cliff grips the card tight in his hand, nails digging into the leather. He makes his way downstairs, and takes a seat in a great armchair perpendicular to the front door of Thornhill.

And there, he waits for his son.

Jason comes home a little before 10 o’clock.

Scarcely has he crossed the threshold that Cliff is out of his seat and hurtling towards him, half-mad with rage and grief. He claws at the boy, gripping his collar. Jason lets out a sort of choking noise.

“Dad, wh-“ Cliff shoves the membership card into Jason’s face. “Oh shit.”

“This is how you repay me? After everything I’ve done for you? This house? Your education? Your food? These clothes?” He yanks at the neck of Jason’s shirt, tearing away a strip of cloth. “You ungrateful little bastard. Where the hell did you come from? My blood is not in your veins!”

Jason’s eyes go wide and he seems ready to voice a protest or a plea. But he doesn’t.

“Good.”
“What did you say?”

“I said good. I’d be ashamed to have any of your blood in my veins.”

Cliff pulls his son closer and thrusts his face aggressively towards him.

“If I’d affronted my father like this, he’d have hanged me from the highest tree in Riverdale, and he would have been goddamned right to do it. I ought to put you on the next boat to Leningrad you faithless prick.”

“Please, by all means,” Jason sneers. Cliff almost hits him. His fists clench. The muscles in his arms and his neck bunch up.

“The only reason you’re not going to rot in a jail cell with Jones and that DeSantos boy is because of the disgrace it would be to our name. And you’ve disgraced it enough already.”

Drawn by the commotion, which is her bread and butter, Cheryl appears at the top of the stairs.

“What’s going on?”

“Cheryl, get upstairs!” Her father barks.

Jason’s eyes go wide again.

“Wait, Jughead’s in jail?” He asks, earnest, as if for a moment forgetting his own predicament.

“Oh, yes. And he’s going to be there for a long time. Let’s say one year for every dollar I lost in that blast.”

“Bu-“

“Shut your damn mouth.”

“What is going on? Dad, let him go!” Cheryl protests.

“Get upstairs! And you…” he snarls at Jason. “Get out. You’re not my son. If I ever see your face again I’ll treat you the same way I would any enemy of this family. Get out.”

“Fine.”

He turns to go.

Cheryl bounds down the stairs.

“Jason, wa-“

Cliff stops her midway. Grips her hard by the wrist.

“Cheryl, enough!” he snaps. “This is none of your business.”

“None of my business? He-“

“Enough!”

Jason steps out of the door, shoots his father one more hateful glance and his sister an apologetic one.
Then he takes his leave, leaving Thornhill and the Blossom name in his wake.

The next morning, the same headline appears in newspapers all over the country.

All over town.

Veronica Lodge and Betty Cooper greet it with dismay.

Jason Blossom greets it with both surprise and horror.

Cheryl Blossom and Archie Andrews greet it with indifference.

Cliff Blossom and Hermione Lodge greet it with glee.

**SPANISH ARMY RISES: DECLARES ITS PROGRAM TO SAVE SPAIN FROM BOLSHEVISM**

The rising is a long time coming.

Spain is a country of contradictions and simmering fury.

Conflicts between right and left, between socialists and fascists, between laborers and landlords, between the church and anti-clericals, have set the country to the point of burning.

There is no longer any center in politics.

The right dives headlong into fascism while the left cheers the onward march of soviet power.

Anarchism and Communism find fertile grounds in the masses of dispossessed, destitute peasants and day laborers that throng Spain in the millions. Fascism flourishes among the merchants and the landlords terrified of suffering the same fate as their Russian counterparts in 1917.

By the time new elections are called in February of 1936, the country is a tinderbox.

The center-left *Frente Popular*, headed by dour liberal Manuel Azaña, faces off against the right-wing *Frente Contarevolucionario*, under the legalist reactionary Gil Robles. Both men are too moderate for their supporters and too extreme for their enemies.

Spain turns out in force to vote.

In the smoky backrooms of *casinos* and country villas, the generals of Spain’s bloated, unruly army plot with the representatives of capital and privilege. They say: ‘should the left win these elections, it will mean the bolshevization of Spain. If they win, we will rise’.

In workingman’s clubs and the salons of the urban intelligentsia, they wring their hands. They say: ‘if the right should emerge victorious, they will impose fascism upon us. It will the days of Primo de Rivera tenfold. They will take away everything we’ve won.’

Azaña’s People’s Front wins a slim majority, but thanks to Spain’s peculiar system of apportionment (ironically the very same that handed a crushing victory to the right three years ago), sweeps the seats in the Cortes.

So the horrified generals, supported by cadres of arch-reactionaries, fanatical *carlistas*, fervent monarchists, and vigorous fascists, mount their insurrection.
On July 17th, early in the morning hours, the army garrison in Morocco, Spain’s last true colonial possession and the base of the feared ‘Army of Africa’, the Spanish military’s greatest army, declares its opposition to the government.

A watchword goes out across the land, transmitted from officer to officer, by phone, or by courier, or face to face.

*Covadonga.*

The place in Asturias where the reconquest of Spain from the Moors had begun all those centuries ago. It is a sacred place in the mythology of the Spanish right. So there is no surprise in that these modern would-be crusaders should choose its name as the light to ignite their rebellion. For they seek to reconquer Spain, just as Ferdinand and Isabella did half a millennium ago. Only their enemies, the red hordes, the spawn of Moscow, are a foe greater than ever was any emir or caliph.

*Covadonga.*

This is the signal for garrisons all over Spain to follow suit. The People’s Front government in Madrid is expected to crumble in days, if not hours.

The rebel generals look forward to a quick victory.

They had expected all the army to side with them. They had expected any popular resistance to melt away before their guns. They had expected that Spain would knuckle under, bow her head supine, and allow them to rule like in the years gone by.

They were wrong.

The grim General Mola rises in Pamplona, seizing a broad swathe of territory across northern Spain stretching from Galicia in the west to Irún in the east. The irascible Queipo de Llano declares for the fascists in Seville and secures most of Andalusia for the rebellion, hours after assuring the government of his loyalty. Morocco is quickly taken by the Army of Africa thanks to the quick action of one Colonel Juan Yagüe. But his generalship is temporary, for the young General Francisco Franco soon flies in from his virtual exile in the Canary Islands to take command of his legionaries and Moorish troops once more.

But in the rest of the country, the rising collapses. The generals have miscalculated.

In barracks all over the country, soldiers refuse to obey their officers’ orders to rebel. They shoot their traitorous commanders dead and declare their loyalty to the republic. The crews of the Spanish Republican navy follow suit, imprisoning or killing their captains and placing their warships under control of sailors’ committees.

In the streets of the great cities and in the fields of rural villages, bands of armed workers and peasants resist the fascist attack by force of arms. They stand up from their ploughs and spades, they come out from their hovels and their wretched shacks. Ranged against heavily armed soldiers and the hated Civil Guard, they fight with ancient hunting rifles and shotguns where they have them, with sickles and pitchforks and fists where they do not.

They know what a defeat of the republic will mean for them. The starvation wages of days past, hardly enough to feed one man let alone his family. The dictatorial might of the landlord and the boss, who will treat their workers like slaves once again, or slaughter them like animals should they dare demand humanity. The unbreakable power of the church, which once held a monopoly on the country’s schools and seminaries and is determined to do so once again. The ignorance and
misery and hopelessness of ages gone by imposed upon Spain once more, this time under the dark banner of fascism.

One middle-aged bracero, his face cracked and burnt by the sun of the fields, armed with an ancient, rusting musket and nothing else, sums it up succinctly to a foreign correspondent who demands to know why he fights:

“I cannot read or write. All my life I have done nothing but work. If these people win, my daughter will never get an education either.”

In Madrid the rebellious military garrison is surrounded in its barracks by a furious crowd. The mighty Anarchist union of the CNT organizes a robust resistance to the fascist coup in Catalonia.

Men cry from the crowds, appealing to the common soldiers in uniform. They are the sons of workers and peasants themselves, after all. Rebel soldiers watch in fascination as loyalist militiamen rush towards them, guns held over their heads in a gesture of peace. Instead of bullets, they deliver passionate arguments as to why they should not fire.

“Soldiers! Brother workers! Your officers have lied to you! Don't shoot! The true enemy is behind you!”

In more than a few cases, the guns are turned around and brought to bear on the rebel commanders instead.

The insurgent generals watch in horror, as their play for power seems to slip from their hands. With the navy in the hands of loyal soldiers, the phenomenal Army of Africa, the rebels’ ace in the hole, cannot be ferried across the Straits of Gibraltar to fight on the mainland.

General Franco dispatches emissaries to Germany, begging the sympathetic Nazi government for planes and guns. Hitler obliges. Within a day or two, German bombers are bringing Franco’s troops across the water separating Morocco from the peninsula, rendering Republican naval superiority irrelevant. Mussolini, excited by the opportunity to extend his influence on the continent, funnels weaponry and materiel of every type to the fascist insurgents.

The conflict thus ceases to be a mere civil one and takes on an international scope.

The international left, who had hailed the election of the People’s Front as a spark of hope amidst the surging fascist tide in Europe, despairs. The destruction of the republic would be another Ethiopia. Another country delivered up to the claws of fascism.

The partisans of fascism and Nazism rejoice. Here is the red threat stopped in its tracks. Here will triumph order and tradition over anarchy and fool dreams of equality.

The rebel generals are shocked and dismayed as their bid for a rapid takeover fails, but they are not prepared to surrender. They marshal their forces and consolidate power in those areas of the country that they have seized. They prepare for something greater than a coup—a campaign. If they could not conquer the republic through surprise, they will take her by brute force.

The republican loyalists, and those groups allied to them by convenience, recover from the initial brutality of the attempted rising. They shore up their defences and prepare to defend their liberty against this band of fascist traitors resting upon foreign bayonets.

The battle lines are drawn.
The world watches in awe as the international struggle of the day plays out in miniature.

The Spanish Civil War begins.

Chapter End Notes

I highly doubt anyone reading this cares, but if I'm being nitpicky it is, strictly speaking, not accurate to refer to the insurgent forces in the Spanish Civil War as 'fascists'. Fascists formed part of Franco's coalition, certainly, but insurgent cause as a whole lacks certain characteristics that make identifying it as 'fascist' iffy.

I'll be calling them 'fascists' in this story mostly because 'holding the line against the fascist hordes' sounds more romantic than 'holding the line against the loose-confederation-of-vaguely-right-wing-groups, many-of-which-had-strong-disagreements-with each-other-and-many-of-which-openly-despised-fascism-and-were-united-only-by-their-opposition-to-the-Popular-Front hordes'.

And this is fanfiction after all :/
Betty manages to con her way past the deputy on duty by a wily mixture of vaguely worded pleas, baseless appeals to constitutional rights, and all-American sweetness. The guard sighs, unlocks the wrought-iron door leading back to the holding cells, and sternly barks: “A few minutes, yeah?”

Jughead smiles when he sees her.

She recoils when she sees him, and in particular the grotesque map of weeping wounds and mottled bruises cross-hatching his face. Unconsciously Betty brings a hand to her mouth.

“Juggy…wh-what happened?”

“Come on,” he sighs. “You know.” Betty’s lip trembles. She shuffles closer to the cell. Kneels down. Weaves her fingers through the iron bars of the cell. Jughead hesitates, but then he gives in and allows her to take his hands in hers. He dearly hopes she doesn’t cry, because more likely than not it will draw tears out of him as well. To head off that possibility, he smiles bitterly. “I’m in it now.”

“You have to tell me…did you…are you really guilty?”

Jughead’s first reaction is one of indignation and shock. The sort he’s been practicing putting on since they wrecked the damn factory. The sort of look that says ‘that you would even consider…’

But he looks at her, all concern and sincerity, and decides that lying in this case will make him a grade-A son of a bitch.

It wouldn’t matter, anyway. Sure, they did get the right guy, but it’s by luck more than anything else. He’d go down just the same if he were innocent as Joe Hill. Yeah, no use in lying.

“Yeah. I am.”

“Why? Why would you do that? Don’t you…”

“Oh, come on. It’s the least Cliff Blossom deserves! Look at my face!”

“Believe me, I know just how bad he is. He’s probably worse thank you think. But…wanton destruction isn’t going to solve anything.”

Jughead groans.

“Don’t start in with this bourgeois morality nonsense, Betts?”

“Wh-Where’d you learn to talk like this?”

“The German Ideology, by Karl Marx.”
Betty sighs.

“Jughead…please tell me you haven’t become a communist.”

He shrugs.

“Eh. Technically I’m a member of the Young Communist League. I didn’t join voluntarily, though, Jason just sort of put me on the rolls.”

“Jason-Jason Blossom?”

“The very same.”

“But…why would Jason-“

“Oh, he’s a communist. Card carrying. Literally. I’ve seen his membership card.”

Betty’s face clouds over. Her green eyes grow stormy and dark. Her breathing intensifies.

“Is…is this because of him? Did he plan this all out and then use you as a fall guy? Is this his fault?”

“Well…” Jughead thinks for a moment. Leaving out the pertinent fact that the factory vandalism was, ultimately, his brainchild is probably tantamount to lying. But it really doesn’t seem like a good time to admit to that, either. He smother the pleading remnants of bourgeois consciousness lurking in his head. “Yeah, this is basically his fault.” That’s not totally wrong. If he hadn’t roped him and Joaquin DeSantos into this nonsense none of this would be happening. Then again, without their support, tacit and direct, material and moral, he would never have done much more than lollygag about singin the International and annoying Cheryl with excerpts from Rosa Luxemburg’s Reform or Revolution. “He…he shares a good portion of the blame,” Jughead qualifies. It’s probably Jason-Jughead-Joaquin as far as the hierarchy of guilt goes.

“Jughead, I don’t want you to go to prison. Or your father,” Betty whimpers with heartbreaking sincerity. Jughead shrugs as if to say ‘well, them’s the breaks, sweetheart’, which is a good deal more cavalier than he’d intended.

“A little while ago you said Cliff Blossom is probably even worse than I think. What did you mean?” Jughead inquires.

“Oh…Jughead,” she sighs. “It’s bad, it’s really bad.” He chuckles sadly. The cellblock is empty and dark, save for the two kids clasped tight together. FP Jones is here as well, but he is, by no coincidence Jughead surmises, held elsewhere. The sad lightbulbs swinging precariously from the grimy ceiling flicker intermittently.

“Betty, I look like a slab of tenderized roast. You don’t need to tell me it’s bad,” he jokes. It falls flat. Betty shakes her head. Her big green eyes shine, luminous and sad.

“No, it’s bad. It’s even worse than that.”

And Betty told me a story. It was a familiar story, though it shouldn’t have been. It was a sad, bloody story that thousands of hot-hearted young men sitting in prisons in Hamburg, Pisa, Debrecen, Warsaw, and Bucharest even at that very moment lived and died. It was a story I’d never hoped to find a part for myself in.
It was like seeing the fragmented pieces of a terrible whole drawn together. The shreds of misery hanging from the hooks of a crooked cross and the coffers of bloodstained gold woven together into a singularly awful reality as Betty spoke.

I had not imagined I could sink any deeper into despondency. As usual, I was wrong.

When Betty left, she left to me a copy of that morning’s Riverdale Register. It was an act of kindness, for she was rarely capable of anything else. But taking the paper in my aching hands and bringing it before my mangled face, the inky headlines seemed to mock. Seemed to promise further darkness. To scorn the fantasy of hope.

In that dank, miserable little cell I read of the embattled Spanish Republic across the sea; of its people struggling against the yoke of fascism. Even the implacably anti-communist Alice Cooper had a word or two of sympathy for the stricken republicans. How could one not, faced with lurid stories of fascist troops sticking children at the ends of their bayonets?

But for me, the story was all the sadder than for any other reader of those same words. For I knew, for Betty had told me, that these were not horrors that would be content to confine themselves to Spain. Soon, this country would feel the selfsame agony.

So I sat in the police station of Riverdale Township waiting for the lash or the hangman’s noose. Waiting for Madrid to fall. Waiting for democracy to perish bloody, not only in Europe but here as well. Waiting for all of America to join me in that cell.

Jason comes by a day later. He comes on in much the same way as Betty, sheepish, sad, frightened. With the town at large oblivious to his recent fall from grace, he is still able to wield the clout of the Blossom name. The bluff that he is here on behalf of his father gets him a visit with the incarcerated far faster than did Betty.

Jughead looks up, catches sight of his visitor, and drops his head again. Jason says nothing. Jughead says nothing.

“What do you want?” Jughead finally mumbles.

Jason leans back against the far wall. He sighs.

“I don’t know.”

“Why are you here?”

Jason makes a titanic effort to avoid looking him in the face and more particularly in the bruises and newborn scars.

“My dad kicked me out.”

Jughead raise an eyebrow. “Really? Is that all? Well, you still look like a free man to me, so why don’t you go enjoy that freedom somewhere else and leave me to rot here?”

“I’m just trying to hel-“

“You haven’t helped shit. What did we do? We blew up a few thousand dollars worth of syrup? So what? Wages are still worthless here. People are still begging in the streets. That’s your great revolutionary victory? You’re delusional.”
For a moment, he smarts at the verbal blow. Then his face stiffens and he digs his heels in. There’s something of that aristocratic arrogance returned to his expression.

“I never twisted your arm! I never made you do anything. You can’t come along and then throw everything back into my face when things go a little pear-shaped!”

Jughead stands up, ignoring the searing pain in his brutalized facial muscles as he speaks.

“A little pear-shaped’? Are you out of your mind? I’m probably going to spend half of my life in prison, at best! That’s if your father doesn’t simply decide to have me ‘commit suicide’ in my cell. You…you like playing revolutionary but you just don’t understand do you? This isn’t a game for us. You…” he sputters, the words piling up and tangling together upon his tongue. “You talk about the…the proletarians…the working class like we’re mythical heroes or something but…we’re people and-you just don’t understand. Just go. Please.” Jason’s jaw sets. Jughead can see shame and indignation battling in his head. The redhead furrows his brows. For a moment he looks prepared to hurl back his own barrage of invective. “You should be in here with me.” Jughead finishes. “But you’re not. That’s why you don’t get it.”

There is a long, strung out silence. A tap somewhere bleeds gently into the darkness. One of the swinging light bulbs finally dies. Jughead shakes his head.

“Well” Jason finally says. “You’re right.” What? Jughead is a bit miffed. He’d expected, and primed himself, for a verbal showdown. The one he was rather sure would reveal Jason Blossom to indeed be only another bohemian radical interested in the form of revolution far more than the content. The one that would restore everything to the way it was meant to be. Everyone and everything back into their proper places. He isn’t supposed to give in like this. “I’ll go.” He stands there for another moment, looking at and yet avoiding Jughead, as if he hopes the boy will say something along the lines of ‘wait, don’t go’.

Jughead has the sudden impulse to share Betty’s horror story of fascist conspiracy with quite possibly the only other person in town to who that will mean much. Jason at last turns around to go, and Jughead is forced to pronounce the dreaded: “Wait a second.” Which means that he’s lost the standoff.

Jason spins around quite quickly.

“What?”

“I…have some bad news. That I should probably share with you. Angry as I am at the moment.”

“Worse than this.”

“Yes. Much, much worse, actually.” He waves his hand in a general arc. “Sit down.” Jason scopes out the dark row of cells, as if searching for a place to sit. “Are you seriously—there aren’t any chairs, you bourgeois ass. It’s a jail! Just sit on the floor!”

Jason obliges.

“What…what bad news?”

“You remember those papers you were looking for? The ones you stole from your father?”

“Yes.”

“I assume you’ve been keeping abreast of developments in Spain?”
"Yeah...it's awful.

Jughead smiles. He scoots closer to the bars of the cell and knits his fingers together.

“Well then, have I got a story for you, comrade. First thing’s first: Yes, Betty and Veronica did steal your papers, an-“

Jason clenches a fist.

“I knew it!”

“Alright, alright, shut up. Let me finish. As Betty tells it, it’s a long, convoluted, improbable and frankly pretty boring story. The short of it is: Remember how your father, Hiram Lodge, Irénée DuPont, Gerald MacGuire, and a lot of other guys with bigger names tried to overthrow the government and install a fascist dictatorship?”

“…Yes?”

“Right. Turns out that’s still happening. Hiram Lodge being arrested was a sort of diversion to take pressure off of the other conspirators. Lodge saved a bunch of money in Spanish banks to fund the affair, but when the People’s Front won in February, they froze half the foreign investments in Spain. So he and your dad and their buddies funded Mola’s fascist uprising and when they win, they unfreeze the money, the plot kicks into gear, and America goes fascist.”

Jason just sort of blinks and then cocks his head like a curious dog.

“Well...you’re putting me on, right?”

Jughead leans as close as the bars will allow him. His bruised face, marked with dried blood, comes across particularly fearful in the dim light. Jason unconsciously leans away a bit.

“Do I look like I’m fucking putting you on you unbelievable jackass?”

“Well…”

“What?”

“You were right. That’s pretty bad news.”

“Okay, okay,” Archie bleats pitifully. “So, Cheryl’s dad and Veronica’s dad are helping plan a fascist takeover of the government. And you two” he begins, gesturing to Betty and Veronica. “Have been working around the clock to stop them. But you failed. So now America is going to become a fascist dictatorship.” Veronica shrugs. “And Jughead actually did blow up the Blossom factory? And is also a communist? And Joaquin? What?”

“Those are the basics, Archiekins,” Veronica sighs. She cuts a rather miserable figure these days, as the weight of her failure (or rather, Cheryl’s victory) weighs down on her. Dark patches of skin have flowered beneath her eyes. But she prefers them to the nightmares. The ones that have soldiers goose-stepping through the streets of New York and Boston and San Francisco side by side with Silvershirt militia. Prisons filled to bursting with ‘subversive elements’ awaiting a mechanically efficient firing squad. Great, yawning graves packed full of corpses stained in red. Her father and Cliff Blossom and their compatriots toasting to their victory while the country groans under its newly fitted chains.
Nightmares slated to become reality soon enough.

“And…and,” Archie sputters. “No one bothers to tell me any of this? No one thinks that I, as one of your best friends, deserve to know any of this? You…you leave me entirely in the dark? We’ve been friends since we were three, Betty! I helped you sneak into *All Quiet on the Western Front* when we were nine! Remember when I agreed to go door-to-door campaigning for Davis with you because your mother thought people would find it endearing? You know my dad voted Coolidge, right? Do you have any idea how angry he was? It was pointless, too! No one in this town voted for Davis!”

“Archie, we just didn’t want to worry—” Betty tries.

“Worry me? My best friend is in jail and is probably going to stay there for a long time! You two have been risking your lives stealing things from fascist sympathizers. Cheryl almost shot you! I have been shot! But, ‘no’, don’t tell Archie! He’s just to dumb to understand any of this complicated politics and intrigue stuff, is that it?” He snaps, his voice rising to a fever pitch.

“Archie, we don’t think that,” Veronica counters, exasperated. “We just…”

“You’re telling me the entire country is going to go fascist? Well, if Jughead is a communist, what does that mean? Are they going to shoot him?” Betty and Veronica trade a look. “Oh, what? Is that a ‘wow, dumb Archie knows communists and fascists don’t like each other’ look?”

“Okay, Archie?” Veronica begins. “You really need to calm down, just a little bit.”

“I will not calm down while this country and my friends go down in flames! Are you insane? I need you to let me know about anything to do with any of this from now on. Okay?”

“Fine,” Betty quickly assents. Veronica shoots her a look that seems to convey a message of ‘well, let’s not go that far, shall we?’

But she too gives in and says ‘okay’.

“Alright,” Archie sighs. His breathing begins to regularize. It even seems his thundering heartbeat reverts to a more normal rhythm. “Okay. So. What are we going to do?”

“Do? There’s not really much we can do,” Veronica says. “As far as the Fraternity’s plot goes, thanks to Cheryl Blossom, who has done what the British and the Southern Confederacy could not, and singlehandedly destroyed American democracy, we have no proof of anything. Meaning we’re powerless. As far as Jughead goes, unless you’ve got some fantastic prison break scheme cooking up in that head of yours, I don’t know there’s much we can do there, either.”

Archie shakes his head, stunned. His mouth falls open a little bit.

“So...so we’re just going to sit here while our friend’s life is destroyed and the entire country is turned into a dictatorship?”

“We didn’t say that,” Betty objects.

“She did. But we-or I, at least—are not going to do that. We’re going to do something.”

“And what’s ‘something’?” Veronica doubts.

“Well...something. For starters...I want to talk to Jason.”
The three of them corner Cheryl Blossom outside Pop’s that evening, in what might appear to observers to be the beginnings of a mugging.

“Do you feel good about yourself, Cheryl?” Betty snaps. “Do you feel good about consigning an entire country to dictatorship? I sure hope you do, beca-“ She steps forward and raises a fist as if to strike. Veronica throws an arm across her friend’s chest to hold her back.

“We want to talk to Jason, Cheryl,” Archie says.

She snorts. Crosses her arms.

“Well, that’s too bad, because I don’t know where he is.”

Veronica laughs at that. Then Betty joins in. Soon, Archie is laughing as well.

“Oh, please. You probably know the number of hairs on his head.”

Cheryl rolls her eyes.

“I don’t appreciate-“

Betty fumbles about in her pocket. Shortly, she retrieves a blunt, beige little object. She strikes a trigger and an ugly little blade about two inches in length slides into being. Cheryl’s face goes a little white. Archie takes a step back. Only Veronica appears unmoved. Betty draws the knife close to the Blossom girl’s throat.

“I don’t care what you appreciate, Cheryl” Betty hisses. “Tell us where Jason is.”

“Uh, Betty…” Archie mumbles, more than a bit disturbed.

“No, Archie. This girl held a gun to our heads the other night. I don’t feel bad in the slightest about this little flick-knife.”

Cheryl quickly recovers her composure. She plants her feet apart and lifts her chin. Soon, she’s rid her demeanor of any indication she was ever frightened by Betty’s bladed posturing.

“Well, as you’ve told me you know, Jason has been exiled from the Blossom clan. My father says I’m not to speak to him anymore, and I listen to my father.”

This time it’s Betty who rolls her eyes.

“How stupid do you really think we are?”

“Pretty stupid,” she replies, flatly.

“I will cut you,” Betty hisses.

“Look,” Veronica begins, deciding to try another approach. “Do you really want Jughead and his dad to spend the rest of their lives in prison?”

“If it means I never have to see that ratty whoopee cap of his again, yes.”

“You know, Cheryl,” Betty says. “Those papers you took back from us. You know who we took them from? Your brother. Who took them from your father. How happy do you think Jason would be you handed them back over to your dad, lock, stock, and barrel.”
Cheryl’s stony expression falters for a moment.

“That isn’t true,” she asserts.

“Yes it is. You know your brother’s…politics.”

“I know you don’t want to help us. But Jason and Jughead were…are…friends? Uh…comrades? You said your father kicked him out. What if he doesn’t stop there? Look, don’t help us for us. Help your brother.”

Cheryl sighs.

She leads them, much to everyone’s surprise, to Thornhill. More specifically, to the sprawling cemetery situated just to the north of the property.

“Just to be clear, I don’t give a hang about democracy,” Cheryl clarifies.

“We wouldn’t expect you to,” Veronica responds.

“Really, can you think of a worse system? You three get votes worth as much as mine? Please.”

They meander among the gravestones, obeying their guide’s command to keep noise to a minimum.

“Jason!” She hisses. Something stirs in the murk of a squat, ugly crypt, whose ancient iron door strapped by great metal bands hangs slightly ajar. Something shambles about inside like a phantom. Then Jason Blossom emerges from the murk.

“You…live in your family cemetery now? In a crypt?” Archie asks, incredulous.

“He sleeps here,” Cheryl is quick to clarify. Veronica chuckles.

"It's warm and I can retrieve things from the house whenever I wa-" he starts, before his words die in his throat as Betty moves at him like a vicious tiger.

“Vous bastard! You put Jughead up to th-“ Cheryl’s arm snakes out and catches Betty around the waist, holding her firmly in place.

“I said you could talk to him, not murder him, ingénue.”

“Talk about what?” he asks.

“About how my best friend is in jail. Largely thanks to you.” Archie growls.

“Hey, the factory was Jones’ idea.” Jason says in his defense.

“That’s not true!” both Betty and Archie proclaim in unison.

“But I’ll take my share of the blame.”

“Then you should be sitting in that cell with him,” Veronica snaps.

“My dad wouldn’t let me into a cell. Can you imagine what an embarrassment it’d be for him? Though he’d probably kill me if he knew I was still on the property. And…speaking of property rights.” He turns to look at his sister. “Jughead said…is it true you gave those papers back to dad?”
She freezes up for a second.

“Well…yeah. It wasn’t a big fuss, just some run of the mill business transaction. I can't believe you stole them from dad in the first place! I thought they were lying! How could you do something so stu-"

“Run of the mill? What the hell, Cheryl?” he snaps. “Do you have any idea what you did?”

“No.” Betty cuts in, flustered. “She doesn’t.”

“Well,” Cheryl pronounces, bitter. “I’m glad we’ve inaugurated national ‘everyone yells at Cheryl’ Day."

“Yes, Cheryl!” Veronica yells. “Everyone gets mad when you try to destroy institutions of democratic governance! Shocking, I know!”

“God, would you all shut up about democracy?”

“So, what exactly do you fellas want?” Jason asks.

“I think you owe it to us to help us fix all of this. Jughead, especially,” Archie says.

“I know he owes it to us.,” Betty growls. “He’s the one that filled Juggy’s head up with all of that Marxist nonse-“

“It’s not nonsense!” Jason snaps. He quickly collects himself. “But you have a point. If Jughead and his dad go to trial, they’ll probably end up in a real prison somewhere. Not county jail. My dad won’t let them get off, regardless of guilt,” Jason laments. “And that will be the end of that story.”

“So they don’t go to trial,” Archie says immediately.

“Right. As for our homegrown fascists. Thanks to the actions of certain parties,” Jason says, turning to glare at his sister, who resurrects her crossed-arms, feet-planted-wide in defiance, stance. “I suppose we’ll need new proof.”

The next time Hermione Lodge speaks to Colonel Yagüe, she is quite unhappy.

“Buenas tardes, Señora Lodge, c-“

"Go to hell with your ‘good evening’, Colonel. What the devils is going on?"

“I do not know what you mean.” He replies, flatly. “At the moment I am in the process of figuring how to best seize Badajoz from the reds. It’s an important city, you know.”

“I don’t give a damn about Badajoz!” Hermione snaps. “You’ve risen, just like you said. So why is it that I still can’t access the money my husband entrusted to you scoundrels.”

Yagüe sighs, a heavy, exasperated sigh.

“Well, madam, if you read the news you will see we’ve had some…difficulties. As you know, we haven’t liberated Spain as quickly as we’d hoped. The reds have put up quite a stubborn resistance!”

“And? Why does any of that mean we can’t get our money? My husband goes to trial in only a few months. We must act before then! The Silvershirts and our men in the army are getting impatient!”
“Well, madam, Generals Mola and Franco have ordered that foreign private assets in our hands be kept under the sentry of the state until the conclusion of this conflict. I’m afraid we cannot release the money to you until we have crushed the government forces.”

“What? What?”

“It’s out of my hands, madam. You would have to speak with one of our generals. And…well…you’d likely have to do so personally. See, we find ourselves fighting for the spirit of Spain. Our commanders don’t have so much time for exchange of letters and phone calls.”

“You want me to come to Spain, then, you worthless idiot.” Hermione seethes, her fury seeping through the line, across oceans and nations. Perhaps even brutal Yagüe is a bit shaken.

“That…well, if you truly wanted this money as quickly as possible, a personal audience with the heads of our National Movement would likely be expedient.”

“Fine! Then I’m coming to Spain.”

Chapter End Notes

Questions, comments, concerns?
Riverdale and Madrid

Chapter Notes

I had intended to finish this before season 2 began, but I'm not sure that's going to be happening now.

"If we sit by and let them grow stronger by taking Spain, they will move on to France and will not stop there; and it won't be long before they get to America. Realizing this, can I sit by and wait until the beasts get to my very door--until it is too late, and there is no one I can call on for help? And would I even deserve help from others when the trouble comes upon me, if I were to refuse help to those who need it today?"

~Letter from an American antifascist who volunteered to fight for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War

It’s day five. FP has been jailed before, naturally. The first time was in 1910, when he and Freddy Andrews had been struck with the brilliant idea of stealing the rowboat of a local fisherman and sailing down the Sweetwater River, possessed by the spirit of Huckleberry Finn. That particular adventure had ended in disaster, as their subpar seamanship led to the craft’s bottom being torn out by submerged rocks and sinking within minutes. Found shivering at the riverbank, it did little good to deny guilt in the affair.

Freddy’s father had seen to it his son was let off with a stern word, but FP had found himself spending the evening in a cell and then assigned to assist said fisherman in repairing his boat.

A string of similar run-ins, mostly for petty theft and the like, followed.

After he and Fred returned from Europe, he’d gotten into it with a few guys down at the bar who’d mocked the AEF. The result had been bloody noses and cracked ribs for his foes, a split lip for himself, and of course, yet another three-day stint in a cell.

This must be the first time he’s been arrested for something he didn’t do.

And yet, he wonders if this will be the time that does him in. He’d narrowly escaped Blossom’s gunmen now a half year ago. Perhaps this is his reckoning at least.

When one of Keller’s deputies shows to drive him out of his cell, he figures his number’s up. He’s brought into the dank, poorly lit room that serves as Keller’s interrogation chamber, he expects to meet the sheriff himself, accompanied by a litany of demands and exhortations to admit his guilt. Which, likely, he will shortly refuse.

Instead, he finds himself faced with Cliff Blossom himself, who leans against the far wall of the room. He wears, as usual, a neatly pressed brown blazer tucked over a white waistcoat. The fresh leather of his shoes scuffs against the dingy floor. A bright red cravat swaddles his throat. The picture of comfortable wealth.

“Shit. What are you in for, Cliff?” he says.
Cliff smirks. FP’s deputy-escort shackles him to the great metal table occupying the center of the room and disappears, leaving him alone with the syrup kingpin cum murderer. FP slides into one of the rickety metal chairs provided. Cliff steps towards his antagonist.

“I’m in here to settle accounts, Mr. Jones.”

FP smiles.

“Well, you know I can’t help you with that. I’m not much good with money. Never got the chance to be.” He smiles crookedly. Cliff’s mouth twitches.

“No, I suppose not.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” FP says. “Those guys you sent to shoot me. Where’d you find them? They weren’t very good, you know. Sloppy enough to be tripped up by my teenage son and his friend.”

Cliff shrugs. He takes a moment to respond, considering whether or not such is wise. But he feels safe enough.

“Pinks. The Baldwin-Felts boys are gone, unfortunately.”

“Give us a taste of Blair Mountain, huh?”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it? I haven’t had to raise wages a cent in my factory thanks to those boys.”

FP chuckles.

“Word is you don’t have a factory anymore. Not under all of that maple syrup.”

Cliff slams a hand down onto the table.

“You liked that, huh? Yeah, I know a whole lot of this town did. You people don’t get it. I keep Riverdale afloat. This town thinks I’m some sort of damn…penny dreadful villain crushing the poor, saintly workers for the sake of profits. Yes, I make money. And? I also keep this town from starving. And men like me do the same all over the country. You think things are bad now? See how fortunes turn when you tear everything down and put a soviet in Washington.”

FP shakes his head.

“Come off it. You don’t tap the syrup from those trees. You don’t refine it. You don’t package it. You don’t ship it out. Yet, by magic, all the syrup is yours. I don’t know the next damn thing about a soviet. I do know you’re a bastard.”

Cliff nods. He adjusts his cap and cravat.

“Well, that’s fine. Frankly I don’t give a damn what you think. But—you know, your son does know an awful lot about the soviets.”

FP hears that. He cranes his neck up. He squints, cautiously weighing the businessman’s words.

“What?”

“Who do you think was behind my factory troubles?”

“Bullshit!” FP snaps, immediately. Jughead would never do something so…stupid.
“I assure you, you've raised quit the young Bolshevist.”

“You’re a fuckin’ liar.” He shakes his head.

“Well, regardless of whether or not I’m a liar, I can tell you this, friend: Jughead’s right here in Keller’s jails. With you.” FP’s shoulders sag. His head droops. He sighs, heavy and sad. Like a frail scaffolding he’s fought all his life to hold up has collapsed at last. “What I want to know is, did you put him up to it? Be honest, because there isn’t much reason to lie now, Forsythe.”

FP presses his fists into his eyes. He refuses to look up at his persecutor.

“Go to hell.”

“I reckon it doesn’t matter. Either way, I’ll have someone hang for all of that money I lost. You know, I was agonizing over what to do with your little bastard of a son.” He brings his face close to FP’s, dark and threatening. “Whether to have him spend the rest of his life in a cell or just kill him now. But I guess I don’t really have to choose, do I? I’ve got both Jones men, now. I can send one of you to jail and the other one to hell.”

FP clenches his hands into fists. He falls in on himself, chin touching to his chest, arms folding in. Supine. Weak. Cliff stands up straighter. Triumphant. Then FP animates and lunges at him. Cliff stumbles back, and FP falls short a few feet thanks to his manacles. He tips forward onto the table, swearing.

“You son of a bitch. L-“

“Yes, yes. ‘Leave my son alone’. ‘Leave me alone’. ‘You’re a monster’. Believe me, you’re all quite predictable.” Cliff starts for the door. He tips his cap and clicks it open. “I’d wish you a good day, but that’d just be cruel.”

Jason awakes from a rather unnerving fever dream. He deduces it’s probably the result of the draft and temperature in his new crypt cum bedroom, the fact that he hasn’t eaten a real square meal in two days, and the combined stress of the past few weeks.

In the dream, he’d been engaged to the Cooper girl (not Betty—the other one, who’d died of polio in ’25) in some sort of dystopian future. He decides not to dwell on it. There are far more pressing concerns.

He’d promised Andrews, Cooper, and Lodge, that he’d try to come up with some sort of scheme to get Jughead out of his predicament. Of course, the well of his mind seems to be running dry. Actually getting Jughead out of his cell wouldn't prove oh-so difficult. He could simply ask Cheryl to slip him a few hundred bucks under their father’s nose and bribe a few cops. But then he runs smack into the real problem of the affair.

The problem being that, even if her were to somehow spring his comrade from jail, there would be little point. In the environs of Riverdale, there is no escape from Clifford Blossom. The moment he finds out his little nemesis has been set at liberty, he will simply reckon with the Jones boy in some other fashion. Perhaps in a lethal one. The short of it is—'we can get jughead out of his cell. Then what?’ Then the only answer would be to spirit him out of Riverdale. To somewhere far from here.

And there’s the rub!

Jason picks up the latest issue of the Daily Worker. He may have lost his family and home, but at the very least the central committee of the Communist Party in New York still sends him materials
weekly. Not that he has much use for them now, with the brittle nucleus of his party chapter smashed and scattered.

**ALL INTO ACTION NOW! DEFEND SPANISH REPUBLIC!** Screams today’s headline.

He thumbs through the story, sadly. It’s as if the world has chosen to fall apart at the most inopportune of moments.

The Spanish Republic has survived the fascist rising, though just barely. The insurgent generals have gathered their forces and are preparing for a decisive assault that will deliver Spain into their hands once and for all. General Franco’s troops have landed in the south of Spain and are cutting their way north, slaughtering all in their path. Resistance is met with the sort of brutality that European armies have traditionally reserved for their colonial wars abroad, never for their own subjects.

In the north, General Mola rules from Pamplona, busily working on purifying his zone of any heretical or ‘anti-Spanish’ tendencies. Just the suspicion of communist, leftist, or merely liberal-republican sympathies is enough to earn one a place in a jail cell or before a firing squad. Spain is to be purged of all foreign, harmful, or subversive elements. To be saved from the ‘Judeo-Masonic International’. The *limpieza* the generals call it.

The cleansing.

“We have to create the impression of mastery, eliminating without scruples or hesitation those who do not think as we do,” Mola, ‘the Director’ of the rebellion, pronounces.

Nearly one half of Spain’s landmass has fallen into the hands of the insurgents, but crucially, Madrid remains held by the republic. The city is the prize, valued above all by both emerging factions. If the fascist troops succeed in seizing Spain’s ancient capital, it will be an unsurpassable propaganda coup. They will have brought under their sway the very heart of Spain. In all likelihood, it will compel foreign governments to recognize the fascists as the country’s legitimate rulers. It would mean the end of the war and the destruction of the republic.

But Madrid hasn’t fallen. Not yet. Dogged republican militiamen offer fierce, uncompromising battle to the insurgents, compensating for training with courage, and making the fascists pay for every inch of ground.

The *Daily Worker* extols the gallantry of the loyalist militia, but there is a particular detail that catches Jason’s eye. The paper’s correspondent reports that, in countless militia operating everywhere from the Aragon-Catalonia front in the north to the roads going to Madrid, fight foreign volunteers struggling alongside their Spanish comrades for the preservation of democracy.

‘Living proof of proletarian internationalism’ as they are celebrated. Men and women who have left everything to travel to Spain. Willing to fight in the service of the people. Willing to die to halt the onward march of fascism.

Jason’s mind returns again and again to Jughead’s words to him. What would a revolutionary do? A real revolutionary, not a wealthy boy playing Bolshevik out of boredom. How could he prove his sincerity? His devotion to liberty and brotherhood? The depth of his conviction?

Jughead is in jail. He has—if inadvertently—sacrificed much to the revolution.

And Jason? What has he given?

He looks back to the paper. He looks to the hammer and sickle blazoned above the headline.
Workers of the world, unite!

Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!

Proletarios de todos los países, uníos!

He remembers Jughead’s story. Or, more precisely, the Cooper girl’s story.

If the fascists win in Spain, then his father and his allies will be disposed to make their move here. It will mean fascism in this country as well.

Here is an opportunity so rare in history.

A chance to truly act in the name of human freedom. To safeguard liberty from the olive groves of Spain to the quiet glen of Riverdale. To write one’s name in the great heritage of humanity.

And then it all comes together.

They need to get Jughead out of Riverdale, don’t they? Somewhere far from here. Out of the state, even. Out of the country, perhaps?

Very, very far.

Jason’s hands shake as the plan slowly coalesces in his head.

Yes.

Veronica returns to Pembrooke buoyed by tentative optimism. Jason had—despite the recalcitrance of his sister—promised to try and see if he couldn’t secure some evidence of the conspiracy to replace their lost papers. She’s doubtful he’ll succeed, considering his last revolutionary scheme has ended with him homeless, Jughead imprisoned, and Joaquin vanished into hiding.

Still, it’s more optimistic than she’s felt in a good while.

But when she runs into her mother, who approaches her with a great smile on her face and a spring in her step, Veronica’s first reaction is hard suspicion. Now, what might have happened to inspire such levity? Unlikely anything that will similarly cheer her daughter.

“Mija! I’ve got some good news!”

Veronica forces a smile.

“Really? What?”

Hermione rubs her daughter’s shoulder.

“Do you remember a while ago when you asked me when we could go back to Spain?”

Veronica is overcome by a creeping, prickling dread. Her mother’s hand on her shoulder feels like a heavy weight. Damning.

“Y-yeah. Sí.”

“Well, looks we’ll be going to Spain sooner than I would have thought.”

“Bu…why? There’s a war in Spain, right now?”
Hermione’s smile loses a bit of its luster. She seems to have been put on the backfoot. Now she’s uneasy as her daughter.

“Well…yes. But…your father had some business there and…despite the recent trouble, it has to be sorted out.”

Veronica’s first instinct is to protest. To say that this is ridiculous and that she refuses to go to Spain while the country is an active warzone. Particularly, because she knows perfectly well which side of the conflict her father has dealings with. And she’s not keen to take a furlough in fascist Spain. But then she thinks better of it. Surely, something has gone wrong? There’s no reason the transfer of money from the insurgents in Spain to her father and his friends here should require a personal visit from his wife.

Maybe best to keep her mouth shut. Perhaps, if there is indeed some hiccup in the procession of the international plot, then there is indeed still hope. So she says nothing.

“Okay. When do we leave?”

“The first week of August.” Hermione hugs her. “Pack your bags, sweetheart.”

Jughead receives yet another visitor that night.

This one comes quite unexpected, doubly so because Jughead is asleep when he comes. He is stirred awake by the sound of boots tramping upon cement and the quiet, gentle whistling of ‘Oh! Susanna”

He runs a hand through his dark hair and clears the sleep from his eyes.

When he recognizes the man who’s come for him, he slams himself into the far wall of his cell like a cannon ball, wild with terror. It’s one of the thugs Cliff Blossom had employed to apprehend him a few weeks ago. Still dressed in those same plain, soldierly colors. His face betrays nothing. All straight, brutal lines. Without care or complaint.

In his heavy, meaty hand, the man holds a rope. He produces the key to the cell from a pocket, and Jughead isn’t even surprised this is being done with the consent of Keller’s boys. The man slings the cell door open and strides inside. Jughead sees his death before him. He spits in defiance. The man grips him round the wrist and yanks him close. Jughead cries out in protest.

“Just don’t make too much of a fuss, kid.”

With one great, broad hand, he fixes both Jughead’s wrists, rendering him powerless. The boy kicks at his attacker’s legs, a pitifully impotent gesture. The man winds the rope around Jughead’s neck and tightens the noose with masterful skill. He tries to cry out for help. The rough filaments dig into the tender skin of his throat, mangling his protests and pleas. The man slings the rope over a high beam and tightens it fast. With one powerful arm, he lifts Jughead off of his feet. One more motion will leave him swinging like a horse thief, and that’ll be the last line of his story.

The man lets go.

Jughead feels like the world has fallen out from under him. His legs kick, searching in vain for a purchase that does not exist. His eyes bulge. He can already feel his mind clouding out. His lungs cry for a breath.

His killer turns and leaves without a word.
Reality smashes at Jughead with all the force of a hammer. He’s being *hanged*. That is what is happening. There’s no one else here, in this dark cell. No one to help. No one to hear. He’s going to die here. His vision flickers in dark tones of red and grey. They are going to pull down his cold, stiff corpse in the morning and write him off as a suicide. Everyone will know it was nonsense, of course. Where the hell would he have gotten a rope? But all Cliff Blossom needs is the thinnest veneer of deniability.

So ends his short, sad, worthless life. So end the lives of all those who dare defy their earthly masters.

He kicks his legs out, again. This time, the toe of his boot catches between two of the bars of his cell. For a moment, there’s balance. His weight is shared out. The rope becomes a little looser. Clinging to the bars with his feet, he sucks in one, two, three breaths. A little life flows back into him. Then he loses the grip and he’s hanging again. Tears and snot plaster his face. He feels his heart thrumming in terror.

*No!*

He swings forward again. This time he grips the cell’s bars with his hands. Again, there’s a moment’s respite. He manages a few more agonizing breaths Jughead cranes his neck up with much effort. The assassin couldn’t have done too fine of a job, he’d gone about it so quickly. If he can only undo the knot fixing the rope to that ceiling beam. His hands grow slicked with sweat. He is on the verge of losing his grip again.

Jughead kicks forward. His feet find purchase, so that now he’s clinging to the bars of the cell by his hands and feet, like some great lizard. The pressure of the rope is almost entirely relieved. But he cannot hold suspended from the wall all night. He needs to undo the knot if he is to have any chance at survival. Painstakingly, slowly, he creeps, working his way up the door of the cell, towards the ceiling. He dares reach up towards the beam and the rope, clinging to the bars with only one hand. His fingers brush the rough hemp. He almost loses his grip and surrenders to the noose. He is exhausted.

If he falls again, he will not have the strength to give it another go. He will hang.

He stretches out. This time, he manages to work his thumb and index finger around a section of the rope. He worries it from side to side. The knot loosens, ever so slightly. Hope flares up in his chest. Ever muscle in his body burns and screams for respite. To rest is to die. Jughead claws on at the knot. The end slips loose.

*God, almost.*

The rope rubs into his neck, splitting the skin in spots and spilling droplets of red down his collar.

His legs grow weak. His arms soften. He is another few seconds from losing his purchase entirely.

With one great, mighty gesture, he yanks at the knot. It explodes and unwinds, just as he finally gives in to his exertion and lets go the bars. He spills to the ground, the noose still wound tight around his neck. The rope comes undone at its base, slipping away from the beam. He falls to the floor in a heap, devouring the air in great gulps. The tears, mucus, and even drops of blood begin to crust over his face. Jughead is far too tired to move. He curls up into a ball, like a child. And he falls asleep.

That’s how they find him in the morning, sprawled out upon the cold floor, a noose round his neck, breathing heavy.
A ‘would-be suicide’.

Cheryl and Jason have worked out a system. He can summon her to his new graveyard home by flashing a candle’s light through one of the crypt’s ports a certain number of times. As fate would have it, her bedroom window is positioned well enough that she has a clear view of the cemetery and consequently her brother’s signaling.

She goes out to the crypt in the depth of the night, bare feet sinking into the soft soil of Thornhill’s grounds, cursing all the while. He couldn’t have just found someone in town to stay with. No, he had to move into the damn cemetery like some insufferable romantic poet. If their father finds out he’s still on the grounds, he’s going to kill them both most likely.

Cheryl knocks on the crypt’s great vault door.

“Oh, good. You came.”

“Yes, I came. Just like I come every time. Because I stick by your side no matter how many unbelievably stupid things you do.”

“Right. I have a favor to ask. Two, actually.”

Cheryl rolls her eyes.

“Of course you do.”

“Okay, first one’s first: I need money.”

“Okay? How much?”

“1500 dollars or so should cover it”

“1500…fine. Fine, I can probably slip you that. You’re cutting it close though. Dad’s going to get suspicious.”

Jason waves away her fears.

“Don’t worry about it. He’ll be far too preoccupied with his whole…overthrowing the United States. He won’t suspect you, at least. Probably.”

Cheryl crosses her arms and looks over her shoulder.

“What do you even need it for?”

“I just…something.” Is his unconvincing answer.

“Oh, Jason, if I’m going to help you thrive under the nose of our father who wants you all but dead, you’d better at least respect me enough to let me in on whatever stupid idea you’ve got cooking this time.”

Jason chews his lip. He hesitates for a moment.

“I need to go to France.”

“France? What do you need to go to France for?” she asks.
“I…the communist party wants someone to-“

“You know what.” She gestures for silence. “Forget it. I don’t even want to know. I’m so sick of hearing about communism. I’ll get you the money. Just leave me out of it.” He sighs in relief. He hasn’t totally lied. It’s a half-truth, at worst.He does need to make a stopover in France. It’s on the way. And really, it’s for the better. No need to worry her beyond reason. “What’s the second favor?”

Jason avoids her gaze on this one. There’s a reason he saved it for last.

“I really, really want you to help Betty and Veronica get more evidence of what dad and his… friends are planning.”

Cheryl shakes her head.

“I don’t understand why you’re so damn invested in this.”

“Because I don’t want this country to turn into an autocratic nightmare! I don’t want to see fascist militia in the streets or a damn Oranienburg on Long Island!”

“Why do you care? How does this affect us?” She demands. “What exactly would change? Except we wouldn’t have pointless elections every four years? Or labor strikes? Doesn't sound so awful to me.”

“Does freedom mean anything to you?”

“If you were to ask moi, most people don't deserve freedom.”

He groans.

“Alright. Forget about it. To hell with democracy. To hell with freedom. Just…do it as a personal favor to me? Please?”

“What would I even do? I don’t have the papers any more..”

“Well…I don't know. Anything you can do. Just...pump dad for information. A...a voice recording, maybe?”

Cheryl sighs. Another draft blows in through the crypt.

“I’ll think about it.”

He hugs her.

“Thanks, Cher.”

Jughead’s throat still hurts like hell in the morning when Jason returns to the cell to visit.

“Oh, you just missed the candygram man your dad sent me.” Jughead snarks.

“Christ!” Jason exclaims upon seeing the ligature marks across Jughead’s throat. “Did…”

“Yeah,” Jughead replies, dryly, his voice hoarse. “I almost ‘killed himself’ last night. With the tacit approval of our fine police force, of course.”
“God…”

“I’m sure he’ll try again soon, so are there any final regards you’d like to give me? Any departed ancestors or friends you want me to take a message to on the other side?

“Actually…I came here with a…proposition.”

“Oh. Really. Well, your propositions have a tendency to land me in jail cells, so—“

“Look. You’re going to end up in a prison or a grave, right? Even if you got out of this cell, you wouldn’t be safe in Riverdale. But…”

“Right. I’m up the creek. What’s your point?”

“Well…what if I could get you out of Riverdale, and give you a chance to hit back at Cliff Blossom at the same time?”

“Yeah? How’s that?”

Jason moves closer to the cell. He leans in, his voice dropping a few octaves.

“I can bribe the guys here to unlock the cell, for just a little while.”

“And then what?”

"I’m going to Spain. Do you want to come?"
Because Our Open Eyes Could See No Other Way

Chapter Notes

Boy I'm on an updating roll.

Academics? What are those?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Ten years before I saw the light of morning
A comradeship of heroes was laid
From every corner of the world came sailing
The 15th International brigade!"

~ Viva la Quince Brigada!

It only takes 50 of Jason Blossom's dollars to convince the guard on duty to leave Jughead’s cell unlocked and turn a blind eye for ten minutes.

He makes good use of the time.

Slipping out of the station and into a warm, dry summer night, Jughead sucks in a few breaths of air. His throat still burns. He’d spent less than a month in that cell. It was more than enough.

Jughead meets Jason at the Sweetwater River, as they’d agreed upon.

“Well…thanks,” he mutters.

Jason nods.

Jughead’s stomach flutters. He’s never been out of Riverdale, much less the country. He doesn’t speak a lick of Spanish. All he knows of the world beyond this little New York township comes through page and film. And yet, he’s overcome with feverish excitement. He never expected he’d have the opportunity to gaze upon the world abroad. And here it is. This is not a chance to be squandered. Even if he is heading into the middle of a war.

“Are you ready?”

“What?” Jughead asks. “When do we go?”

“Well, I figured tonight.”

“Tonight?” The excitement is tempered by a flash of fear.

Jason shrugs. “Well, do we have anything else to do here?”
Jughead shakes his head.

“No…I guess not. But I wanted to say goodbye. To…Betty, and everyone else.”

Jason squints up at the moon. The trees bent low over them groan in the breeze.

“Mmm…I don’t know if that’s a good idea. We’ll come back, you know.”

“We’re going to a war. And even if we weren’t, I can't ever come back as long as your dad’s in charge here.”

“He won’t be forever. That’s why we’re going to Spain. To make sure of it.”

Jughead straightens up and lifts his chin.

“I won’t go unless you let me say goodbye.”

Jason puts his hands on his hips. He retrain his eyes onto the forest floor. Chews his lower lip.

“Alright. But then I’m going to Thornhill, then. Be quick. We’ll meet at…3:00 o’clock, yeah?”

Jughead nods.

“That’s fine. Where?”

Jason thinks for a moment.

“The war memorial in the park. Be there.”

“Okay.”

And, for a moment, they part ways.

______________________________

Jason darts off through the woods, but Jughead remains in place for a good five minutes, turning his options over in his head. He wants to say goodbye to Betty, of course. It’s possible he’ll never see her again. But he doesn’t want to risk her trying to stop him. He doesn’t want to risk giving in. So maybe he’ll just say goodbye to Archie, and ask him to relay a message to Betty.

He’s still equivocating as he starts the walk back towards town, avoiding lights and men, and remembering that he is technically a fugitive. And he’s still made no conscious choice when he finds himself at the Cooper house, standing beneath Betty’s window. He sighs, grips the trestle stretching from her sill to the ground, and begins the climb up to her room.

She’s sleeping, blonde hair flowing around her face in waves, chest rising and falling rhythmically with the beating of her heart. Perfectly at peace. He almost doesn’t want to wake her up.

Jughead knocks on the window. It takes a few for her blue eyes to pop open, and for her to stand and grant him entry. He slithers inside, tumbling onto her floor with a thud.

The bruises on his face are beginning to fade, leaving only a few scars in their places. The rope burn on his neck, still present, is at least not so angry as it was days before. He is, in short, healing.

“Jughead…” She starts, voice choked with sleep. “What are you…how did you get out of—“

“I’m leaving town, Betty,” he blurs out.
“Mmm…what? Why?”

He shakes his head.

“Look at my throat. Th-“

She only now notices the ligature marks round his throat. Her face contorts with horror and sympathy.

“Oh my God! Did the-“

“Yes, Betty. And I’m not going to stick around this town and wait to be slaughtered like a damn farm animal.”

She bows her head, tears in her eyes.

“Where are you going to go?”

He looks up at the ceiling, still unable to believe it’s all come to this. He considers lying to her, telling her the truth in a letter if at all. But, no.

“Spain.”

“Spain? What? Why?”

“It’s…Jas—“

“Jason! You’re not seriously still listening to him, are you? After all of this?”

He shrugs.

“I don’t have a better idea. I can’t stay here. He’s offering me an out. And it won’t last forever. Just until…”

“Until what?” she demands.

“Until…” He selects his words with caution. “Until you manage to make things safe here again.”

“Safe…in Riverdale, or this country?”

He smiles bitterly.

“Both, I suppose.”

She returns the smile with one of her own, just as mournful.

“I don’t know that that’s going to happen, Juggy.”

“Yes it will. I know it will. Look, I’m going to Spain, right? That’s one front of this fight. This is another one. You and Veronica almost had them with those papers—you can do something. You can figure something out.”

“You know…Veronica’s going to Spain, too.”

Jughead cocks his head. There’s a surprise. If Veronica is going overseas, surely it’s because her mother is. And why would Hermione Lodge need to make such a journey now, while the business plotters’ putsch is so near execution?
“Really?”

“Maybe you’ll see each other there,” Betty offers with a weary, forlorn grin.

“I don’t think we’ll be on the same side of the lines,” Jughead laments.

“Are you sure there’s no other option?”

“Not that I can see,” he says, defeated.

Betty throws her arms around his neck and kisses him full on the lips. He stumbles back, but regains his balance and returns the kiss. They stand there like that for some time, locked in an embrace and allowing the world to flow around them uninterrupted. For a moment he forgets about fascism and communism and Spain.

When the kiss finally breaks Betty says only: “Don’t get yourself killed.”

“No promises,” he jokes.

It falls flat.

Jason goes about his goodbye in much the same way.

He crouches out in the cemetery, beside the great crypt that has served as his residence for the past few weeks, and flashes the glow of a lighter in the direction of Cheryl’s bedroom window, four times slow, four times fast.

Cheryl comes down to the cemetery, face wan and arms full of a bundle of-something.

“You’re going tonight?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

She thrusts the bundle at him, and he realizes then that it’s his old JROTC pack. He smiles at the memory. He’d never wanted to be a part of the damn program, but his father had insisted on it. ‘Discipline is crucial to a young man’s formative years’ Cliff had said. Maybe it would come in handy now. “Cheryl, wh—”

“I’m not stupid,” she says. “I know where you’re really going. And you’re probably not going to let me talk you out of it. So… I took the liberty of packing for you, because God knows you wouldn’t have done it yourself. Some… suitable clothing. A few hundred extra dollars. One of dad’s old knives.”

Jason contemplates the pile of materiel in his arms. His throat constricts. He’s struck by the sudden urge to throw aside the pack and run inside and hop into his bed and hide under the covers. Forget any of this ever happened. Burn his Marxist literature and party card. Undo everything.

Too late for all of that.

He hugs Cheryl, tight, battling back tears.

“Thanks,” he chokes out.

“One more thing,” she says. Her voice also trembles. Cheryl reaches into a pocket and extracts a little scrap of paper that takes Jason a moment to identify as a photograph. She pushes it into his
He turns it over and recognizes the little memento of their trip to Coney Island last year. It depicts the two of them perched on a boardwalk railing. Ferris wheels and multicolored tents rise up from the sand to their left. Directly behind them to the right, the Atlantic Ocean laps gently at the beach. They squint into the sun, their red hair mussed by the marine breeze.

He smiles.

“I’ll see you soon,” he promises.

She hugs him again and kisses him gently on the cheek.

“Please try not to die, idiot.”

He meets Jughead, as agreed upon, beneath the shadow of Riverdale’s great Civil War memorial.

It consists of a broad stone pedestal upon which are engraved the words: “IN MEMORY OF RIVERDALE’S SONS THAT DIED FOR LIBERTY IN THE WAR OF THE REBELLION”. The pedestal is topped by the image of a Union soldier, standing tall and proud in uniform, face turned towards the heavens, kepi hanging low over his eyes. The heavy pack on his back does not bow in the slightest his ramrod straight back or broad shoulders. In his right hand he holds a musket by the barrel, the bayonet pointed forth in a challenge to his invisible foe.

Upon the base are inscribed the names of all forty-two Riverdale men who died on the battlefields of Bull Run, or Vicksburg, or Antietam.

Jughead is crouched at the memorial’s base, scanning the memorialized names, when Jason arrives.

“Hey.”

“Captain Alexander Blossom. That your great-grandfather?”

Jason shakes his head.

“Great uncle, I think.” He cranes his neck up to appreciate the proud soldier of granite looming over them. “The statue’s supposed be based on him, supposedly.”

Jughead follows his gaze. He examines the stony, silent features of the immortal Yankee rifleman.

“Looks a little like you, I suppose,” Jughead offers.

Jason keeps silent for a few moments then says: “Yeah, I suppose.”

Then they turn their backs on the sorrow of unfinished wars and of a little town called Riverdale.

The road to New York, hitching rides half the time and simply hiking the other half, proves a few days short of three weeks long in the end. When the two boys come in sight of the great city, its lights gleaming on the horizon, promising civilization and warmth, they cheer.

Of course, they spend only a day there, and Jason is insistent the money Cheryl slipped him must be saved for absolute necessity alone. So the pair subsists on a few street vendors’ hot dogs and cups of murky water.

Jason has visited New York before, of course. Along with Paris and San Francisco and Buenos
Aires and Johannesburg. The city is as grand as ever, but for him it’s become a routine grandiosity. Jughead is awestruck. He cranes his neck up and finds that even so he can only just see the peaks of the great skyscrapers. The lights of stores and theaters and bars are blinding. He’s never seen such brilliance. Or so many people, as they throng the streets like an ocean of flesh, sweeping them by. It’s as if all the world has been summoned here. He feels a child again.

But the ugly sprouts of immiseration and destitution poke through the façade of even that wonderland. Men and women sleep on street corners, swathed in think blankets, thanking God it’s summer. Signs declaring ‘NO WORK HERE’ abound. Men with lifeless eyes clad in tattered vests and ratty caps haunt doorways and alleys, jobless and long since surrendered to that fact.

The boys, leery of a hotel considering Jughead’s technically being an escaped prisoner, spend the night in a city of muddy tents erected by longshoreman, employed or otherwise, on the banks of the Hudson River. The men, tired and worn, welcome their guests with hospitality beyond any they ought to have expected.

Jughead and Jason take their places around a little fire. Little puffs of acrid smoke come out of the old driftwood and hunks of assorted material that keep it alive, but at least it’s warm. A few men heat up little billycans of tea or bad coffee over the flame. One of them hums ‘John Brown’s Body’.

“Where you boys from?” Asks a big dockworker in a tattered red coat at last.

“Up north,” Answers Jughead, simply.

“Yeah? Where you headed?”

“Spain,” Jason answers with as much speed.

“Spain!” One man’s eyebrows rise. “What the hell for?”

“To fight.”

“Fight what?”

“Fascism, you idiot,” barks one of the man’s companions. “Don’t you read the damn papers?”

“Excuse me if I got more things to worry about than some damn war in Spain,” he retorts.

“Shut your mouth, Tony.” Then to the boys: “Good luck to you two. If I didn’t have kids I’d be right there alongside you. Give the bastards a black eye for me.”

Jughead keeps that request in mind when they board the Selkie, a weighty ironclad passenger ship, the next morning. They have no official business aboard, of course. Another hundred of Jason’s money wins them a place aboard the vessel.

The first day at sea, Jughead vomits some four times. Jason advises him not to move about too much. Too amazed by the surreality of the open sea, he ignores the advice and vomits again. Jughead leans against the ship’s railing and stares down into the murky, blue-green waters of the Atlantic, disturbed by frothing whitecaps. He marvels at the depth of the sea just below him. The immensity of the water. He’s broken out of some strange, involuntary cocoon at last. The scales fall from his eyes. He has the sensation of being an integrated part of the world at large. For so long, Riverdale alone had been the extent of his reality.
He finally has an inkling of what the silver-tongued communists mean when they speak of ‘internationalism’.

The crossing takes five days in entire.

“Do you actually speak any Spanish?” It finally occurs to Jughead to ask, long after the point of return has passed on this mad adventure. They lean on the railing, staring down at the twinkling stars reflected in a particularly violent midnight sea. Jason squints furiously at the light of Neptune caught in the crest of a wave, greatly discomfited by his companion’s question.

“Oh… *un poco,*” he mumbles in what Jughead is sure is probably an atrocious accent. “I… took a few Spanish lessons from a private tutor when I was twelve or so.” It dawns upon him that he’s just embarked on a journey to a foreign country without anyone actually capable of communicating with the natives.

“Of course. Of course. This will go swimmingly.” When they dock at La Havre at the close of day five, Jughead stumbles onto dry land like a drunk. He nearly spins in a full circle as he ingests the ground and the air and essence of France. The land of Mazarin and Richelieu. Of the Sun King. Of the Convention and the Terror. Of the Vendée. Napoleon. And the land where his father had fought and bled almost twenty years ago. The reality of their mission weighs heavier on him.

“What are you actually planning to do once we get there?” he asks as they stroll past an ornery customs official.

“Fight, I suppose.”

“You actually want to pick up a gun and go to the front?”

Jason shrugs.

“Sure.”

“Have you ever even shot a rifle?”

“My dad used to take me hunting when I was younger? Have you? Didn’t your dad fight in the war?”

Jughead scratches his head. He’s kept his immortal whoopee cap all this time. Through prison and hardship and sea.

“Yeah. But we could never afford a rifle. He told me a few fun facts about war here or there. Probably about twenty years out of date. But it doesn’t matter, because I’m sure as hell not doing any fighting. I’m staying here until things are safe at home-assuming they ever are again-and that’s all.”

“Suit yourself. But twenty years down the line, do you really want to have to say: “I had the chance to fight against fascism in Spain, but didn’t?”

Jughead stares at Jason with the look reserved for the mad or the pitiable.

“Do you read the papers? Have you read what the fascists do to their enemies? To their prisoners? I’d rather not be bayoneted to death by legionaries, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Well, that’s why we’ve got to fight them.”

The stopover in Paris is agony. Here is the great city of light, the hearth of European culture and
c civilization, the wellspring from which issued forth countless great poets, novelists, statesmen, and artists. And Jughead is not allowed a moment’s furlough to enjoy any of the city’s landmarks, memorials, or other places of interest.

“No, we have to go,” Jason insists. “You can stop on the way back.”

“Assuming we come back! Are you seriously—you have enough money left over! The Tuileries is right there!”

But instead of to the Tuileries (or rather—its remains, for it was burnt by the Communards during those glorious days of 1871) or the Louvre or the Eiffel Tower, Jason marches them to the city headquarters of the PCF—the Communist Party of France. His party card winning them entry, he inquires as to the situation in Spain. What he learns is that the Communist International—the Comintern—is indeed making preparations to raise units of volunteers from around the world to go and fight for the embattled republic. Of course, such a program is in its infant stages still, so the two New York boys will have to make it to Spain under their power.

The commissioners are, at least, kind enough to furnish the boys with a few false papers that, they say, will facilitate their entry into Spain, whose border with France has been officially sealed with the outbreak of the war.

They thank the apparatchiks, and start for the train station, Jughead practically coming to tears as they pass the Luxembourg gardens by.

Their train courses south, through central French cow country and then finally through the valleys and woods of the Occitan regions. Jughead is periodically given to shaking his head viciously or squeezing his eyes tight, unable to truly believe this is not all some fantastic dream. For despite the ugly chain of events that has brought him here, this is indeed a long-time dream fulfilled. Already, within the space of two weeks, he’s set sailed the Atlantic and set foot on a foreign country. And he’s about to set foot on another.

He’s giddy enough that, despite Jason’s suggestions that they remain quiet, especially about the nature of their journey, he strikes up a conversation with an elderly Italian gentleman seated across from them.

“Where are you lads headed to?” he asks, first in broken French. When it’s clear that neither of them understands, he switches to much better, if still accented, English.

“Spain,” Jughead answers.

The old man’s bushy eyebrows rise. His eyes twinkle with amusement and confusion.

“Spain? You boys know there’s a war on in Spain, don’t you?”

“Really? Shit, why didn’t anyone tell us?” Jason interjects.

“Mmmm…I remember being stupid enough to march onto a battlefield,” the old man says, wistful.

It’s the crossing the Pyrenees that’s the hardest. Of course, despite the closed border and the inhospitable terrain, such a feat is not impossible. The villagers and mountaineers that subsist in this hinterland know the ancient and obscure pathways that the Parisian-imposed authorities do not. And more often than not, they are all too eager to make for themselves a quick dollar offering themselves as guides to foolish foreigners.
Jason and Jughead find for themselves a leather-faced farmer of some forty years who offers to take them across in exchange for a hefty payment. Deftly dodging border guards and winding through invisible roads and footpaths carved out of the ancient mountains, they reach the Spanish border in three days.

The guide wishes them luck and vanishes back into France. And Jughead and Jason are left alone staring upon the vast expanse of this country rent by civil war. Marching down the slope of the hillside to a little border town, they are met not by uniformed officers, but by unshaven, ragged men in peasants’ wide-brimmed hats and sandals, with rifles slung over their shoulders. Around their necks they wear bandanas colored red and black. They move not like soldiers, but rather like poor laborers unused to and uneasy by the heft and form of a weapon. And yet at the same time cheered because for once they have the guns, and not the landlord or the army or the Civil Guard.

“Quienes sois vosotros?” Snaps one of the taller militiamen, a pistol dangling dangerously from his right hand. Jughead feels suddenly less than secure, as the armed peasants crowd around them. One of them snatches Jughead’s cap from his head, gives it a once over, snorts, and hands it back.

“Uh…” Jason stammers, wracking his mind for that long-forgotten schoolboy Spanish. “Sois… somos…c-compañeros.” He gestures to himself and then to Jughead.

“Como sabemos que no sois espias?” the man demands.


“No! No! I’m not a German!” he cries back. “Antifascista! Antifascista! Comunista!” He raises his trembling right hand in the clenched fist salute of the People’s Front. Jughead fumbles about in his pack and retrieves the false passport the officials at the PCF headquarters in Paris equipped them with. He offers it to the nearest militiaman, who waves it away with a look of disgust on his face.

“Esa mierda burguesa no nos importa nada.”

“Wait…wait,” Jason stammers. He produces his communist party card, and hands it over to the head miliciano. The man traces the embossed hammer and sickle on the billfold, nodding. He flips it open and turns it over in his hands a few times. He smirks.

“No es fascista.” He hands Jason the card back and claps him on the shoulder. “Pero…qué quieres tu en España?”

“What did he ask?” Jughead hisses.


“Que sabes tu de la guerra, muchacho?”

“And you, Carlos?” His comrade asks him. “You knew nothing of war either until we fought the fascists on the 19th. None of us did.”

The man evidently named Carlos nods.

“Tienes razon, he admits—’you’re right’. Then turning back to the boys—“Pues…si venís a matar fascistas, bienvenidos, compañeros.” Jason beams.

“What was that?”
“He says ‘if we came to kill fascists, then welcome.’” Then he turns back to the militiamen, who regard them now with a cautious amusement. “Well? Which way’s the front?”

Chapter End Notes

You've probably heard of the well-famed International Brigades, through which the vast majority of volunteers came to Spain. That was a project organized by the Communist International, and men who came as Internationals had their fare, training, and weaponry paid for by the Comintern. However, the first International Brigades were not formed until the fall of 1936. This chapter is set in the late summer of that year. At this point, there were no International Brigades, and any volunteers looking to fight in Spain had to make the trip on their own dime, like our protagonists here.
Not so long after Jughead Jones and Jason Blossom embark on their Spanish misadventure, the silvershirts come to Thornhill.

Cheryl watches them arrive from her lofty bedroom window. The troopers number about fifteen, crouched in the back of a lorry. They hop out as the truck rolls to a stop on the manor grounds, clutching rifles with bayonets fixed.

The ‘Silver Legion’ is said to number some 20,000. It’s a pale, sycophantic imitation of Hitler’s brownshirts or Mussolini’s *squadristi*, but a formidable force nonetheless. They are commanded from North Carolina by homegrown American fascist William Pelley, and where the silvershirts are numerous enough, they march in the streets, in their ruffled grey tunics, their soldiers breeches, and wide-brimmed campaign hats. They sing their intent to fashion a ‘new America’ to complement the new Germany and the new Italy. That is, an America free of Jewry, of blacks, of trade unionists, ‘orientals’, and ‘red agitators’.

Her father greets the fellow who appears to be their captain. The captain extends his arm in a fascist salute. Cliff deftly returns it.

Cliff leads the captain and two of his lieutenants into the manor, leaving the rest of the troopers to take up posts outside, chatting and smoking.

Cheryl weighs her options. Her first instinct is to go crouch on the stairwell, just out of sight from the sitting room, and listen in while her father speaks with his guest. But that’s a bit bold. So instead, she throws on a coat and goes out onto the grounds to mingle with the silvershirt troopers. On the way down, she passes Jason’s empty room and feels a pang of sadness.

She emerges from a little portal opening out into the garden and thoroughly startles a young silvershirt in a hat and tunic far too large for his weedy frame. He’s probably not much older than her. He straightens up and tips the rim of his hat to , before turning away, setting his jaw, planting the butt of his rifle in the ground, and resuming his role of motionless sentry. Cheryl leans back against the garden wall next to him.

“You know, it’s impolite not to greet me.”

He coughs, and his composure falters again.

“Sergeant Jack Whitney, 3rd battalion, Silver Legion.” He offers another stiff, snappy fascist salute.

“What?”

“What?”

“What are you pointing at?”

“I’m not—it’s a…very funny.” He relaxes his arm.

“Well, *je m’appelle* Cheryl Blossom.”
The man’s eyes go a little wide.

“Oh, you’re mister Blossom’s daughter.” His arm twitches and begins to rise.

“No, no, please, no more salutes.” She begs. He reluctantly stiffens his arm and then lets it go slack.

“Sorry.”

“So…” She asks sweetly. “What brings you to Thornhill? Daddy not paying your boss enough?”

“Well, that isn’t it. Actually…well, they don’t tell me a whole lot, you know. But they called us in from our base to come here.”

"Your base?"

"Sure. The old army base. Down in Midvale."

"And why were you called out here?"

"Your father wanted us providing security here, just for a few months, until everything comes off."

Until everything comes off.

Cheryl nods. So it is true, then. She feels something a rarity in her breast. The prickling of guilt.

“Well, I, for one,” she finally says with a flourish. “Couldn’t be more thrilled to see this rotten government go down the tubes.”

“Of course. That bastard Roosevelt, with his Jew advisors whispering in his ear all the time, he’s going to run this country into the ground we don’t act.” He flashes her a reassuring smile. “But rest assured, we’ll act.”

Cheryl feels a little sick. She’s definitely heard enough. But something holds her from turning away and drifting back into the house.

“I hope it doesn’t go down too bloody.” She offers.

Jack shakes his head.

“If everything goes right we won’t even have to do any fighting. Our friends in the army will call martial law, make a few smooth radio broadcasts, and that’ll be that. We’ll sweep the traitors out without a shot fired.”

“Right. Well, I’ve got to go, Sergeant Jack.”

He tips his hat again.

“Good day, miss! I hope to see you at our victory parade through Times Square! Who knows, your father has been such a help, maybe you can even march with us!” He exults.

She stretches her lips into a grin that threatens to tear her face open.

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Cheryl storms back up the stairwell to her room, the growing reality of the situation nipping at her
heels all the way. She’s not used to feeling guilt. But that’s because, in her estimation, she rarely does anything worthy of guilt. And yet…this is happening. Really happening. And happening because of her. Betty’s words gnaw at Cheryl’s mind: “I hope you feel good about yourself”. She doesn’t. She really doesn’t.

Cliff concludes his conference with the silvershirt captain within an hour or two. He and his lieutenants depart but the rest of the troopers stay behind. Semi-permanent security, her father explains that night at dinner.

It’s odd the sort of gap Jason’s departure (or rather, exile) has left in Thornhill’s routine. Neither mother nor father has dared take any of his pictures down, and his room remains largely undisturbed. Even most of his Marxist literature remains in place on his shelves. Every time she passes the half-open door she peaks in to see the spines of *Marxism and the National Question* or *Anti-Dühring* gleam back at her from their places of honor.

And yet despite the refusal to physically destroy his memory, Cheryl isn’t sure she’s heard her father mention Jason’s name once since his dramatic expulsion. A few nights after that, she’d listened in on Clifford comforting a miserable Penelope desperately wishing for her son back. Cheryl had even heard a sob or two from him, she thinks. But that’s all.

Cheryl has taken to obsessively keeping up with the latest news on Spain. She would not normally care a whit for civil slapfights or hoary military risings but now that Jason’s committed himself entirely to the cause of the Spanish Republic, she feels compelled to enlist her sympathies on its behalf, even if passively.

Of course, she won’t tell her father that.

Anyway, the news from that front is hardly cheerful for supporters of the republic. The loyalist forces are everywhere on the defensive. Tenuously holding positions at best, in full rout at worst.

The fascists are advancing all but unopposed north through Andalusia and west across Castile. Governmental authority throughout Republican Spain has largely collapsed, leaving power in the hands of various decentralized trade unions, parties, and militias.

The insurgents are furnished with new state of the art aircraft, tanks, firearms, and even troops by the sympathetic governments of Italy and Germany. Nazi Junkers rain bombs upon peasant militiamen who have never seen an airplane, much less been attacked by one. Panzers crush the meager barricades and networks of barbed wire erected by the republicans. Franco’s crack Moorish troops, hardened by years of colonial war, make short work of untrained militants with rusty rifles. The cry of ‘los Moros! Los Moros!’- ‘The Moors! The Moors!’ is soon enough to throw loyalist forces into a panic.

No one expects the republic to hold out more than a few more weeks. Months, at best.

“My partners and I are going to hold a conference at Thornhill in a few weeks.” Cliff informs his wife and daughter at dinner. “I expect you both to be accommodating” He delivers the word ‘both’ while glaring at his daughter, who feels, not for the first time, quite small in her father’s sight.

“Hermione Lodge isn’t coming, is she?” Penelope inquires.

He snorts.

“No. In fact she’s off to Spain to sort out some last minute financial woes with our rebel friends.” Then he turns to his daughter, whose glum demeanor has not gone unnoticed. “Cheryl, darling,
what’s the matter with you?” She barely resists the second-nature urge to roll her eyes. Like he doesn’t know.

“Nothing.” She spits back. If he’s going to present such bald-faced dishonesty, she might as well do the same.

*Are you really going to pretend your son never existed?*

“Well, chin up.” He swallows a few bites of roast. “You know, I’ve been thinking, and I actually want you to sit in on this meeting. You did so well with the job I gave you, I think it would be good preparatory experience for you. I’m very proud of you, Cheryl, you know.”

*Right, now that you’ve only got the one child to be proud of.*

“Are you…sure enough about that?” Penelope asks, face distorted by disbelief. “You don’t want to give off the…wrong impression.

He offers his daughter an apologetic smile then turns back to his wife.

“You really don’t give our daughter enough credit, love. Cheryl’s a very smart girl. And it is the 20th century, after all.”

*Right, and what does that mean to you other than more blood money?*

“Thanks, daddy.”

She spears a piece of roast hard enough that the fork scratches into the ceramic of her plate.

“And you know” he goes on. “The company I leave to you is going to be a whole lot bigger than the one my father left me. Even now, we’re doing quite okay. You just wait a few months until we’ve got this business all sorted out, and Blossom Maple Farms will be thriving like never before.”

*No it won’t, you bastard. Because you and your shady friends are going to crash and burn. I’ll make sure of it.*

The disappearances of the Jones and Blossom boys will seemingly be enough to feed Riverdale’s hungry rumor mill for ages. No one is quite sure where they’ve gone, nor if the vanishings are connected.

Cliff is furious when Jughead’s survival and escape are revealed. It passes, though, and he contents himself with the thought that the little troublemaker is out of his life and off of his plate once and for all.

FP Jones is of course, ‘put to the question’, as the inquisitors of old might have said, in regards to his son’s whereabouts. And he, of course, lets nothing slip (not that he could). He is brought up on charges of criminal mischief in the 1st degree and violation of the Criminal Anarchy Law. 30 years in prison.

Joaquin DeSantos, thanks to his connections with the Serpents, seems to have become a phantom. He’s escaped the wrath of Blossom, for the time being at least.
Veronica Lodge sits about, brooding, waiting to be taken off to fascist Spain by her mother.

She and Archie Andrews are initially furious when Betty informs them where Jughead and Jason have gone off to.

“And you did nothing to stop them? Come on, Betty!” Archie cried.

“You don’t know the sort of people we’re talking about!” Veronica exclaimed. “They’re going to end up in a ditch with bullets in the back of their heads! At best!”

Betty explained, calmly as she could while resisting the urge to cry out: “You think I wanted this to happen? You think I ever wanted any of this?” Instead she just said: “There wasn’t much of a choice. They had to get out of town. Jughead was almost murdered in prison. They’ll be safe. Far from the fighting, I’m sure.”

Slowly, the three friends (Kevin Keller has been more or less confined to his home since his father discovered he’d had connections of any sort with a Serpent) simply come to terms with yet another unfortunate turn of events. Those are quite common as of late.

They spend a few late nights in their booth at Pop’s brainstorming impossible, fantastic schemes to quash the fast-approaching coup before it can be brought to fruition. The realization that there is no realistic solution comes slow. And just as slowly, unable to admit to themselves, they give up.

In fact, Veronica is sitting alone in the booth, thinking about how she’s failed, when Cheryl materializes in the seat across from her.

She lifts her head up to face the new arrival, eyes smoldering.

“What do you want, Cheryl Brownshirt?”

Cheryl crosses her arms and purses her lips.

“I suggest you try a nicer tone, Miss Lodge, because I’m about to become your very best friend.”

Veronica forms a fist. She’s quite close to seriously decking the other girl. It would be damn satisfying.

“You want to go goose stepping together?”

“I’m willing to help you,” Cheryl says. Veronica’s dark eyes light up. She allows herself a moment of optimism.

“Help…”

“Not because I care even a jot about democracy or liberty or any of that nonsense. I’m doing this as a personal favor to my brother.”

Veronica regards her with suspicion. Her fist slowly loosens and then unclenches.

“And how are you going to help, exactly?”

“Well, I was getting to that, if you’d let me speak. My father’s…associates, and I think you know who I mean by that, are coming to Thornhill for a conference in a few weeks. And I think we both know what that conference is going to be about. And, here’s the payoff, my father wants me to sit it on the meeting.”
Veronica leans in, feeling lighter of heart and mind than she has in months. She almost allows herself to trust the redhead.

“And…”

“My idea—my plan—is that I record the minutes of the conference. Simple as that.”

“And you don’t think your dad is smart enough to screen for a little something like a recording device?” She snorts.

“Please. He’s not going to search his own daughter. Especially not now. He trusts me, after I took those papers back from you and Betty Boop.”

Veronica feels on the verge of fainting. Here is their eleventh hour salvation. A part of her rails against the idea of trusting Cheryl Blossom on anything, but the larger part reminds her that there is really no other course of action open at this point. There’s really nothing at all to lose.

“Well, the problem is, I’m going to be in Spain before ‘a few weeks’.”

Cheryl smirks.

“Yes, I heard. Give my regards to General Franco, will you?”

“Very funny.”

“Which means you’ll have to work with Betty and Archie on this.”

Cheryl examines her fingernails.

“If you’re asking me to be the brains behind those two poor saps, the answer is, yes.”

Veronica rolls her eyes.

“Look. Meet me back here at 9:00 tonight, sharp. I’ll bring them, too. We’ll figure everything out. Be there.”

Cheryl leans back in her seat. Her smirk grows wider.

“You can count on me, comrade.”

Jason and Jughead crossed the border into Catalonia, but they do not stay in the region long. As they soon learn, Catalonia is not Spain, and Catalans do not consider themselves Spaniards. Even Jason’s rusty grasp of the Spanish language is largely useless among a population that speaks Catalan, which is a sharp, clipped tongue closer to Italian or French.

They stroll down La Rambla, the tree lined avenue that slices through the heart of Barcelona. It is a street world-renowned for its beauty and hallowed history, and Jughead finds himself recalling the words of Lorca, the great Spanish poet whose translated works he’d devoured back home:

“La Rambla is the only street in all the world that I wish would never end.”

Barcelona is a revolutionary city. On July the 18th, when the local military garrison had attempted to rise in favor of the fascists, they had been brutally put down by armed workers’ militias united under the banner of the CNT, the anarchist trade union with its base in Catalonia.
The towers and windows are draped with the red and black flags of the anarchists. Hammers and sickles are scrawled across walls. A handsome young man in a militia cap stands on a box at a street corner, belting out the *International* in Catalan while an adoring crowd watches, fists raised in the People’s Front salute.

“This is…amazing.” Jughead finds himself breathing. It’s like something out a fantasy. Trucks and lorries speed through the streets, packed with armed militiamen, bristling with bayonets. The flatbeds and the hoods of the vehicles are blazoned with hastily painted slogans and initials.

*Visca la Libertat!*

*Mort al feixisme!*

Ironically, the fascist rebellion brought the very revolution it was meant to forestall. When its violence disrupted the machinery of the republican government, it allowed the various anarchist, socialist, and communist movements active in the country to seize the moment for the long-awaited uprising of workers and peasants. Landlords are chased off of their land, which is summarily collectivized among the landless laborers. Factories are taken over by workers’ committees. ‘Soviets’ are set up in many working class *barrios* and in rural villages. In many places, the abolition of marriage and other such institutions is declared.

And of course, there is a darker side as well. Churches are burned and priests are killed. The clergy is too-often viewed as a tool of the landlord and the boss meant to delude and pacify the worker. Armed squads of militiamen roam from door to door, taking away suspected ‘fascists’ to be jailed or shot. Many without any real ideals take advantage of the chaos to settle old apolitical scores. The powerless central government, hoping to win aid from its fellow liberal democracies of France and Britain, watch in dismay as these radicals destroy the moderate image the republic is trying to cultivate abroad. The democracies might lend help to another embattled democracy. They will *not* lend help to red revolutionaries.

Like all revolutions, the light and the darkness are not so easily separated. Indeed, seen from various eyes, they are quite often the same.

The pair steps into a little café, eager for a snack, for they’ve hardly eaten since crossing into Spain. When Jason retrieves a little stack of *pesetas* they’d traded for American dollars up near Gerona, the shopkeeper waves it away, disgusted.

“Your money is no good here, comrade. The revolution has come. We are done with bourgeois greed and hoarding. Sit down and have a drink.”

Jason puts his money away, mouth slack. He looks positively giddy. Jughead actually has to help him to a seat. The café watches them, some with suspicion, most with a welcoming warmth.

“Can you believe it?” Jason gushes. “This is it! The revolution! All around us! This is the beginning!”

“It is…something.” Jughead concedes.

As we sat in that café in Barcelona, sipping our drinks in the heart of the revolution, a sense of renewal came over me. It felt, if only for a moment, as if all the dead words and hollow promises of the communist propagandists were perhaps not so dead and not so hollow. Through the window I could see flags of red and black floating majestically in a summer breeze. I could see throngs, in the hundreds, raising their fists and their voices to the tune of the International. I could see hotels
and palaces and consulates converted into housing for the poor and destitute. I could see militiamen, certain of their victory, speeding off for the front, as their loves and their children waved them goodbye and good fortune.

Around us, the tables were packed with militiamen in their mechanic’s jumpsuits and peasant’s blouses, with only a red or black scarf and an old rifle to identify them as fighters. So many of their faces were still filthy with the dust of battle. Sometimes they bore bandages, covering a vicious wound sustained in the fighting. A few carried flowers pinned to their chests, in memoriam of fallen comrades. But in their eyes was fervent, almost childlike enthusiasm and hope. They truly believed in the revolution. They truly believed in the end of misery and poverty and tyranny. They truly believed in liberty and brotherhood. They truly believed in their new world.

Back through the years and decades, as the fog of history closes in and transforms these flesh and blood men and women into uniforms and numbers, it may seem foolish, naïve, or even dangerous. But there, in that moment, it was impossible not to believe as well.

Jughead scarfs down two small cakes and a sandwich, both provided free of charge in accordance with revolutionary principles. Having done so, he takes to picking crumbs from his plate and jamming them into his mouth. Jason stares at him, fingers knitted together, saying nothing.

"Can you please eat, or at least drink, something? You're freaking me out."

"I'm thinking."

Jughead takes a sip from his glass of water.

"About what?"

"Who to talk to."

After another ten minutes or so of thinking (and of Jughead eating) he gets up and wanders over to a nearby table occupied by three militiamen, laughing and talking and waving their guns around with flagrant disregard for any form of firearm discipline. Jughead places a silent bet on how long before someone is accidentally shot. The militiamen seem receptive to the foreigner, and wave Jason to sit down with them. Jughead watches from across the cafe. Luckily for Jason, a disproportionate number of the militia serving in Barcelona are not Catalans themselves, but migrant laborers hailing from Andalusia or the Levante, rendering his primitive Spanish useful again. Much to Jughead's chagrin, they're seated just far enough away that he can't make out anything of the conversation. He orders another little cake, along with a pitcher of water. Halfway through his pastry, the Jason's interactions with the militiamen intensify. One of them mimes an explosion, setting the table to a roar. Then Jason points to Jughead and then whispers something to his newfound comrades. Jughead bristles. One of the militiamen, a tall, olive-skinned Spaniard, nods excitedly. Jughead takes a sip of water.

A few minutes later, Jason points to Jughead again. This time, the tall militiaman nods even more vigorously. He pats Jason's shoulder. Jason stands up and calls: "Jones!" Jughead stands, cautiously, gripping his half-eaten pastry. "Come over here," Jughead tarries. "Come on!" Reluctantly, carefully, he shambles across the cafe. "Look, I want to introduce you to my new comrades." He gestures to the tall militiaman. "This is Mariano." Mariano nods and offers a clenched fist salute. "That's Carlos" he points to a broad-shouldered, bull-necked man with two pistols jammed into his belt. "Jose Maria" A gaunt, fair fellow with dark blonde hair.
"Uh...buenas tardes." Jughead mumbles. About the only Spanish phrase he knows, thanks to Jason drilling it into his head during the journey over the Atlantic and through France.

"So..." says Mariano, in surprisingly good English. "Your friend says that your father...he worked buildings, yes?"

"Construction worker? Yeah."

"Yes. Ah..." Mariano snaps his fingers, struggling to string together an English sentence. "Como se dice...sabes...que sabes sobre explosivos? Sabes destrozar edificios-To destroy buildings?"

"He wants to know" Jason translates. "If you know anything about demolition. Like, with explosives."

Every fiber of common sense screams at Jughead not to answer that question in the affirmative. *Don't do it. Don't do it. Shut up.* His mouth opens in stark defiance of his mind. His lips begin to move.

"Yeah. Theoretically, I know some stuff."

"Dice que sí." Jason translates for his new friends.

"Fantastico!" Carlos exults, pounding a fist on the table.

"Then," Mariano says, with a great, toothy grin. "You will help us breach the walls of a fascist fortress!"

"Goddammit!"

Chapter End Notes

Okay this might seem a bit much, but since I'm terrible at describing geography, here's a map of Spain during the civil war for reference which might come in handy if my prose starts confusing the hell out of you:

http://www.asisbiz.com/Battles/Spanish-Civil-War/images/Artwork-showing-a-map-of-the-map-showing-battles-areas-during-the-Spanish-Civil-War-0A.jpg

Rebels/insurgents/Nationalists/fascists/whatever: The increasingly lighter shades of show their advance over the course of the war (Darkest being the first territory they won, lightest the last). The tanks signify battles, the bombs bombing raids, skulls massacres.
Veronica leaves Riverdale in the third week of August 1936.

She bids farewell to Archie and Betty like a soldier marching off to war, and begs them to keep a close eye on Cheryl.

With the coming of the war, more or less all passenger shipping to Spain is cut off, meaning traffic to that country is forced to detour through one of several neighboring states-usually France or French Morocco.

“Mom,” Veronica begins, when they disembark in French Morocco and await the next and final leg of their journey that will take them to Spain itself. “Where exactly are we going?”

“We’re going to Seville,” Hermione replies. “To speak with General Queipo de Llano.”

The name seems vaguely familiar, but not important.

“Sevilla? Okay.” She hasn’t been to Seville since she was six or so. Despite herself, she becomes a bit excited. “Queipo de Llano is…”

“He’s the man the National Movement has put in charge of Seville.”

‘National Movement’? You mean the fascists?”

“They’re not-I need you to be on your best behavior, Veronica. Okay? I mean it, no sarcasm or insults.”

Veronica’s mouth goes wide.

“I would never insult the brave men saving Spain from communism.”

“That. Don’t do that.”

From Casablanca, they embark for Cádiz, from which they will continue on to Seville.

The ship that carries them is an Italian warship. Counted among its passengers are various officers and technicians sent by Mussolini as advisors to the Spanish fascists. Veronica’s fairly certain the mysterious lumps covered in tarps upon the deck are tanks and artillery pieces. She doesn’t ask.

British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden has suggested a ‘non-intervention committee’, which would call together the great powers of Europe to pledge neutrality in the current Spanish conflict. France, Great Britain, Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union duly sign on.

Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany just as duly ignore its existence, as evidenced by this ship and its
It takes a day to reach Cádiz.

From there, they board an armored train. It’s been out of commission for the past weeks, as the insurgents clear Southern Spain of ‘reds’ and ensure the railroads are safe for use.

This will be its first journey in some time.

Then, on to Seville.

In the years leading up to the war, Seville, that old jewel of Andalusia increasingly became a robust stronghold of Spanish organized labor. So much that she won the epithet, said in admiration as often as in disgust, Sevilla Roja—‘Red Seville’.

The red and black banners of revolution were an ever-present sight in the city’s poorer working neighborhoods, and the victory of the People’s Front in February had been greeted with fireworks, music, and dancing in the streets, much to the disgust of Seville’s propertied classes. May Day had seen a procession of thousands marching through the grand avenues, banners waving, singing La Internacional, and the much-loved Anarchist hymn A Las Barricadas!

By the time Veronica and Hermione Lodge arrive in the fall of 1936 to iron out Hiram’s business with the rebel generals, Red Seville is in the process of receiving a thick new coat of white paint, courtesy of its late fascist rulers.

The city has been transformed from a center of revolutionary fervor into a towering monument to the incipient ‘National Movement’.

The red-and-gold flags of the Bourbon kings flutter from every spire and balcony in Seville. Walls are plastered with posters extolling the virtues of ‘old’ Spain and condemning the evils of Marxism and the People’s Front. Lorries tear through the streets, packed full of armed Falangists in their blue shirts wielding pistols; spoiling for a fight with any ‘red’ they run across (more likely anyone who looks unlikely to stand up to them). Radios and loudspeakers blare patriotic music from every street corner and every window.

The air is infected with the strains of the Cara al Sol and Marcha Real.

When Veronica and her mother rendezvous with their appointed chauffeur at the train station, he greets them with a sharp fascist salute and a firm ‘Arriba España!’

“Señora, señorita, bienvenidos a Sevilla. The General will be so pleased to see that you made the trip. He himself is making one of his broadcasts right now. He should be done soon, though. Come, get in. I’m supposed to take you the Plaza de España. That is from where the general makes his broadcasts. And, I believe it is where you’ll be staying during your time in Seville.”

Veronica climbs into the backseat of the sleek, black vehicle, mumbling her discontent. On her way in, she notices the yoke and arrows, old standard of the Spanish kings and now symbol of the fascist Falange stamped onto the doors.

As they career through the streets, little Spanish flags flutter from the car’s bumpers. Pedestrians and fellow motorists clear aside. Someone important is inside, clearly.

“The rebels are sure cleaning this place up,” Veronica comments as they speed past a shop with its windows smashed out, defaced with a crude swastika and the ever-present insurgent slogan:
‘Arriba España!"

“Eh…señorita,” The chauffeur grimaces. “Please do not refer to the national forces as ‘rebels’. Particularly not when you meet General Queipo de Llano. He will not take it well.”

The name’s significance finally clicks. “Wait a minute. Queipo de Llano…isn’t he the one Jose Antonio punched in the face that one time?” Veronica inquires.

Jose Antonio: son of her father’s uncle and late dictator of Spain, Miguel Primo de Rivera. And her first cousin, once removed. Upon his father’s fall from power, Jose Antonio had founded the *Falange*, Spain’s very own fascist party. He gained a reputation as a playboy and firebrand, building up a small blueshirted army of loyal followers, touting himself as a fresh new alternative to both right and left in politics. Veronica’s met him five times. He rarely impresses, especially when he gets drunk and goes on rants about Marxism and international Jewish capital.

The story slowly returns to mind. A few years back, when Jose Antonio was a young officer in the army, and his father still in power, Queipo had published a screed denouncing the dictator. Jose Antonio, furious at the insult to his family’s honor, had tracked the general to a café and laid him out flat. He’d earned a court martial for striking a superior officer, but the third time Veronica had met him, he’d been quite proud of it.

“Yes…mija,” Hermione confirms. “But…don’t mention that to the general. Please. In fact, don’t mention your cousin at all. He’s been taken prisoner by the reds, anyhow.”

“Is it because he punched Prieto in the face?”

Jose Antonio had also once, during his time as a deputy in the *Cortes*, vaulted over three benches to clock socialist leader Indalecio Prieto during a heated argument.

“Your cousin likes to punch people.”

“What are you ladies talking about?” The chauffeur questions.

“Nada,” Veronica snaps.

“Her cousin, Jose Antonio,” Hermione says.

“Primo de Rivera? He is your cousin?” The chauffeur asks, star struck. “You should be very proud. The Falange is helping our movement to save Spain.”

The car rolls past a lamppost, from which swings the pallid corpse of a young man, hands and feet bound. Around his neck hangs a sign reading: “Traidor rojo” - ‘red traitor’.

“Not sure how much more saving Spain can take,” Veronica mumbles

The vehicle arrives, after some time cruising through the conquered city, at Seville’s *Plaze de España* (for there are many cities in Spain with identically named squares). The plaza is ringed with massive complex of buildings designed to evoke both the old gothic style of Spain’s catholic kings, and the neo-Moorish aesthetic of the *Mudéjar* School. Veronica shields her eyes from the sun and steps out from the car.

The chauffeur holds open their doors and directs them toward a vaulted gateway. He offers one more fascist salute and bids them farewell.
Two grim-faced sentries in the olive-green of the Spanish Legion allow them entry, stepping aside and mumbling ‘Arriba España’. Veronica notices a few splotches of dried, red-brown coloring their drab uniforms. She ignores it.

Just within the building itself they are greeted by a handsome young man in the blue shirt of the Falange. A smile on his face and a pistol in his belt.

“And you are of course, the lovely wife and daughter of señor Hiram Lodge.” He chirps in perfect English. Yet another fascist salute. “Bienvenidos a Sevilla, señoritas. Come, come! The general is still at his radio, but I’ll take you to the garden. We can wait there for him. He will be very happy to see you.” The young falangist extends his arm to Veronica. She instinctively pulls away, but he insists, his smile never faltering. Burying her disgust, he allows him to link his arm with hers. Hermione takes his other arm, and they start down an airy breezeway flanked by pseudo-oriental pillars.

“When will the General be able to see us?” Hermione asks.

“Shouldn’t be more than another half hour or so,” the falangist says. “I am Santiago Romerales, by the way. Jefe de Centuria, Falange Española. At your service, always.” Veronica rolls her eyes.

The corridor opens out into a broad, hexagonal garden constructed around a simple neo-classical fountain. Green vines curl around pillars and pediments. A balcony encompasses the garden one story up. Six benches are arranged, perfectly equidistant, round the fountain. Santiago motions for them to sit among a pit of roses. Veronica lifts her eyes to see a loudspeaker affixed to the pediment of a nearby pillar. It whines and squeaks, struggling to transmit.

“What’s that?”

“Ah. Loudspeaker. See, we can listen to the general’s broadcast from here. He addresses us over the radio every day, you know. To hearten our boys and to terrify the reds.”

“That’s why they call him the ‘Radio General’, then?” Hermione inquires.

“Of course!”

Finally, the loudspeaker sorts itself out, and the thundrous, angry voice of an older man rends the air.

“…To you, who dare oppose our national movement,” General Queipo de Llano growls over the radio. “We will kill you like dogs!” Veronica flinches. Santiago chuckles. Queipo rants for over an hour, inveighing against the ‘reds’, the Marxists, the liberals, the anarchists, the socialists, the French, the Jews, the freemasons, and every enemy, real or imagined, under the blazing Spanish sun. “Our valiant legionaries and regulars have shown the reds what it is to be men!” he shrieks at the height of his excitement. “And to the women of the reds, too! Now, they’ve known real men, not castrated milicianos! Let them kick their legs around and scream! It won’t save them!” She can practically see his face burn and the spittle fly from his lips.

Santiago laughs.

Veronica’s stomach turns. Queipo de Llano wins the dubious honor of being one of the few people she comes to hate before ever seeing their faces.

“Is he nearly done?” Hermione is finally brought to ask.

Santiago shushes her.
“Friends, Spanish patriots! This has been another address from your General! As always: Long live our National Movement! Long live the Army of Spain! Death to Marxism! Death to the red swine! Arriba España!”

The radio crackles once more, and then falls silent. Santiago stands and motions for his charges to do the same.

“He can see you now.”

Veronica resists the urge to vomit. She’s not sure she’ll be able to do so in the physical presence of the loathsome creature whose deranged rambling she’s just been forced to endure.

Santiago drives them up another staircase, and then down another hall, to a pair of heavy oaken doors. He knocks once. The doors swing open, and they step inside.

There, behind a desk, a microphone and a bottle of red wine before him, sits General Gonzalo Queipo de Llano. He switches the microphone off, and takes a swig of his wine.

The vibrant, raucous voice over the radio had led Veronica to imagine a jovial, heavy-set man with ruddy cheeks and a paunch.

Instead she finds a tall, gaunt old soldier with a bullet head and a thin mustache curling over his pale upper lip. Enthrone behind his microphone, his sunken cheeks and beady eyes give the impression of an angel of death. He spreads his arms wide in welcome.

“Señora! Señorita! Bienvenidos a Sevilla!”

“Gracias, mi general.” Is Hermione’s genteel reply.

Veronica feels unclean. Her skin prickles. She begins to sweat.

“Am I supposed to say ‘Arriba España’ again?”

“Stop it, Veronica.”

“Perdoname?”

“I said I’m very thankful to be here, general.”

Queipo smiles and slithers out from behind his desk. He towers over the Lodge women. Takes Veronica’s hand in his leathery one. She musters all her self-mastery to keep from wrenching it away. He leans down and presses a kiss to her knuckles. He must feel the shudder that wracks her entire body. He releases her hand and she immediately wipes it against the fabric of her skirt. Queipo doesn’t notice, too enamored of his own propriety, and repeats the gesture with Hermione, who responds with much more stoicism.

“So! Tell me, tell me! How was your journey? No difficulty getting into Spain, I hope?”

“Everything went fine,” Hermione assures him.

“Good, good! That damn Jew Blum has made it impossible to get through from France. I’m sorry you had to come by ship. I hate the sea, myself.”

“I assure you, it was quite alright,” Hermione says.

He smiles, lips curling back over a set of small, almost jagged teeth.
“Wonderful. And how is Señor Hiram himself? Well…I’m aware he’s been arrested but…”

“If everything goes as it’s supposed to, he’ll be free soon.”

“Of course.” He swings his dark, accusatory gaze to Veronica. “And tell me, Señora, has your lovely daughter ever visited the patria?”

Veronica forces a smile.

“A few times, General. But not in a while.”

“Well!” he exclaims, planting his fists upon his hips. “You’re lucky! You get to see Spain reborn!”

“Spain reborn,” Veronica mumbles to herself.

“The ladies must be very tired from their journey,” pipes up the forgotten Santiago from his post at the door. “The bullfight at the Maestranza begins at 6:30. Might I suggest escorting them?”

“Well, general,” Hermione protests. “A corrida would be charming, but we do have business to discuss.”

Queipo waves a hand in dismissal.

“That can wait! Santiago is absolutely right. Señor Lodge has been an incalculably great help to our cause. The least I can do is treat his wife and daughter to a corrida!”

Veronica grimaces. Her father has always loved bullfights. They are, he says, a ‘perfect microcosm of the struggle that is existence. The eternal dance of life and death played out on the sand of an arena’. She herself can’t stomach them. She sees little sport in the theatrical slaughter of animals.

But she is in no position to argue.

Hermione, out of impatience more than squeamishness, appears little more enthused than her daughter. But she forces a smile and says: “That sounds lovely, mi general.”

At the very least, being the guests of the general afford them a spot in the royal box at the Maestranza bullring, providing some meager protection from the merciless sun, which beats down hotter in Andalusia than anywhere else in Europe. Queipo takes a seat dead center, with Hermione and Veronica to his left, and Santiago to his right. Veronica squints into the blinding sunlight. The sand of the ring looks…off in spots. Discolored by splotchy, off-brown stains. She doesn’t ask.

The crowd comes in hundreds. Youthful señoritos with wealthy young ladies of breeding, clad in black mantillas, on their arms. Older gentlemen in epaulettes and chests sparkling with medals. Elegant middle-aged women imbued with all the grace trained into them through years of finishing schools and stiff-backed tutors.

The moneyed classes of Seville. There is nary a workman’s cap or a workwoman’s apron in sight. Veronica feels like she’s being confronted with a much-unwanted mirror. She doesn’t want to think she springs from the same milieu as these people.

Angry as she is with her mother, it’s a great comfort when Hermione reaches out and squeezes her hand.

“Señores y señoritas!” Bellows an announcer. “Bienvenidos! Antes que empieza la corrida, hemos
Upon saying so, the entire crowds moves to stand. A band somewhere up high strikes up a tune. The mass of spectators raises its right arms in the fascist salute. Her mother follows suit.

“Veronica!” she hisses. Reluctantly, Veronica throws a salute herself. The band begins to thunder out the notes of *Cara al Sol*, and all the crowd commences singing.

“*Cara al sol, con la camisa nueva! Que tu bordaste en rojo ayer! Me hallara la muerte si me lleva, y no te vuelvo a ver!*”

She holds the salute for what seems like an eternity, as her arm stiffens and tires.

“*Volveran banderas victoriosas, al paso alegre de la paz! Y traeran prendidas cinco rosas, las flechas de mi haz!*”

The song finally ends with the great, roaring clash of cymbals and drums. Veronica lets her exhausted arm go limp.

“*Arriba España!*” The crowd roars. The volume and unanimity of the cry chills her a little.

The bullfight proceeds as is routine. Bugles play as the beast is forced out onto the sand, snorting and bellowing. The red-and-gold flag of the fascist movement flutters from every elevated place in the arena.

Veronica flinches each time a *torero* slams his lance into the poor creature’s flank. The bull moans in pain. The elegant crowd roars its approval, belying its mask of upper crust, aristocratic propriety.

“*Olé! Olé!*”

The bull snorts and charges. The dashing *matador* skillfully dodges the beast’s attack. The animal totters. Blood streams down its flanks and legs. Veronica’s heart contracts. Hermione watches with a face of stone, betraying nothing either way. Queipo smiles.

The *matador* delivers the coup de grace. The bull slumps forward, a corpse. The crowd cheers so loud she fears her head might burst from the din.

The dead animal is dragged away, leaving smears of blood in its wake. The *matador* plays to the crowd and executes a fascist salute before exiting the arena.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.” Cries an announcer. “And now, may I draw your attention to our gallant General Queipo de Llano, who has been good enough to sponsor this fight and to join us today.” The crowd answers with thunderous applause. Queipo stands gracefully, a smile on his cadaverous face, and waves to the masses. Here, in Seville, he is answerable to no one. Not even the other directors of the rebellion. And he makes no secret of how greatly he enjoys ruling this city like a king.

“Now” Queipo exults. “The climax of the day.”

The doors to the ring swing open again. New prey is driven onto the sand, at the point of bayonets and the butts of rifles, to the shouts and jeers of the spectators.

But not a bull.

A mass of bedraggled, weary men and women are forced out into the bullring by armed soldiers
and blueshirted falangists.

Ah, here are the laboring classes of Andalusia. The men and women guilty of voting for the People’s Front or union membership. She sees the workmen’s caps and jumpsuits. The grimy aprons. The broad-brimmed peasant hats. The *alpargata* sandals of the rural laborer.

Yes, here is the other half of Seville.

Veronica’s mouth goes dry.

The crowd in the stands devolves from a flock of sophisticated, propertied citizens into a pack of rabid beasts.

“Red dogs!” They howl. “You’ll get what’s coming to you!”

“Traitors!”

“Bolshevik animals!”

“Bullets are too good for you filth!”

The mass of despondent prisoners is herded into the center of the ring. They hold their hands in the air in hopeless surrender. Their faces are empty. Vacant. Most of them have long run out of tears. Veronica zeroes in on one figure in particular. It’s a boy in a plain white shirt and tattered trousers. Dried blood coats the side of his face. He’s probably been beaten. He doesn’t look any older than her. Younger, even. He’s certainly not out of tears. He sobs intermittently. His plaintive, pitiful cry can be heard even from the royal box in which she sits.

“No soy comunista!”- ‘I’m not a communist!” Over and over again. “No soy comunista. No soy comunista. Por favor, no soy comunista. Por favor. Por favor. No quiero morir.”

The crowd jeers and shrieks. She expects them any moment to sprout fangs and claws.

“Scum! Scum!”

Veronica’s throat hitches.

“These men and women!” The announcer thunders. “Have been found guilty of treason against Spain! Of acting against our glorious movement! For this, there is only one fitting punishment.”

She wonders what their ‘treason’ was.

To belong to a union? To vote incorrectly? To read ‘un-Spanish’ newspapers? To demand bread? Dignity? Liberty? Humanity?

“Death! Death! Death!” The crowd chants.

The soldiers and falangists form up in a line. The unbearable Andalusian sun burns Veronica’s skin and boils her mind. Queipo has begun to breath hard. His pupils dilate. His breaths come sharp and short, almost as if aroused.

A moment passes. Veronica feels incredibly dizzy. She squeezes her mother’s hand.

“Can’t you do something?” She squeaks. “Please.”
Hermione, tight-lipped and silent, shakes her head.

The soldiers level their rifles and pistols.

“No soy comunista...no soy comunista...”

“Death! Death! Red dogs! Death! Death!”

“Fuego!”

The soldiers open fire. The volley of bullets slams into the mass of condemned. Blood spurts out onto the burning sand. Veronica doesn’t wonder where the dark stains came from anymore. Half of them fall. It looks nothing like the movies. They don’t roll about on the ground or scream. They crumple like emptied sacks. Some don’t fall. Not right away. These scream. They scream in agony as the bullets tear their flesh. They scream in terror. They scream in powerlessness. The crowd roars so loud Veronica fears it might snap the last thread of her sanity. The fascist executioners fire again. No one stands now. They lie in bloody, shuddering heaps. She sees the boy in the white shirt, fallen in a crumpled heap, his arms and legs twisted unnaturally. He’s still breathing. Barely.

Queipo leaps to his feet. He waves a hand wildly, in ecstasy.

“Acabadlos!” - ‘Finish them!’

The crowd rises, too. They raise their arms and throw fascist salutes. The executioners fix bayonets. They advance on the heap of corpses and near-corpses.

“Arriba España! Arriba España! Arriba España!” The creatures in the stands howl. The soldiers ram their bayonets into the soft flesh of their dying victims. They roll barely breathing men and women onto their backs and shove their blades through lungs and throats. Slaughter them like a herd of pigs. “Arriba España! Arriba España!” The chant invades her head. It courses through her brain. Through her mind. Through her blood. “Arriba España! Arriba España!”

“Stop!” Veronica shouts. Except, she realizes that she didn’t shout. She can’t shout. It comes out instead a dry, strangled, pitiful, childish plea. “Stop. Stop.”

“Arriba España! Arriba España! Arriba España!”

The soldiers slice their victims apart with bayonets. Gleaming, dark red blood runs out onto the sand in rivers. The monstrous Andalusian sun cooks her flesh and brain.

“Arriba España! Arriba España!”

Her head swims. She vomits. The world begins to pulsate in dark reds and blacks.

“Arriba España! Arriba España!”

It no longer sounds like a human shout. It sounds like some horrible, rolling thunder. The roar of cannon. The breaking of a wave.

Her hand slips out of her mother’s grasp. Hermione regards her daughter with concern. Queipo leans forward, eager to get as clear a view of the butchery as possible.

“Arriba España! Arriba España! Arriba España!”

She faints.
I didn't make up the bullring massacre. It really happened, more or less as I've
described here. In fact, it was worse: done with machine guns, and not a few dozen
killed, but upwards of 1000 over the course of a few days. The blood was supposed to
have been almost ankle deep. The only invention here is that it took place in the town
of Badajoz, not in Seville (though Seville itself also suffered thousands of executed
when the insurgents took the city) and of course the presence of Archie comics
characters.

Unfortunately, Queipo de Llano himself was also very real, as were his revolting
broadcasts.
Good news @ the ~4 people actually reading this (my analysts tell me that's an optimistic estimate). I actually haven't forgotten about or abandoned this story. In fact I have about 15 chapters worth of it backing up my computer. I'd like to say I've been busy with academics or something but mostly I've just been sitting around (though I've gotten a lot of work done on my original novel, about 90k words, so that's nice).

Anyway, enjoy some more Spanish Civil War/Great Depression shenanigans.

"On my second day at the barracks there began what was comically called ‘instruction’. At the beginning there were frightful scenes of chaos. The recruits were mostly boys of sixteen or seventeen from the back streets of Barcelona, full of revolutionary ardour but completely ignorant of the meaning of war. It was impossible even to get them to stand in line. Discipline did not exist; if a man disliked an order he would step out of the ranks and argue fiercely with the officer.”

~George Orwell, on his time with the POUM militia in Barcelona

Cheryl’s ‘Walkie-Recordall’ arrives, as ordered. She breathes a great sigh of relief. There are only a few days before her father’s conference, and she’d begun to fear it would not come in time. The recording device has about an hour’s worth of

She snatches up the package from the mailbox at Thornhill’s gate and rushes inside. Hoping to get back to her bedroom unnoticed, her plans are thwarted by the improbable appearance of Rose Blossom, who makes use of her uncanny ability to materialize from the ether anywhere she pleases.

“What have you got there, dear?”

Cheryl freezes, the package in her hands. She thinks to hide it behind her back, but decides that she doesn’t need to. Nana won’t know what it is.

“Just something I ordered, Nana,” she says with a smile.

“What’s that?”

She sighs. No harm in telling her, really.

“It’s a recording device, Nana. It captures your voice and plays it back to you.”

“How fantastic! My, the world is changing so fast these days. You know, my father rode a horse, and so did his father, and his father, and his father before that. And my son rides in a horseless carriage.” She shakes her head. “Who knows what the world will be like when you and your brother are my age, eh?”

Cheryl smiles wistfully.

“Who knows?”
“Where is your brother, dear? I haven’t seen him in a while.”

Cheryl pauses. Again, no reason to lie. Not really.

“He’s in Spain, Nana.”

“Spain! What’s the poor boy doing in that beastly country?”

“Fighting, I think.”

Rose shakes her head, sadly. She mumbles her disapproval.

“Dear, dear, are we at war with the Spanish again?”

“Not exactly…”

“What, then?”

“The Spanish are fighting each other, I think.”

“And what does your brother care about that?”

Cheryl sighs. Good question.

“I suppose…if he were here, he’d tell you he cares about freedom.”

Nana Rose is silent for a long moment.

“I had a brother, you know,” she says at last.

Cheryl knows Rose had a brother, of course. But that’s all she really knows, though his statue crowns Riverdale’s Civil War memorial. The story is murky, and never truly told. Alexander Blossom’s tale is remembered only through the fragments of others’. So Cheryl lies and says: “Really, Nana?”

The old woman nods, her eyes misty and distant.

“Poor, dear, Alexander.” She sighs. “He went off to the war, too, you know. Good God, how could I forget? The spring of ’61. When the Great Rebellion broke out and the traitors in the south fired on Fort Sumter. President Lincoln put out his call for the 75,000 volunteers. How Alexander leap at that call!”

“He sounds very brave, Nana,” she says.

“Or maybe just foolhardy. I told him not to go! And so did mother. Even father! We begged and pleaded, but no. For ‘liberty’ and the ‘Republic’, he said.” She lets the hollow words roll from her tongue.

Cheryl’s mouth dries up. She doesn’t want to ask the next question, because she already knows the answer.

“What happened?”

Nana Rose shakes her head. She looks immeasurably sad. As if an old grief that she’s carried in her breast all these decades has been brought to the fore again. Her chest rattles with a deep sigh.
"I never saw him again. None of us did. He died at Antietam, with a rebel bullet in his heart. They said he was a hero. I don’t know if that’s true."

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Rose manipulates her wheelchair and draws a little closer. Cheryl swallows. Rose reaches out an ancient, withered hand and takes her granddaughter’s.

“I should dearly hope nothing similar befalls your brother, darling.”

The bottom falls out of Cheryl’s stomach. She tries to occult such thoughts.

“Yes. So do I.”

Her grandmother’s haunting words still ringing in her ears, Cheryl leaves Rose in her chair near the fireplace and tiptoes upstairs to her father’s study, clutching the recording device in hand. She casts occasional glances over her shoulder, even though she and Nana Rose are the only ones home.

Cheryl steps into the study and scopes it out. The room is dark and quiet, and the shadows offer a hundred decent places of concealment.

She finally hides the recorder behind a bookshelf. The Sonoband recording belt has a capacity of a little over an hour. She knows most any conference her father holds will go far beyond that.

Now there’s only to hope that they’ll let something damning spill within the first hour. Or else this will all have been for nothing.

Cheryl steps back to stand at the threshold to the room. She examines every possible vantage point and concludes that the recorder is quite well hidden in the shadows behind the bookshelf. Of course it is. She’s the one who hid it, after all. She slips back out into the hall, nerves frayed. Somewhere, the Blossoms’ big grandfather clock tolls 5 o’clock in the afternoon. Another three hours before her father’s ‘associates’ begin arriving en masse.

Cheryl shivers.

She passes Jason’s room by and feels a flash of anger. The boy had a real life ahead of him. The world may be falling to pieces, but theirs doesn’t have to. They’re lucky enough to have been born in one of the few families in America keeping its head above water. And he’s gone and thrown it all away for the sake of some madcap revolutionary fantasy halfway around the world. One that’s probably going to get him killed. And left her here to pick up the slack. Cheryl shakes her head. When he gets home she’s going to sock him on the jaw.


Does anyone really care about such high-minded, abstract concepts? Is she really just a heartless wretch, or just honest enough to admit to herself what others won’t: that she’s fine with the world spiraling into disaster so long as she and hers remain insulated.

Good God, people are fools.

Cheryl figures she should probably call Betty and inform her that everything’s in place. But…not yet. Let her squirm a little. She goes down, instead, to the foyer and picks up today’s paper from the dining room table where her father left it.

**MADRID REDS SLAY MORE FOES NIGHTLY!**
The headline trumpets. The article has been marked-up, annotated to hell and back by Cliff, whose feverish handwriting betrays his investment. Cheryl sits down to read. The article, clearly sympathetic to the fascist cause, asserts that ‘the majority’ of Madrid’s 1 million people hope for the rebel army to take the city and ‘save them’ from red terror and ‘proletarian misrule’. Certainly, that’s what she would hope for if she were in Madrid, but it doesn’t square with what Jason said to her before his leave-taking. The people of Spain had voted their People’s Front government in, hadn’t they? Surely ‘the majority’ of them can’t desire its overthrow by fascist arms?

She shakes her head.

Whatever.

It doesn’t concern her.

Cheryl has to remind herself that she doesn’t care what happens in Spain any further than it concerns her or her family.

The article goes on to cheer the advance of General Franco’s forces on Madrid. It seems they are on the verge of taking Talavera de la Reina and Toledo, the last two real obstacles on the way to the capital. Once that’s done, it will be a straight shot to Madrid and the end of the war. She only hopes Jason comes to his senses before Franco’s moors are fighting in the streets of Madrid. He’d promised to write (though she’s not sure what that might consist of beyond a photograph of a machine gun crew captioned with ‘wish you were here’ or something similar) but she’s received nothing as of it.

What a damn nightmare. Or maybe a tragic comedy.

Either way, it will all be resolved quite soon.

Jughead Jones sits atop a crate in the empty patio of an old Barcelona barracks; a rifle balanced between his thighs, wondering how the hell it came to this. Over the walls of the old fort, the blazing sun tumbles into a sparkling blue Mediterranean Sea. The docks of the city pulse with activity. Not even a civil war will disrupt all of that. Sailors shout and sing and adjust their sails and burly longshoremen lighten the load of groaning cargo ships.

From the barracks’ parapets flies the red and black banner of the anarchists. Across the walls, the revolutionary slogans omnipresent through Barcelona.

‘Ni patria, ni dios, ni amo!’-Neither fatherland, nor god, nor king!

‘Abajo la burguesia!’-Down with the bourgeoisie!

And, of course, the ubiquitous ‘No Pasarán!’-They shall not pass!

Jughead had been more or less dragooned by Jason Blossom and his newfound miliciano friends into acquiescing to a bit of perfunctory training at the militia barracks. He’s had gone along with it mostly because, for one, he’s absolutely nothing better to do, and for another thing, they’ve promised he won’t actually have to do any fighting at any point (which had saddened Jason considerably).

The militia—which has grandiosely christened itself ‘La Columna Libertad’-the Liberty Column—is housed in the old Drassanes barracks. The fascist military had attempted to use this place, seated on a slope near Barcelona’s great port, to stage their takeover of the city. They’d failed and succumbed to the overwhelming might of Barcelona’s armed workers. The ancient Catalan capital
was held for the republic, and the Liberty Column’s anarchist laborers claimed the barracks for their own.

At least this’ll all make good material for the book he muses.

Jughead had been quite recalcitrant about learning how to shoot of course. They’d promised he wouldn’t have to fight, and teaching him to use a rifle seemed like a pernicious way of assuring that they’d always have the option. But ‘it’ll be fun!’ Jason had insisted. ‘Come on, Torombolo!’ The miliciano Mariano had boomed.

‘Torombolo’ being the now unshakeable nickname the militiamen had stuck him with upon seeing him devour a near score of sandwiches and cakes at the café.

So, very much against his wishes, they’d shoved a rusting Mauser rifle into his hands and marched him into the barracks’ courtyard to learn how to use it. Across the patio from him, the red brick wall is still splattered with concentric circles of white paint arrayed in crude targets. Jughead isn’t an awful shot, as he’s learned, for a beginner. At the very least, he usually manages to score somewhere on the target, which is more than can be said for most initiates (the militia’s already had more than a few cases of accidental firearm injuries in its three months of existence).

Jason had better aim and form, but he’d started with the advantage of a wealthy father enamored with hunting.

Jughead eyes the set of pockmarks his bullets have left in the far wall. Only four. Ammunition is precious. ‘Every bullet we use in training is one we can’t shoot at the fascists’ Mariano said.

He holds the old rifle, examining its length and make. He considers the heft of the weapon and the rough texture of the wooden stock against his hands. He feels silly. No, he’s not a soldier and he’s not going to be doing any fighting.

The rest of the milicianos have retreated into the barracks for supper, leaving him alone at the jerry-rigged shooting gallery. The pane-less windows of the mess hall glow with light and simmer with raucous laughter. The door to the hall swings open. Jason steps out and walks across the dusty courtyard to take a seat next to his companion.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Why don’t you come in and eat with us?” Jason asks.

“Not hungry.”

“You’ve barely eaten since we got to Spain.” He waits a moment, to no response. “I know this is all a bit…much.”

“Jason, being yelled at by the owner of the Twilight Cinema because the audience didn’t like the ending of London After Midnight is ‘a bit much’. This is…this is…I can’t find words for this.”

“Are you worried about home?”

“No, I’m not at all concerned about my girlfriend and friends. I’m definitely not concerned about my entire country becoming a fascist dictatorship. Why would I worry about silly things like that?”

Jason shifts uncomfortably.
“No need to be sore about it.”

“No need to—are you out of your mind? How are you so damn blasé about all of this?”

“Well, I view it as an opportunity.”

“An opportunity to do what, die?”

“To fight for freedom!” he says, eyes glittering in the vanishing sunlight. Jughead rolls his eyes. Jason leans towards him. “Think about it, Jones. Twenty years from now, don’t you want to be able to say: ‘I was there. I stood up for what was right’?”

“Dead folks don’t tend to say much of anything.”

“Think of it this way: if we fight them here, we don’t have to fight them back home, right? No fascism in Spain means no fascism in America. No one stood up to them in Germany or Italy. Something’s got to give.”

“Right.”

“I’m sure everyone at home will be fine,” Jason assures.

“You say that based on…”

“On…on nothing. Good point.” Another pause. “Look, just come to the hall with me. You don’t even have to eat anything. Just come sit down. No point in sitting out here all alone.”

“Fine. But only because you asked nicely,” Jughead relents. Jason offers him a hand and helps him to his feet. As the last rays of sunlight flicker out, they step into the mess hall together.

The militia did not function like an army.

In the early days of the war, the Republican government dissolved Spain’s armed forces, thereby freeing the men from their obligations to their officers, and hoping in this way to head off further defections to the fascists. Of course, this also meant that the Republic had no more army to defend her.

Instead, she was forced to rely on the spontaneously raised militias of dozens of distinct left-wing trade unions and political parties. Organizations that, until recently, had for the most part detested the Republic for its moderate policies But now, they said, if it was between the Republic and a fascist regime, they would take the Republic.

So it was that the government ministers in Madrid survived only by the whims of revolutionary militias of anarchists, socialists, and communists who hated them only a little less than they hated the fascists.

There was no saluting and no proper ranks in the militia. No one was ‘sir’ or ‘officer’. Everyone was ‘comrade’. We were encouraged to discuss orders and strategy rather than obey unquestioningly. It was a valiant attempt to apply egalitarian revolutionary principles to the organization of an army.

Whether its benefits outweighed its flaws is a question over which much ink and paper has been wasted.

But to the milicianos and milicianas themselves, eagerly training to march off for the front, there
was no question. Not only did their system work, it was the only system that would work. They were, in their own eyes, the defenders of the people and the revolution. Here was the nucleus of the coming new world, borne on bayonets and scarlet banners.

The Drassanes’ mess hall is packed. A good 100 of the barracks’ 400 or so occupants are crammed inside. Today’s fare is, as usual, a bland soup of exactly the sort one would expect in a military installation. But among the diners, there is no hint of army discipline. The milicianos talk and sing and laugh. They wave their weapons about with no regard whatsoever for basic firearm safety, and Jughead is sure someone is going to get himself shot. One man raises his rifle into the air and brags that ‘this is the weapon that will exterminate entire fascist battalions!’ He slams it down onto the table and it discharges. The bullet miraculously strikes no one and buries itself in the far well. There’s a moment of silence as the diners process their near miss. Then someone laughs heartily, and soon the entire mess hall is cackling. Jughead shudders.

Jughead takes a seat, bowl of flavorless soup in hand, in between Jason and a miliciana named Isidora absentmindedly spinning the cylinder of her loaded revolver. Jughead flinches.

“Eh…no…no hacer esto,” he forces out in broken Spanish. The miliciana turns to glare at him. She spins the cylinder faster.

“Can you please tell her to stop?” Jughead asks Jason.

The ginger shrugs.

“Mi amigo no quiere que hagas eso,” he tells her.

“Vete al Diablo,” the woman with the revolver snaps.

“Right. Sorry, Jones. I don’t think she’s going to stop.”

“There’s…there’s no coordination here…none of these guys know how to use a gun better than me…how do you expect to win a war like this?” Jughead demands of no one in particular.

Mariano shrugs.

“We won’t have the old barracks discipline. With…with the officers and the saluting and the ranks. We’re free men.”

“Yeah, you’ve done a great job freeing yourselves from common sense,” he mutters. Jason kicks him in the leg.

“No lo haces caso-no mas esta enojado porque mi padre trato a matarlo, y entonces tenia que huirse de nuestro pueblo.”-‘He’s just mad because my father tried to kill him so we had to run away from home.”

The miliciana Isidora's eyebrows rise.

“Que historia!”-What a story!

“What did you tell them, Jason?” Jughead demands.

“I just told them how we ended up here.”

“The whole story? I bet they’d like the whole story.” Jughead clears his throat. “Did you tell them the part where you’re the son of the richest man in town? As bourgeois as bourgeois comes, let me
tell you.” That earns a glare from Mariano. “Don’t worry though, he’s also a communist. Because he’s got no sense of self-preservation. Short version is; his father tried to kill my father, a factory was blown up, I nearly died, and now the country is going to be taken over by fascists.”

“Well. Ours too,” Mariano says.

“Yeah. Everyone’s country’s getting taken over by fascists these days. It’s in vogue,” Jughead grumbles.

“Spain will never submit to fascism as long as our hearts are beating and there are guns in our hands,” one miliciano thunders. He slams the butt of his gun onto the table. The mess hall cheers.

“About that,” Jason says. “When is…this column leaving for the front.”

Mariano slurps his soup, lifts three fingers, and says: “Three days. Taking the train to Toledo. Which reminds me, Torombolo. You told us you know how to demolish a building.”

“Uh…technically?”

“You should say ‘yes’.” Jason whispers.

“Oh, go to hell.”

Mariano looks from one American to the other. He slips a cigarette—one he’s rolled himself—from his pocket and lights it up. His dark eyes flash behind a screen of smoke. Jughead is struck by the sense he’s choosing his next words carefully.

“You know about the Alcázar, comrades?”

The boys shake their heads.

“Alcázar? No, what’s that?” Jason asks.

“The fascist fortress we mentioned a few days ago at the café. It’s in Toledo,” the miliciana Isidora interjects. “Our militia’s besieging the fortification, but the rebels are holding the place fast. We have to take it before Franco’s troops come up from the south to relieve them.”

“Well,” Jughead says, slurping his garbanzo bean soup. “Best of luck with that.”

“But, see,” Mariano says. “We don’t have so many engineers. And breaching the defenses of a big fortification like that is hard. We’re leaving for Toledo in a few days. And…well, we were hoping you would come with us. Help us set charges. Bring the walls down.”

“No.”

The man’s face falls; genuinely shocked that Jughead would decline such a request. Jason takes him gently by the arm. Whispers into his ear.

“I think you should consider it.”

“I am not ‘considering’ anything,” he hisses.

“He’ll sleep on it,” Jason tells the militiamen.

“I will not sleep on it!” He spits.
“Por favor?” Isidora pleads.

“Toledo is the last obstacle between the fascists and Madrid. If they take Toledo, then they can march straight to Madrid. And if they take Madrid, then it is all over.”

“I’m a writer—and a bad writer—not a sapper!” Jughead snaps. Then he turns to Jason, who looks at him with big, pleading eyes.

“Jacinto is right,” Isidora says (‘Jacinto’ being what they’ve taken to calling Jason, it being easier for the Spaniards to pronounce). “You should sleep on it.”

“How hard can it be?” Jason prods. “All you’d have to do is show them where to place charges. Where the structure’s weak. Stuff like that. You wouldn’t be in any danger.”

“I narrowly escaped being hanged by your father in prison, and I’d like to narrowly escape being shot by Spanish fascists!” He stands up, shoves his chair aside and nearly tips his bowl of soup. Jughead storms out of the mess hall. “This soup tastes like sewer water, by the way!”

“I think we upset him,” Mariano says.

“He’ll come around,” Jason assures, before devouring another spoonful of soup. “Probably.”

“He’s right about the soup, though.”

One morning, two days before the Liberty Column is set to leave Barcelona for Toledo, finds Jughead down at the beach. The Drassanes Barracks rise up behind him, and the sea spreads out before him, sparkling, thick with fishing boats and republican warships in for refueling. He hears a low rumble, and then a plane screams overhead. For a moment, his heart thunders in fear. But he picks out the red wingtips, and realizes the aircraft is Republican, not fascist. On their ships and on the docks, sailors and longshoremen cheer as the warplane swoops low over their heads. They lift their caps and wave. The pilot tips a wing in acknowledgement. The plane vanishes, the exhilaration of the moment passes, and the seamen return to their labors.

Jughead finds himself suddenly reminded of a few words from Tennyson:

Oh well for the fisherman’s boy
That he shouts with his sister at play!

Oh well for the sailor lad
That he sings in his boat on the bay!

And the stately ships go on
To their haven beneath the hill

But O for the touch of a vanished hand!

And the sound of a voice that is still

He turns his eyes down to the grimy sand and sighs.

Jughead scribbles into his journal—a replacement picked up in Paris after the destruction of his original by Cliff’s goons—thinking that, if nothing else, stories of war always sell, don’t they?
He squeezes his eyes shut. He hears the soft, shifting sound of footfalls in the sand. When Jughead opens his eyes again, Jason is sitting beside him. The leather workers’ jacket—the unofficial uniform of the militia—looks absurd on him.

*The world turned upside down,* Jughead scratches into the margins of his notebook.

“Here for a last-ditch attempt at recruitment?”

“Nah. I’ve given up. If you don’t want to come, you don’t want to come. You can stay in Barcelona. I’m going to Toledo, though.”

Jughead shakes his head.

“You’ll get yourself killed.”

“These guys seem like they know what they’re doing.”

“No, no they don’t. They’re not even soldiers! They’re just…guys with rusty guns.”

“But that’s it! They’re volunteers! Not mercenaries or conscripts! We believe in what we’re fighting for! That’s why we’ll win.”

“I would have thought the whole affair of being disowned by your family and exiled from New York would have knocked some of the romance out of your head.”

“I guess not.” For a good minute they sit in silence. A gentle breeze blows in from the eastern Mediterranean.

“Oh, one more thing I thought I should tell you. Since I know you’re deep into writing.” Jason looks away. The look Jughead’s come to recognize as the ‘you’re not going to like this one’ look.

“What?”

“The fascists shot Garcia Lorca in Grenada.”

Jughead’s mind judders to a halt. Federico Garcia Lorca. The finest of Spain’s poets. When Jughead was twelve he’d saved up for nearly two months, then proudly taken his meager funds down to Riverdale’s only bookstore (long since closed down with the coming of the Depression). There, after much deliberation, he’d purchased the newly translated *Poem of Deep Song*, by Garcia Lorca.

The poems therein, their heartfelt odes to the valleys and olive groves of Spain, to the ancient and eternal traditions of Andalusia, to the unbowed existence of her people, had touched the deep well of his heart. They were poems about Spain, but through the medium of Spain, Lorca spoke to all mankind. Curled up in his bed, wrapped in a pathetically sheer blanket, his stomach empty, Jughead could turn to Lorca’s poems and find a sort of comfort. His weals and woes were not peculiar. They were shared, the world over. He was not alone. Somewhere, back home, the dog-eared compendium still sits, waiting to be read again.

And they’d shot him? For what? He was no soldier or politician. Only a poet. What cause could they have found to pass such a sentence? Jughead feels a deep, ugly rage boil up in his gut. This is more than the brutal execution of a harmless man. It’s the murder of an artistic luminary. Violence against the international brotherhood of poets and writers. It’s an assault on literature and human expression. It’s an assault on him, personally.
“Why?” He finally manages to gasp.

Jason shrugs.

“He was a supporter of the Republic, I suppose. They’re butchers. It’s not a surprise, really.”

“That’s it?” Jughead finds himself digging his fingers into the fabric of his pants. He swears under his breath. In a moment, the death of Garcia Lorca brings down upon his head the weight of all the past six months. He’s almost been killed, twice. His father and best friend have been shot. The democratically elected government of Spain is under fascist attack. If they win a country of twenty million people will be subjected to their brutal rule. And if they win, the very same will happen back home. Jughead groans. He buries his face in his hands. “Fuck. Fuck it. Come on. Let’s go get in a little last minute target practice.”

“Hmm? Why?”

“Because we’re going to Toledo, aren’t we? I’m supposed to blow up some fascist fortress, aren’t I?”

“Uh…”

“Well, we’d better get some practice in, don’t you think?”
On the morning of September 2nd, the Drassanes Barracks are roused from sleep by an adrenaline-driven Mariano rushing from barrack to barrack, waving his pistol about and crying: “Levantad! Levantad! Vamonos compañeros! Vamonos! Al frente!” Jughead pulls his pillow over his head and groans. Jason leaps out of bed with inhuman speed. Jughead stumbles into the forming ranks of milicianos with considerable lethargy.

The courtyard is packed with militamen, bayonets bristling, charged with the thrill of coming battle. The militia lacks uniforms, thanks in part to its disdain for military conformity and thanks in part to lack of supplies. The leather workers’ jackets and red scarves are all that exist to give this armed rabble a semblance of purpose and unity. That aside, they appear as what they are, civilian volunteers come off the streets and handed firearms. In truth, an army of the people, as they are proud to be called.

“No pasarán! No pasarán! No pasarán!” The assembled milicianos chorus. “They will not pass!” The slogan is quickly becoming the watchword for the defenders of the Spanish Republic.

Jughead forms up behind a tall, broad miliciano in a blue mechanic’s jumpsuit. He snatches up his rifle and squeezes his eyes shut as he reminds himself that, yes, this is indeed happening.

Jason comes up behind him and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Ready?”

“Ready enough.”

The militia sallies forth out of the barracks to the acclaim of Barcelona’s people. The red-gold-mauvéd flag of the republic and the red banners of revolution float over their heads as they march through the city’s broad, tree-lined thoroughfares. Barcelona herself has been restructured in the name of the cause. Everywhere businesses have hung signs proclaiming that they are ‘collectivized. The bosses have been run out, replaced by workers’ councils. The pre-war police have disappeared, replaced by armed workers’ patrols. The hotels and houses of the wealthy have been cleared out to house the homeless and sick. Cries of support and well wishes rain down around the marching column. Some of the militiamen wave and smile like movie stars to the adoring crowd. Jughead tucks his chin into the collar of his leather jacket.

“Viva la republica!”

“I think they like us.” Jason jokes.

Jughead mumbles.

When they reach the train that will ferry them to Toledo and to the invincible Alcázar, they find the platform just as swamped by hysterical crowds. A few lone Assault Guards hold back the seething mass to allow the milicianos safe passage to the locomotive. The crowd tries to shove gifts and tokens of appreciation through the line to their departing heroes. A young woman, her face alight with joy, presses a little medallion into Jughead’s hand as he passes. Without looking at it, he pockets the thing.

The train looms up before them, its engine humming, puffs of smoke bursting from its stack.
Across the flank of the iron engine is scrawled yet another slogan: \textit{Jurad sobre estas letras, hermanos: antes morir que consentir tiranos!}\hfill

\textit{Swear upon these words, brothers: die before you countenance tyrants}\hfill

Jason leans over and whispers into Jughead’s ear. “Don’t you feel heroic, Jones?”

“I feel dumb, Jason. I feel really, really dumb.”

The journey by train to Toledo is a festive one, considering they’re heading off to war. The \textit{milicianos} sing and joke all the way. When the train slows enough, they lean from the windows to exchange clenched fists salutes and cries of ‘\textit{¡No Pasarán!}’ with laborers in the fields. Sometimes, they’ll even leap from the cars to collect stray fruits where they’ve fallen from their orchards, before boarding again. Every car is packed full of fighters, up to a few men riding on the roof and firing their rifles into the air.

As they go, they sing. Oh, do they sing.

The anarchist hymn ‘\textit{A Las Barricadas!’}-To the Barricades!’-Is a favorite.

By the time the train snakes its way out of Catalonia, Jughead has memorized the damn song start to finish.

A \textit{miliciano} pops his head in from the seat behind him. A beret hangs over his youthful face, comically large. He can’t be any older than them. He asks for a cigarette, and Jason duly slips him a few lucky strikes. The kid claps him on the shoulder, smiles, offers a clenched fist, and then slides back into his seat.

“Everyone’s so…pleasant here!” Jason gushes.

Jughead shrugs. “They are pretty cheerful, considering a good chunk of them are probably going to be dead in a few days.” Jason doesn’t have an answer to that. He turns to watch the Spanish countryside, in all its bucolic glory, pass them by. Clouds mass in the heavens.

“\textit{En el tren que va a Madrid!’}” The \textit{milicianos} sing. “\textit{Se agregaron dos vagones! Uno para los fusiles, otro para los cañones! No pasarán!’}”

Jughead reaches into the pocket of his jacket. He extracts the medallion the woman had pressed on him back at the train station. It’s a little silver disc some two inches in diameter. Across the top of the medal are stamped the words \textit{Per Catalunya!} Curving up across the bottom: \textit{Libertat!} Jason tentatively reaches out.

“Let me see.” Jughead lets him take the little token from his hands. Jason turns it over a few times, flicking it through his fingers. “I think this is real silver, Jones. Worth a lot.” He hands it back.

“Of course you could identify real silver in a split second.” Jughead responds, though with no real venom in his voice. “I don’t think I’ll be selling it though. Betty might like it.” He murmurs, wistful.

“You should write her a letter.” Jason suggests.

“Yeah. Maybe.” Jughead narrows his eyes and stares intently into his lap. His rifle sits propped up against the seat. The muzzle glints dully in the vanishing daylight.
“I’m sure they’re okay back home.” Jason assures him. “I know I’ve said that before but…well…I don’t know your friends very well, but they seem like smart, good people.”

“They’re out of their depth.”

“We all are.”

“Your dad’s going to crucify them all.”

“Don’t be such a pessimist. Cheryl will help them out.”

Jughead balks at that one.

“Are you sure she won’t leave everyone in the lurch for her own benefit? Again?”

Jason sighs.

“She…she’s not a bad person she just…”

“Remember when we were about ten and she glued a fifty dollar bill to the sole of one of my shoes? And watched me try to pick it off for five minutes?” Jason snorts. “It wasn’t funny you jackass!”

“Alright. Fine. It wasn’t funny.”

The train pulls into Toledo a few hours after leaving Barcelona. Cheering civilians waving red banners again swamp the platform. Children beg to be hoisted upon their mothers’ shoulders to see the milicianos. Some wags have constructed a rough effigy of the rebel General Franco. In full view of the train station, they set it alight to raucous applause.

“No pasarán! No pasarán! No pasarán!”

The locomotive’s doors hiss open and the militiamen file out, rifles on their shoulders, pistols in their belts.

“I’m going to die.” Jughead mumbles.

A row of lorries, beds empty, await the arriving fighters.

“Al Alcazár! Al Alcazár!” The men chant. “To the Alcazár! To the Alcazár!”

Jason hops into the bed of a truck and helps Jughead aboard. Some fifteen other milicianos follow and the vehicle is filled to capacity. Ancient Toledo looms up around them. Mournful Gothic cathedrals. Lively Moorish spires and domes. The history of ten centuries stamped onto the city’s face. Jughead, who has only ever known the drab environs of his little New York hamlet, appraises the ancient place with awe.

At the heart of Toledo, perched upon a hill, sits the Alcazár. An old, stolid fortress with four monstrously thick stone walls. Crenelated parapets connect its four towers, and Jughead is immediately reminded of the castles from childhood fairy tales. How could he imagine he would ever lay his eyes on such a magnificent structure with his own eyes? From the towers’ spires fly the red-gold flags of the fascist rebellion. The fortress is encompassed by a veritable sea of tents, the encampments of the milicianos charged with laying siege. Charged with forcing surrender from
its fascist defenders, an outcome that seems increasingly unlikely.

“It’s…massive.” Jughead breathes quietly.

“I’ve seen the Coliseum.” Jason shrugs.

“Oh, go to hell.”

They hop down from the truck and into the Alcazár’s shadow. The besieged and the besiegers have long since settled into a routine. From behind walls and impromptu barricades and sandbags, the militiamen fire aimlessly at the fortress’ impenetrable walls. The cadets and soldiers holed up inside fire back, over the parapets or through ancient loopholes. The walls in places are scorched black, evidence of failed attempts by the Republican militia to get through with dynamite. When not trading bullets, the two sides trade insults.

“Fascistas cobardes!” One miliciano shouts up at the fortress. ‘Fascist cowards!’

"Vete al Diablo, malditos rojos!” Comes the reply from atop the great walls. ‘Go to hell, you damn reds!’

Jason shoulders his rifle. He narrows his eyes, squints, and fires a round at the Alcazár’s northwest tower. A number of milicianos take his shot as inspiration. The bullets buzz through the air, strike stone, and then whizz harmlessly off into the distance. The Alcazár stands unharmed. Not so for the militiamen’s pride.

“You sure showed them.” Jughead snarks, craning his neck up to look at the fortress. “I bet they’re shaking in their boots in there.” He feels the strap of his rifle digging into the flesh of his bicep and shoulder. It feels wrong. Unnatural. He’s not a damn soldier.

Mariano materializes from behind them. He takes Jughead by the arm, gently.

“Torombolo. Jacinto. Come on, we’ve got to go speak with Comandante Cabello.” He says.

“I’m sorry, who?” Jason inquires.

“Just follow me.”

He leads them away from the embattled fortress, down a dusty alleyway, to a squat old tavern building. An ancient sign hanging over the door reads: La Llama-The Flame.

Two milicianos stand guard at the door, doing undisciplined impressions of the Queen’s Guard.

“Let us through, assholes.” Mariano says, slapping one of the sentries on the shoulder. They part and allow the visitors entry. The tavern’s interior consists of one old room, with a crude wooden bar tacked up against the right-hand wall. The stores of wine and beer have long since been depleted, and the little watering hole has quick become an impromptu headquarters for the local Republican militia. Round the long, pockmarked wooden table at the center of the room stands a little clique of leather-faced men with rifles slung over their shoulders and pistols in their belts.

Some molder in Spanish army uniforms, though their open tunics and caps askew show little respect for its infamous discipline. Others are clad in the militia’s blue workers’ boiler suits. More still are content with civilian dress along with a red bandana or a black armband. They lift their heads as one to appraise the new arrivals. Clenched fist salutes all around. “These are the specialists?” Inquires a pudgy, towering figure in a leather jacket and an officer’s cap stripped of insignia.
“Si, Comandante Cabello.”

“What did he ask?” Jughead hisses.

“He asked if we’re the specialists.” Jason replies.

"The specialists’. Of course."

Cabello stands up straight and lights up a cigarette. He beckons the two boys to him with a crooked finger. Mariano nudges them forward.

“You’re going to help us blow the walls of the Alcazár?” He demands in clipped, accented, but perfectly intelligible English.

Jughead rolls his eyes.

“I don’t know. I suppose? I was a projectionist two months ago.”

“I was a barrister until the war began.” Cabello responds. “We’re all soldiers now, comrade.”

“Right.”

“He’s hard on himself, but he’s a revolutionary like us.” Jason offers.

“Shut up Jason.”

Cabello nods, introspective. The rest of the command watches intently. One of the milicianos in the blue boiler suits plays five-finger fillet with a bayonet.

“How soon can you do this? Franco’s troops will arrive from the south within days. We have to capture the Alcazár and secure Toledo before then.”

Jughead shrugs and sighs.

“I don’t know? I have no idea what I’m dealing with here I…I’m not a sapper, you know. How’s the Alcazár built? Do you have blueprints? What kind of charges do you have? Who’s going to be laying them? These…these would all be useful things to know.”

“We can try to get you a layout of the fortress, I should think.”

“Good. Good. I’d need that.”

“I’ll call on you when we’ve got them.”

“Thanks.” Jughead pinches the bridge of his nose.

“We’ll be ready.” Jason says.

“Will you stop doing that thing where you speak for both of us? You aren’t even doing anything!”
“I’m…I’m consulting.” Jason offers pathetically. Jughead resists the urge to sock him in the gut. Cabello waves them off.

They exit *La Llama* and step back into the light of a noonday Castillian sun.

“I think it’s a nice day.” Jason chirps.

“Yeah. Civil war’s raging. Bullets are flying. People are dying. The world is succumbing to fascism. What’s not to like?”

“You should lighten up.”

“You don’t know me at all.”

They amble back down to the city of tents encompassing the Alcazár.

A gang of *milicianos* huddles in a circle, arguing heatedly. Periodically, one breaks from the debate to fire a shot in the fortress’ general direction. The red-gold fascist flag fluttering from the Alcazár’s northeastern tower is shredded and torn by the *milicianos’* bullets, but it floats proudly still.

“No sabes tirar, carbon!” One of the militiamen accuses his companion.

“Jodete!” The other retorts.

“What are you boys doing?” Jason asks.

A *miliciano* points up at the tattered banner on high.

“We’re trying to hit that fascist rag just right, so that it comes down.” He says. One of them kneels, aims, and fires. The bullet grazes the flag, carrying away a strip of red fabric. But the standard itself is unbowed.

“Let me try.” Jason says. Heshoulders his rifle. Centers the sights. Slows his breathing to keep a steady aim. The flag snaps in the breeze. He waits a moment. The *milicianos* watch, ready for another failure. They cross their arms. Smirk. Jughead does the same. Jason fires. The crack of the rifle shot breaks the heavy air. The round slams into the flagpole just beneath the banner, slicing clean through the rope holding it in place. The cord snaps and twists once in the wind, before going slack. The flag separates from its moorings. It wilts sadly, like a dying flower. Then, at last, it comes free and begins its slow descent to the earth.

A thunderous cry goes up from the Republican militiamen at the sight of the fascist banner humbled. The crew of *milicianos* watches in awe. Jughead raises his eyebrows, impressed. It’s a small victory. But still, it’s a victory. As the flag drifts low enough, the *milicianos* reach up and pluck it out of the air. Within seconds, they’ve torn the banner into unrecognizable shreds.

Mighty shouts of “*No pasarán!* *No pasarán!* *No pasarán!*” smash against the walls of the Alcazár, as powerful as the bullets.

Jughead allows a little smile.

“Well…that wasn’t a bad shot, I will grant you.”
Well, good news to those keeping up: a year after beginning I've finally finished (and to think I planned to finish it before summer 2017 was out. Haha)

I wish there was a way to just upload the rest of the story at once, because the readership is really not large enough to justify even weekly updates, but alas there doesn't seem to be a way to do that.

As always, thanks for reading.

“Gentlemen.” Cliff begins, clearing his throat. “Thank you for coming.”

Thornhill’s voluminous conference room has seen many a meeting of earth-shaking importance. It was here that Obadiah Blossom bought out the family’s last real competitor some years after the Civil War, securing Blossom Maple Farms’ local monopoly thereafter. It was here that that Clifford’s grandfather realized there would be no peace with his brother so far as the headship of the family business was concerned, and did what had to be done. It was here that Cliff himself, some twenty years ago, signed his contract with a Dutch shipping firm, and expanded the company’s prospects beyond the borders of the United States.

The room, with its vaulted ceiling, stately table, and great brick fireplace, could house fifty people. Tonight it only holds six. Five men, and one young woman.

Cheryl sits sandwiched between a portly fellow in a bad suit representing the interests of JP Morgan, and a smartly dressed army officer in full parade dress.

“Don’t interrupt.” Her father had demanded of her. “Just sit and listen. That’s the way to learn.”

“Not here on a pleasure visit, Cliff.” The officer says. One man raps his knuckles onto the table in agreement and then immediately stops when no one joins in. Cliff forces a smile.

“Of course not.”

The squat JP Morgan man shifts uncomfortably in his seat. He wipes sweat from his brow. Cheryl leans away from him.

“You know, Washington’s spooks have been sniffing around.” He whines. “You said they’d be satisfied with Lodge. That it’d take the heat off of the rest of us.”

“And it did.” Cliff snaps. “Hiram bought us precious time going down like that.”

A weedy financier from New York City named Xander St. Clair who’s spent the past few years glutting himself on the world’s destitution pipes up. “How long until your Spanish friends send us our cash, huh? If we can’t buy guns and ammunition for Pelley and his boys, we’re paralyzed, you know.”
Cliff clenches a fist. “If you would all… wait a moment and allow me to explain the present state of things, most of your questions will be answered. Now, it’s true there have been some… complications with Spain. Our friends there have met with more resistance than they anticipated. As a result, they’re not eager to unfreeze the funds we’ve stored with them—or any foreign investments for that matter—until they’ve secured the country an-”

“But…” The financier protests. Cliff motions for silence.

“But… Franco’s boys are marching onto Madrid. And Hiram’s wife is in Spain as we speak, and she’s going to hash things out with our rebel friends, and convince them to release our cash forthwith.” He keeps a hand raised to keep his co-conspirators shut up. “Once that’s done, we’ll be ready to move without any further delay.” He nods towards the officer in his soldier’s dress. “Colonel.”

The military man—evidently a colonel—coughs and straightens up in his seat.

“I can assure you of the loyalty of at least five brigade-sized units. That’s some 25,000 men. That’s on top of Pelley’s, what, 15,000 silvershirt goons?”

“That’s 20,000 goons,” Cuts in a silvershirt lieutenant smarting at the choice of words from a few seats down. “But, yes. We’re ready to march. We have near 4,000 of our best men camped out some eighteen miles outside New York City, near Midvale. The rest can be brought in by train within days if not hours.”

“There you go.” The colonel smiles. “45,000 men right there. We’d have a lot more if that bastard Butler hadn’t rolled over on us, but it isn’t about numbers in the end, anyway. It’s about speed, right boys?”

Cheryl looks to the clock on the wall. It’s running a little past a half hour. That means another thirty minutes or so left of recording space. What’s been said so far is valuable, but she’s holding out for something a little more incriminating. Something undeniable. Ironclad.

“Butler will get his when we’ve won.” Cliff says, curtly.

“Of course.” The colonel assures. “Anyhow. As soon as we get the signal, we can march. I imagine we can have Washington secured in hours at most. That’s what they call a decapitation strike. Once the capital is ours, the rest of the country follows real quickly. That’s what your Spanish friends are trying to do with Madrid.”

Cliff smiles. He turns to the fidgety financier.

“There you go, St. Clair. Nothing to worry about. Our friends here have got everything planned out to the last detail.”

“And if we don’t? If something falls through? They’ll hang us all.”

“They don’t hang people anymore.” Cheryl pipes up, unable to restrain herself. “They’ll shoot you.”

The table freezes. St. Clair looks on the verge of fainting. The silvershirt lieutenant snorts. The colonel’s face goes a little red. Cliff glowers.

“Why is she here?” St. Clair demands.

“I live here.” Cheryl snaps.
He opens his mouth to reply, but thinks better of it. The clock winds down. Fifteen minutes.

“As I was saying.” Cliff seethes. “Regardless of any little hiccups, everything is proceeding more or less according to plan.”

“St. Clair, I here a lot of questioning from you, but not a lot about your own part in all of this.” The JP Morgan man accuses. “How are things coming with our friends in Germany and Italy?” St. Clair squirms a little more.

“Well.” He squeaks. “My contacts in Rome and Berlin say their governments are prepared to recognize us as the legitimate representatives of the United States the moment Roosevelt’s administration folds.”

Bingo. Cheryl sighs in relief. That’s what she needs. She resists the urge to shake the financier’s doubtless very sweaty hand. He’s just tightened the noose round his own and his friends’ necks.

Cliff nods, pensive. Cheryl crosses her legs.

“I’m expecting a call from Hiram’s wife in the morning.” He says. “She’s meant to let me know how things are going in Spain. Of course, as soon as she does I’ll relay it all to you men, and you can send it on to the rest of my friends in the Fraternity.”

“Very good, very good.” Mutters the JP Morgan man to himself.

“Very good.” Cheryl echoes, even quieter. His ears practically perk up, but he doesn’t raise his eyes to meet hers.

“Now.” Cliff says. “I’d like to raise the issue-particularly with Lieutenant Kessel here-of…cleanup, once we’ve won.”

The Silvershirt lieutenant cocks his head.

“Cleanup?”

Cliff rolls his eyes.

“Do I have to spell it out? We’re looking to you—the Silver Legion, that is—to clear the country of her enemies once we’ve won.”

Cheryl feels a little chill in her gut. She remembers the papers she handed over to her father. Particularly the ones that consisted of names. Just names. Listed from top to bottom.

Lieutenant Kessel smiles.

“Of course, of course. We’re quite ready to make mincemeat of the new order’s enemies.”

The colonel raises a hand.

“My…superiors will not be pleased if you and your greyshirt buddies go on a rampage without our clearance.”

“Silvershirts.” Kessel corrects.

“Whatever. You think the people of this country will warm up to us if you’ve got…Pelley’s goons going door to door icing folks at random?”
Kessel slams a hand on the table.

“Not at random. Just…trade unionists, reds, obstructive liberals, other assorted filth. I assure you, the American people will be quite untouched. In fact, they’ll thank us!”

The colonel sniffs.

“Regardless. You won’t be apprehending or executing anyone without the approval of the army.”

Kessel bristles. Cliff raises a hand.

“Gentlemen. These are…minutiae. And I assure you they can all be worked out after our victory parade.”

Cheryl closes her eyes. The clock hits the one-hour mark. Ensconced behind its bookshelf, the recorder will have reached capacity. She doubts a more incriminating tape exists on the earth at the moment. Betty and her friends ought to be tickled pink.

The meeting continues on for another hour and a half or so, and the recorder may be out of room, but Cheryl tries her best nevertheless to commit all she can to memory. There is more talk about the removal of ‘subversive elements’ once the conspirators’ power is firmly established. A brief argument erupts between the Colonel and St. Clair over which prisons should be requisitioned for the internment of political prisoners. Kessel angrily denies the need for prisons at all. As he puts it, ‘the Jew-communist scum that have ruined this country deserve a shallow ditch, not a cell’. There is another row when the topic of Spain is brought up, and more specifically how long it will take the insurgent army to capture Madrid. All the while, Cliff tries his best to act as mediator between the delegates.

At last, the colonel inquires as to the precise date for the execution of the coup. Naturally, a precise date is neglected. ‘Early 1937. Maybe March.’ is as precise as it gets. It’s too bad Cheryl can’t catch that on tape.

By the time the conference is adjourned, it is nearing 2 o’clock in the morning. The men stand, and shake hands with Cliff and each other. One or two deign to offer Cheryl curt bows. Not St. Clair, who has only another glare for his associate’s daughter. They file out of the mansion, past the ranks of assembled silvershirt guardsmen, and out to their waiting vehicles.

The last to depart is Lieutenant Kessel, who turns, snaps to attention, offers a sharp fascist salute, and a curt: “To victory!” Cliff returns the gesture, and a commanding eye makes certain Cheryl does so as well.

Once the last of the men is vanished, he turns to his daughter and smiles.

“I’d be angrier about your shooting quip if I didn’t hate that slippery bastard St. Clair so much.” Cliff says. Cheryl smiles. Cliff waits for her to say something. To make a comment, for better or for worse. She doesn’t. The disappointment on his face shines through, well as he tries to hide it. “Well” he finally says, driven to force a response. “That’s business. What did you think?”

“A lot less formal than I expected.”

He chuckles.

“Yes. More often than not it’s just like that: a lot of idiots squabbling around a table and one man with a brain trying to keep them in line.”
“Have you been keeping up on Spain, daddy?” Cheryl asks, sweetly.

“Of course, Cheryl. Good news, mostly.”

Cheryl grimaces.

Depends on whom you ask.

An hour to sunrise, Cheryl returns to the emptied conference room, willing each footfall to silence. She retrieves the satiated record-all from its hiding place. With trembling hands, she lugs it back to her own room and stashes it beneath her mattress. And so the curtain falls.

“Special delivery for Cooper and company.”

Cheryl accosts Betty outside the Twilight Cinema, some three days after her father’s clandestine conference. With Jughead’s disappearance, the theater’s owner has been forced, much to his fury, to take up the task of projectionist himself.

Tonight there’s a double showing of Dracula and Scarface. Betty slinks out of the theater, eyes glassy and haunted. Summer is drawing to an end. She pulls a thin jacket around her shoulders.

“Hey, Cheryl.”

“Enjoy the movie?”

Betty shrugs and shakes her head.

“I suppose? I’ve seen them both before.”

Cheryl shakes her own head and chuckles.

“Why are you here, anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be on your epic quest to save American democracy? Shouldn’t be wasting your time at the pictures.” She clicks her teeth. Instead of firing back, Betty lowers her eyes. She sighs. She blinks a few times. Cheryl watches her intently. Then she cracks a glowing smile. She throws her head back and laughs. “Wait, don’t tell me. This is some sort of sad, pitifully romantic attempt to feel closer to your dearly departed paramour by patronizing his one-time place of employment?”

Betty’s despondency turns to anger.

“Go to hell, Cheryl!”

“Way ahead of you, believe me.” Cheryl slings her purse from her shoulder and reaches inside. “Look, fun as it is, believe me, I’m not here to insult you.” She retrieves a sizable, beige wooden box. Betty squints at it, as if it were some alien contraption. Cheryl plants a fist on her hip. “It’s a recorder, my brilliant friend.”

“A recorder….” Betty’s eyes flicker, and then light up. She clasps her hands together like an overjoyed child. “Did you—“

“Yes. I sat through several hours of my father and his associates conducting themselves like…dime novel villains. For your sake, princess.”
“For a lot of people’s sakes, Cheryl.” The redhead rolls her eyes. “I know you don’t care but… you’re doing something good, here.”

“You’re right. I don’t care. Do what you will with it. I wash my hands of this mess.”

Without warning, Betty lurches forward and throws her arms around Cheryl.

“Thank you.”

Cheryl peels her away with a grunt of disgust.

“Get off of me.”

She turns to go. Behind them, the lights of the Twilight flicker and go out.

“Wait!” Betty lifts up the little recorder, a sheepish smile on her face. “I…don’t know how to work this thing. I think I need you to show me.”

Cheryl whirls around again. Patience draining fast.

“You really are hopeless. If you’re the last line of defense against fascism, I know where I’m placing my bets.”

“You can insult me all you want, just help me out here.”

Cheryl snatches the recorder back and presses a few buttons. The thing crackles and whirrs to life. For a moment there’s only static. Then the voices come through. Tinny and artificial, but starkly audible. Cheryl sits back, disinterested, as the minutes of the meeting play out for the second time in a week. Betty’s eyes grow progressively wider.

“Woah. This…this is…”


“Cheryl…thank you.”

“Sure. No big deal.”
I suppose I'll just upload a chapter a day or so. If I combine some of the shorter ones I ought to have the whole thing up in a week or two.

Also, this chapter has a bit of war violence in it. Here's a warning if you are uncomfortable or very disturbed by that sort of stuff.

“I’m not sleeping in there,” Jughead insists.

“Well, if you want to sleep out in the open be my guest,” Jason says.

Jughead sighs.

The little tent is hardly big enough for one of them, much less both. Jughead nudges one of the stakes with his toe. The sun sinks beneath the sierras of Castile. Jason drops to his knees and worms his way through the flaps.

“You look ridiculous.”

“There’s plenty room in here!” He calls out. A blatant lie. Jughead shakes his head. He leans down and pokes his head through the tent flaps. As expected, Jason is curled into one corner like a frightened rabbit, and even so still takes up far too much space. Jughead crawls inside and no matter which way he contorts himself, he can’t create more than an inch of separation between them. Jughead exits the tent. Night comes fast. Glittering stars explode into the sky. Jughead takes a seat upon a stone just outside the tent. The periodic sound of rifle fire does a nice job of punctuating his thoughts. When night falls, at least, the intensity of the exchange of banter and bullets lessens. The besiegers and defenders settle down, too.

“I’m gonna head into town, Jason.” Jughead mumbles.

“Alright. I’m just gonna stay here. I’m a bit tired.”

“Mhhm.”

Jughead lights up a cigarette, leaves the city of tents behind him and strikes out for Toledo. The town glows in the night. The gentle light of streetlamps and windows washes over him. The walls of houses and stores and buildings are plastered with posters and slogans in the service of the Republican cause.

One depicts the Iberian Peninsula under the shadow of a great dark swastika. Massive red letters roar: ¡Los Españoles nunca seran los esclavos del fascismo!—Spaniards will never be the slaves of fascism! Another depicts a stylized miliciano, muscled like a Greco-Roman hero, shirtless, gripping a rifle in one hand and a sickle in the other. ¡Obreros! Campesinos! ¡Milicianos! ¡Ni un paso atras! Hasta victoria o muerte!—Workers! Peasants! Militiamen! Not one step back! To victory or death!
Across the face of a burned out church someone has scrawled the words: ¡Viva la revolucion! ¡Viva la republica!

Jughead winces. He can understand the fury of the Spanish peasant and worker even if it wounds him deeply to see such a beautiful old building reduced to ash and cinder. In the past few weeks he’s heard many a horror story from the milicianos of the hardships the country’s downtrodden are forced to endure. The life of the most destitute American seems luxurious in comparison. The men and women here labor from sunup to sundown for hardly enough coin to fill their stomachs for a night. Much less a family’s. Should they let down the plough or hoe for one moment, they cannot expect even that. Should they demand better wages, or god forbid, to simply be treated like humans then they will find themselves on the business end of the Civil Guard’s rifles.

But that's all changed now.

In the towns and cities of the republic, bourgeois dress and affections have disappeared. Even the wealthy have exchanged their suits and doublets for the grimy blouses and overalls of the workers. To do otherwise is to invite scorn and jibes, or even a beating. The Republican government is powerless to enforce order. Revolutionary power reigns.

Jughead stops to lean up against the wall of the gutted church and finish his cigarette. The butt glows in the night. He exhales a puff of smoke into the air. Summer is ever slowly closing out and giving way to fall. In the days, the Spanish sun still burns unbearably bright. But the nights are chilly enough. Jughead takes one last drag. Then he flicks the Lucky Strike to the cobblestones and snuffs it out with his heel. He closes his eyes and thinks of home. Maybe Jason was right. Perhaps he should write a letter. What will he say? He smiles.

Hi Betty, the war’s going great! I learned to fire a rifle! Now I’m going to help breach a fascist fortress! How are things going back home? Any headway when it comes to the ‘fascist conspiracy’ business? Cheryl hasn’t backstabbed you again, has she?

He shakes his head. He still hasn’t decided whether Jason Blossom is monumentally stupid or monumentally optimistic. He’s slowly leaning towards the latter. Either the way, the boy has managed to take all of this in stride. And not once has his communist faith been shaken.

Jughead hears a light droning.

He disregards it. The streets are mostly empty. Occasionally, a patrol of milicianos will stroll by, waving their guns about, singing and joking. Without exception, they offer him the clenched fist 'People's Front' salute, and he duly returns it. It’s starting to become second nature.

The droning grows louder. Jughead steps away from the church’s wall. He cranes his neck about, looking for the source of the sound. He finds nothing. It gets louder. The ground starts to shake. Men and women step from their houses in confusion. Then it clicks.

A black speck appears in the southern sky. It draws closer, and out of the evening gloom materialize the sleek wings, the smooth snout, the sweeping tail. He squints. His gut chills. It’s too dark-far too dark-to identify any insignia on the aircraft. Not until it’s too late at least. The warplane nears, its engines humming. Jughead strains his eyes. The droning rises into a roar. Lights begin to go out. The craft is nearly on top of them now. In the lights of Toledo, just barely, he can make out the symbols painted onto the plane. The black Xs on the wingtips. On the fin flash, a bold swastika.

“Get inside!” He shouts, gesturing wildly to the civilians on the street. “Get inside!” He can’t say it in Spanish, but they get the message. Jughead himself dives into the burned out church. He presses
himself up against the fire-blackened remains of the altar. He looks up. An image of Christ on the cross, charred and cracked by flame, glares down at him from his spot high up on the wall. The plane’s engines are screaming now. Jughead claps his hands over his ears. There’s a strange sound, and then a high-pitched whine.

Then the world goes up in tones of bright red and orange, a thunderclap louder than he’s ever heard assaults his ears, and a blast like the fist of providence hurls him back against the wall. He crumples to the ground, groaning, pain bursting through his back. The ground shakes beneath him. The monstrous explosion pounds in his ears. His skull feels like it’s split. Jughead brings his hands to his head. He wants to stand. He isn’t sure if he can. He feels like he himself has burst apart. He expects the church to collapse in on him, and as his vision clears and the world comes back into focus, he realizes the building’s façade has been torn away.

He can see clearly out into the street. Out into the street, where a row of houses stretching from block to block has been obliterated by the warplane’s attack. All that remain are smoldering piles of pulverized stone or wood enveloped in billowing orange flame. Jughead puts up an arm to shield himself from the heat. Smoke twists and curls up towards the stars. It’s impossible that this horrible wreckage was a collection of homes only seconds ago.

It’s even less possible that the twisted, bleeding hunks of flesh strewn out across the road were lately human. He pulls himself to his feet. He stumbles out from the ruined church, bile rising in his throat. Jughead shambles past a man missing both legs and one arm. He writhes in a puddle of his own blood, eyes rolling about in agony. The poor wretch can’t find the strength to scream. Jughead averts his eyes. He couldn’t help anyway. A woman sinks to her knees, wailing. Before her, the burning wreck of her home collapses in a flurry of ash and fire. Jughead nearly loses his balance and pitches forward. Tires screech. A boy pulls himself to his feet, clutching his head. An ugly gash across his forehead spurts out black-red blood. He moans in pain.

A man cradles the motionless body of what was until now his son, wailing and crying.

A lorry filled with milicianos tears around a corner and grinds to a halt. The men leap out from the truck’s bed. Some carry barrels of water, which they hopelessly pitch onto the burning ruins. Others tend to the wounded, best they can.

Jughead sees one miliciano hook his hands beneath a motionless woman’s arms and haul her to her feet. Or try. The man struggles, and with a gasp, drops her. He tries again. Jughead rushes over and takes hold of the woman’s feet. The miliciano says nothing. He nods his thanks. Together, they carry her to the waiting truck bed and lift her inside. Her dress is stained bright red, but she’s still breathing. For the moment. Jughead tries to keep from drowning in the screaming and the shouting and the hissing of the fire.

He stumbles back into the road. The man without legs has bled out. His glassy eyes stare up into eternity. To his left lies a corpse so ruined by the heat and force of the blast age and gender are indeterminate. It resembles a hunk of slaughtered meat more than anything, glistening with bright blood and muscle and bone. Jughead impresses himself as he keeps from vomiting. Can’t waste time with corpses. He hears a weeping, low and quiet. Casting his eyes around for the source, he locates a child curled up beneath the doorway of a half-burned out house. Jughead sprints forward, and gathers the kid, a little girl, up in his arms. She looks up at him with great, terrified eyes. Her hair, dark brown, is plastered to the side of her head with blood. Jughead gags. He tries not to think of Jellybean.

“Are you hurt?” He chokes out. She stares, uncomprehending. Right. Of course she doesn’t understand English. He kicks himself. Racks his mind for the Spanish words, if he even knows
them. “He-herido?” He finally manages, voice shaking. She nods, eyes glistening with tears. He feels a lump rise in his own throat. He carries her to the waiting truck bed, and helps her inside. She clutches the hem of his jacket and won’t let go. He sets his jaw and peels her hand away. “I’m sorry,” he mumbles. He calls out to a miliciano and gestures to the girl. “Necesita ayuda,” he manages. The militiaman nods. Jughead stumbles away from the truck. The girl calls after him.

By the time the horror is all cleared away, he’s helped load four wounded and three corpses into the truck. The milicianos’ valiant attempt to extinguish the blaze proves fruitless. The houses burn until the city’s few real fire trucks arrive, and even then they can do little more than keep the flames from spreading. The men and women and children whose homes have been lost to the raid watch, wailing or weeping or in miserable silence, as their lives burn away.

“Asesinos fascistas!” A woman shrieks up at the sky. “Fascist murderers!” Jughead collapses onto the sidewalk. His jacket and undershirt are stained red with the blood of the victims he tried to save. His breaths come in great, dry heaves. A miliciano sidles up to him, face grim and drawn. He claps Jughead on the shoulder and then hops back into the lorry.

“Gracias por tu ayuda, compañero.”--‘Thanks for your help, comrade’.

Jughead nods. He has little energy for anything else.

The lorry speeds away, with its grisly cargo of wounded and dead. Jughead forces himself to stand. He trudges away from the tragedy, as the firemen struggle to contain the blaze. He stumbles back towards the Alcazár, mind laid waste. He is shocked, despite everything, to find himself crying. The tears trickle down his grimy cheeks, mingling with the strangers’ blood upon his clothes. He digs his fingers into his scalp. He tries to force the images of the bleeding corpses and the little girl and the burning houses from his mind.

He reaches the tent and finds Jason standing outside, eyes wide, mouth tight.

“We heard the bl-“


"Are you…”

“I’m fine.”

Jughead collapses onto the flat stone in front of the tent. He buries his face in his hands. He hears the rustling as Jason takes a seat beside him. Then the odd sensation of a hand on his back. He doesn’t look up until he’s roused by the sounds of shouting from the Alcazár. A new flag has been raised to replace the one Jason brought down two days ago. Jughead listens to the shouting of the fortress’ defenders.

“They’re cheering,” Jason mutters, finally.

Jughead suddenly realizes he’s shaking. His teeth chattering. His hands trembling. He rises to his feet again. He feels the hot tears coursing down his cheeks. He reaches a hand out towards the Alcazár, as if to bring down its walls with only his seething anger.

“Asesinos fascistas!” he shouts, louder than he thought himself capable of. “Asesinos fascistas!” If
the fascists holed up inside hear him, they give no indication. “Fascist murderers! Fascist murderers! You’re going to pay!” Then he whirls around to face Jason, he looks back at him helplessly. “Did you…I saw what they did…I was there…I saw…there were…there were kids!” He gasps. “I…fuck!” He dives inside the tent, and emerges a moment later carrying a rifle. His or Jason’s he isn’t sure. Jughead aims at the dark walls of the Alcazár and fires. Fires again. Working the bolt action on the rifle. Round after round strikes the fortress uselessly. He fires and fires until the ammunition is exhausted. Then he throws the weapon the ground in disgust. “Fuck…” He murmurs. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” Jason shakes his head. “No, no. God. You should be angry. You should be. They want to put this entire country into slavery, and they’re willing to kill children to do it. And they want to do the same the world over. The world should be angry. It’s a good thing you are.”

Jughead runs his fingers through his hair. He echoes, hardly conscious: “I should be angry.”

_________

Until now, a spirit of levity had prevailed over the besiegers of the Alcazár. There had been no deaths, and few real injuries. The militiamen had disported, firing aimlessly at the fortress, doing little more than puffing up their egos. But the bombing raid destroyed all that. Now, the realities of the war had come to the fore.

When the fires finally subsided, many of the militiamen, including us, went into Toledo to help clean up the wreckage. It was there that we were confronted with the brutality of the insurgents. It was there that we saw the impartiality of their slaughter. It was there, as we cleared away rubble stained with blood and flesh, that we learned to hate.

A small fleet of lorries has been brought to bear, to take away the shattered stone and broken wood. Milicianos swarm over the wreckage like ants, taking what they can as individuals, and the larger chunks of rubble in teams of three and four.

Jughead takes up one end of a long oak beam, probably part of a roof.

“Jason!”

Without a word, Jason picks up the slack, grabbing hold of the beam’s other end. As they lift away the great length of wood, they reveal a destroyed bookshelf. The spines and pages are scorched, half beyond repair. A few might still be salvaged. Once they’ve loaded the beam onto a truck, Jughead jogs back across the rubble to the bookshelf. He leans down and picks a title at random.

Jughead reads aloud, quietly.

“El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha.” He flips through the pages gingerly. Half the cover crumbles away. He smiles sadly.

Jughead whirls around, with a grin of his own.

“You…do realize that makes you Don Quixote, right?”
“I…”

“Actually, that’s not a bad comparison. Every bit as rich, twice as deluded.”

Jason kicks him gently in the back. Jughead laughs. He grabs up a few more books and shoves them into his knapsack, with an eye to improving his Spanish.

“We should get back to work.”

“We should get back to work.”

He slings the bag over his shoulder, and they return to clearing away rubble. When the job is done, the remains of houses and shops will be repurposed. This is a war, after all. Hunks of cement and planks of wood will be incorporated into barricades or strapped to the sides of lorries to create jerry-rigged armored cars. Thrift is never more important than in times of conflict.

The sounds of airplane engines echo through the skies, and the milicianos duck as one man, crying out in shock. Jughead flinches. He drops a slab of stone and quite nearly crushes the toes of his left foot. But he looks up. The warplane soaring over them is not the monstrous German craft of last night. It’s a little biplane, wingtips bright red, identifying it as in the service of the Republic. He sighs in relief. The milicianos cheer.

“Es nuestro!” Someone cries. ‘It’s ours!’

“Nuestro!”

More cheering.

Jughead tries not to think of how hopelessly outmoded the little biplane in the bright blue sky is. How hopelessly outmatched by the devastating, modern aircraft that Germany and Italy are funneling to the fascists. The League of Nations prattles on about non-Intervention and neutrality while Franco is supplied with the best and deadliest tools of modern warfare by his Nazi-fascist allies. While the Republic is left to flounder and sink.

“Did you see the plane that hit us last night?” Jason inquires.

“Yeah.” Jughead mutters.

“What kind was it? German, I bet?”

“I don’t know. Well…it was big and black. Or…dark grey, maybe. Swastika on the tail. It was German, I guess.”

Jason nods.

“A Junkers, probably.” He shakes his head.

They hardly notice the man bounding across the rubble towards them. He stops at their side and waves.

"Hi!" He says, in perfect English.

"...Hi," Jughead responds, cautious.

"Dan Swift. Colliers. You two are Americans?"
"That would appear to be the case," Jughead says dryly, pushing aside another load of shattered concrete.

"Interesting. Interesting. I'm here uh...covering...you know. You mind if I take a picture of you boys? For the bit I'm doing on foreign volunteers in the Republic?"

Before Jughead can answer, Jason steps up and says: "sure!"

So they kneel down amidst the broken, burned out homes and stores. Jason puts his arm around Jughead's shoulder. They raised their fists and smile. Swift takes the photo. The little camera flashes.

"Thanks!"

Then he disappears.

It will take some days to clear all of the rubble away. Some three hours after nightfall, the *milicianos* are relieved for the day. The work can resume in the morning.

Jughead wanders towards the church he took refuge in when the bomber attacked. The building’s façade was torn away in the explosion, so that the ancient place of worship looks like a dollhouse. A cross-section of a church. The ancient brick is blackened by fire. He steps inside, footfalls echoing against what remains of the walls. The charred figure of Christ still glares down at him from its place on the wall.

Outside, the darkness falls thick and heavy over Toledo. Jughead suddenly feels that yesterday is repeating itself. Any moment now he’ll hear the droning of the engines and then—he squeezes his eyes shut.

Jason drifts into the church, trailing behind him.

Jughead drops down into a pew. The burnt wood groans beneath him and for a moment he fears it might give way. The blood—of that woman, of the little girl, of the old man he’d helped hobble to the truck—still stains his jacket and trousers, though it’s faded to a dull brown. It’s the only clothes he has.

“I was talking to some of the militiamen…they said you helped them save people hurt by the bombings. That’s…impressive.”

Jughead shakes his head.

“I just…I didn’t really have a choice.”

“Still, for someone who doesn’t even want to be here.” Jason slides into the pew beside him. The entire church groans on its foundations. “I feel like this whole place might cave in.”

“Maybe.”

“Hey. I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you…well, do you think we’re friends?”

Jughead cracks a broken smile.
“Friends don’t drag friends into foreign wars.”

Jason bows his head a little.

“You did come along out of your own free will.”

“I’m just needling you.”

“Is that a no?”

“It’s not—do you need a friend?”

Jason looks at him, eyes shining in the darkness.

“I haven’t had a whole lot of friends.”

Jughead rolls his eyes.

“Oh God. Spare me the ‘woes of privilege’ speech, please.”

“Alright, alright.”

“I don’t know…I have to ask, is this really a good time for friends?”

Jason wrinkles his nose a little bit. He closes his eyes. He sets his rifle against the burnt pew.

“Is it ever? Things haven’t exactly been great back home in the past few years, either.”

“Well, not for us. For you…”

“Fair enough. Comrades, at least?”

Jughead smiles. Then he laughs, a little bit. Lifts his eyes up. The stars and the moon shine through a great hole torn into the church’s roof shingles.

“Sure, Comrade. Comrades.”

“Comrades.”

When they leave the church they bump into Mariano.

“Compañeros. Commandant Cabello wants to speak with you.”

Jughead groans.

The two Americans trail behind their Spanish comrade, who leads them through Toledo’s winding streets back to La Llama. Cabello raises a hand when they entire.

“Torombolo!” He calls.

“My name’s not—nevermind.”

Cabello produces a stack of sheets and lays them out over the big table. Jughead ambles closer and takes stock of the papers. Rough sketches, evidently handmade. Jughead reaches out a hand and traces out the contours of the blueprints. It’s a bird’s eye of the Alcazár. There, the four great towers at each of the fortress’ corners. The massive walls. The courtyard, and a cross-section of the fortification’s interiors. Mess halls, armories, barracks, officers’ quarters. Jughead commits the
layout to memory. He slides the paper aside. Beneath is another. This one, a horizontal
examination of the Alcazar’s construction. The skeletal frame of the massive walls. The bases of
the towers. The subterranean tunnels that crisscross the earth beneath the fortress and hold its
massive stores of ammunition.

Jughead nods. He trawls the depths of memory to recall any and all pertinent information that
might have been imparted to him by his father over the years in the art of demolition. He identifies
the crossbeams that hold the fortress’ towers in place. A little to the left, he singles out the
connecting supports that bind said crossbeams to the frame of the Alcazar’s prodigious walls. He
nods again. Cabello, along with Jason and the rest of the commanders, watch him intently. He
smirks.

“Where did you learn demolitions, comrade?” A miliciano in a blue boiler suit asks him in
Spanish.

“They told me he fought in Ethiopia, against the Italians.” Cabello responds.

Jason snorts.

Thankfully, Jughead doesn’t understand a word.

The boiler-suit man nods.

Jason comes and peeks in over Jughead’s shoulder.

“Anything?”

Jughead gestures to where the tower’s crossbeams connect with the wall’s supports.

“Assuming this is what it looks like…if you wanted to bring down the Alcazar’s walls…give me
that pen.” Cabello hands it over. Jughead scribbles a circle around the connection point of the tower
and the wall. He scratches out a few arrows. “Are these subterranean tunnels? Here?”


“Well it looks to me like if you got some charges into this tunnel…right under the tower, right
where it meets the wall. If you placed them just right, you could hit the wall at its weakest point,
which would probably bring this…” he gestures to the entire northern wall. “Crumbling down.”
option that might be a little riskier but might also have a bigger payoff. I don’t think the tunnel
goes this far, but if you managed to place charges right here, in the center of the tower, and bring
the whole tower down…it might destroy two walls at once…both of the walls connected to this
tower. That would knock out half the Alcazar’s fortifications right there. Leave it wide open for
you to storm in and…” He snaps his fingers.

Cabello smiles.

“How soon can you do this?”

Jughead opens his mouth. He’s preparing to say: ‘Me? I’m not doing anything. The rest is in your
hands’. Then he remembers the air raid. The corpses. The fires. The blood.

“Well, do you have the explosives ready?”

“Of course.”
On cue, a miliciano charges into the tavern, his breath racing ahead of him. He offers a quick clenched fist salute. Slings his rifle to the ground.

“Comrades…” He choke out in rapid Spanish. “Castillo and his column-“


“Castillo and his anarchists from Galicia. They volunteered to go scout out the Sierras between here and Royal City.”

“Yes?”

“They-they just came back into Toledo. Just now. Half of them.”

“And the other half?”

“They ran into a Tabor of regulares. Killed. Taken prisoner.” The miliciano shakes his head.

Cabello slams his hand down onto the table.

“Where? How far south?”

The miliciano sucks in a few more breaths of air. The tavern watches, with rapt attention.

“I don’t…19 miles, 20, perhaps?”

“Hijo de puta!” Cabello growls. “They weren’t supposed to be here. Not this soon. Fuck!”

Jughead struggles to pick out any words he can understand. There’s little. Even so, the frantic pitch of the conversation doesn’t bode well.

“What…what’s going on?” He demands. Jason shakes his head.

“I think…they’re saying the fascists are almost here. A few miles south.”

Jughead’s stomach turns.

Cabello turns back to Jughead. He lights up a cigarette with shaking fingers. Offers one to the American. Jughead accepts it.

“Okay, comrade,” Cabello pronounces, voice low and even. “You want to know when? Tomorrow, Sunup. It’s then, or never.”

“Then or never.”

Chapter End Notes

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

none of the information given here regarding demolitions is even a little bit accurate.
They sleep in the tent that night, Jughead’s earlier protestations ignored. He rolls to the left, his back to Jason. Outside, the occasional rifle-fire provides a decent substitute for Riverdale’s crickets and cicadas. Jason snuffs out their guttering oil lamp. The cheap little tent is plunged into darkness.

“Jones.” Jason suddenly whispers.

“Hmm?”

“Do you think you can do this?”

“I’d damned well better be able to, and if I can’t it’s your fault, considering you’re the one that cajoled me into this.”

“What if we get taken prisoner?”

Jughead pulls the thin blanket tighter around his shoulders. There’s only one, so they have to share it. And Jughead is jealous with a blanket.

“What if—again, it’ll be entirely your fault. Just remember that. Quite literally any misfortune that befalls us on this…God help me… trip will be your fault.”

A machine gun rattles outside.

"Try harder you fucking reds!” Someone thunders down from the Alcazár’s walls.

“Jones—”

“For God’s sake, go to sleep. We have a war to fight in the morning.”

Jason doesn’t speak again.

Some four hours past midnight, Jughead finally falls asleep.

He’s awakened with the sun by a sharp, unpleasant pressure against his head. He shifts and tries to swat it away. His hand strikes something hard and angular, and Jughead opens his eyes to find Mariano crouching over him, pressing the stock of his rifle into his skull.

“¡Despiertate, hombre!” He growls. Jughead swears and shoots upright, throwing off the blanket. He stumbles to his feet, snatching up his rifle.

“Where’s Jason?”

“Already outside. Come on, we need to go. Now.”

They crawl out of the tent and into open air. The thin clouds above burn a dull orange-red, as the sun rises over the sierras in the east. Jughead wipes sleep from his tired eyes.

The milicianos have intensified their activity. Three machine guns are wheeled into positions. Much as they rattle, their bullets will do little more than the rifles to the massive walls. But they might make the defenders keep their heads down.

“What are they doing?”
Jughead follows Mariano through throngs of *milicianos*. They inspect their weapons. Load and reload. Argue heatedly. Even threaten each other. This is not sport any longer. The fascists are miles away. This is the moment of action or the moment of defeat.

They amble up a winding path towards the Alcazár’s northeast tower and Jughead looks to his left to see a tank rolling in from Toledo. It’s an old French Great War Renault, small and compact. The vehicle grinds to a halt and the crewmen hanging onto its gun and chassis scramble into position.

“They’re covering you.”

“What?”

“We’re putting everything we’ve got left into the fortress. Make them shit their pants. Distract them. Give you a chance to blow this place.”

“Shit.”

He’s not eager to disappoint a few thousand armed revolutionaries.

Mariano leads him down around a small rocky outcropping, to a gaping hole carved into the stone, just out of the sight of the lookouts on the Alcazár’s walls. It reminds him of a mine’s opening.

“Get in.”

“Uh…what is th-“

“Our boys have been digging it for weeks. We’re connecting to the tunnels under the Alcazár.” Jughead sighs, ducks, and slips into the opening. Clutching his rifle to his chest, he follows dim torchlight through the winding, freshly carved corridors. Militiamen chipping away at great hunks of stone and dirt stop to salute as he passes. He waves them down. “Just a little further up.” Mariano says.

Jughead hears them first. “Esperad! Viene!” Even in Spanish, he recognizes Jason’s voice. He shakes his head. He rounds one more corner, and finds himself in a wide, low chamber carved out of the earth. Dirt crumbles down onto his head. The soft soil gives beneath his feet. Jason and a dozen other *milicianos* stand against the far wall. “Hey!” Jughead calls.

“Jones!” Jason’s face lights up. “Come on!” The ginger beams and claps a hand on Jughead’s shoulder. He asks one of the *milicianos* a question in Spanish. “We're...roughly under the northeast tower. Just like you wanted! The stuff's right there..” Jason gestures to several packs strewn across the dirt floor or slung over the *milicianos’* shoulders. The explosives.

“Can I see a map?”

“Carlos! Tráeme el mapa!” Jason calls.

Jughead exhales, hard.

One of the *milicianos* steps forward and offers Jughead his hand. He takes it.

“Carlos Quintana, miliciano de la tercera columna Asturiana. Mucho gusto.”

“Mucho gusto.” Jughead mumbles.
Then Carlos produces a map from his pack. He shows it to Jughead, and points out their position, just below the northeast tower. Jughead surveys the map, remembering the weak spots he’d pointed out to Cabello the day before.

“These guys are Asturian miners.” Jason tells him. “They know their way around dynamite, don’t worry.”

“Right.” Then something like a clap of thunder sounds through the subterranean chamber. Distant, but not so distant. “Is that a…thunderstorm?”

“Cañones.” One of the milicianos mutters.

“Those are guns.” Jason says. “Artillery.”

“Wh-ours?” Jughead asks.

“Son nuestras?” Jason demands of a militiaman. The man shakes his heads.

“No. Franco’s.” Jason says, grim. “We’re out of time.”

“Alright! We have to go.” One of the miners hisses.

There’s a moment of brief silence, save for the roar of Franco’s heavy artillery, ever nearer.

"Okay..." Jughead says quietly, sounding less than sure. He gestures across the room. There are no identifying marks in the underground chamber. It's hard to know exactly where the charges out to be placed. He spitsballs, and points to a particular spot on the roof, near the marked out points on the map. The dirt looks a little loose.

"Allí." Jughead says. "There."

The militiamen get busy. They bind together the various bundles of dynamite and join their fuses to create one singular, titanic charge. They strap the explosive to the roof of the mineshaft. Jughead watches, hands shaking. If this succeeds, it could save Toledo for the Republic. If it succeeds, he will have deaths on his head. Even if they are fascist deaths.

The militiamen finish. The charge is set.

"Vamonos!” One of them cries.

They rush up out of the tunnel, collecting the other milicianos on the way with warnings of ‘it's going to blow up!’ When they emerge into open air again, some of the elixir of success watches over them.

The men erupt into cheers. One of them charges Jughead and wraps him up in an embrace, nearly crushing the boy in his burly arms.

“¡Lo hicimos!” Someone cries.

“Hey!” As soon as Jughead is free from the unsolicited hug, Jason entraps him in one of his own. “You did it, Jones! How long unt-“

The explosion is tremendous. The militiamen dive to the ground, dropping their weapons and throwing their hands over their ears. A few curl up in fear. Jughead stumbles and falls over. Jason nearly impales himself on his own bayonet. The bright red tongues of flame are clear even in the morning sky. Jughead turns. The northeast tower of the Alcazár trembles. Massive cracks race
along the ancient stone. Slowly, like an avalanche, the stalwart structure crumbles. The tower pitches forward, the old mortar and brick shattering with a sound like heaven breaking. Half of the northern wall goes with it, collapsing in a cloud of dust and debris. The two boys from New York watch in awe as their handiwork unfolds before them.

When the smoke clears, a path over the shattered parapets straight into the fortress has been cleared.

The cheer from the thousands of militiamen is almost as loud as the explosion itself. They’ve been waiting weeks—*months*—for this. Like a human wave, they surge forwards. The milicianos pour over the shattered wall into the heart of the Alcazár, bayonets fixed, red banners waving. The stunned defenders stand up to meet their advance.

The Alcazár has fallen at last. The battle begins.

Except—

An odd whistling rends the air overhead. Jughead barely has time to register it before the artillery shell slams into a squad of militiamen some hundred meters away. He sees a blinding flash, and hears another explosion, impossibly loud. Some thirty *milicianos* are consumed by the blast. When the brilliance of the strike clears, they are left a tattered mess of bledding flesh and shattered limbs.

“Holy—“

“Look.” Jason says, tapping Jughead’s shoulder.

He wheels around, towards the jagged hill country just south of Toledo. There, stark against the dusty *sierras* is the unmistakable mass of men and vehicles, marching beneath the red-gold flag that days before Jason had brought down from the Alcazár.

Franco is here.

“Oh. Oh. This is bad, right?”

“*Come on!* A miliciano cries. “*We need to get back into the city! Have to-have to hold the-keep them from getting in!*”

Jughead’s heart pounds.

Even as they fight to subdue the Alcazár’s defenders, some thousand militiamen are rushed out into the city’s southern suburbs to halt Franco’s inexorable advance. Toledo itself is thrown into a panic. As news of the fascist army massing to the south spreads to the ramshackle houses of the city’s poor, people stream out into streets, carrying all they can hold. Carts and trucks loaded up with entire families and all their worldly possessions jam the roads north out of Toledo. Men and women burn their trade union and party cards. They rid themselves of Republican flags or posters. To be found with such things when the fascists arrive is a death sentence.

Jughead runs north, his breath racing ahead of him. They pass people fleeing in the same direction, and others, armed with rusty hunting rifles or even scythes, running *towards* the fascists.

They stop running at the crossroads where *La Llama* sits. A team of *milicianos* busies itself throwing up barricades across the narrow streets. Jughead doubles over, catching his breath.

Commandant Cabello strides out from the tavern, face red.
“Is it true? Is-“

“The fascists are here, commandante.” Mariano assures him.

“Mierda! You!” Jughead turns to see the man jabbing a finger at him. “Did you-

Jughead shrugs. “I blew up the Alcazár. Just like you asked. I don’t think it’s going to do you a whole lot of good now, Jason, le-goddammit.” He whirls around to find his companion gone, and locates him together with the team of milicianos consolidating assorted bits of rock and wood into a barricade.

The ground shakes as the fascist guns unleash another barrage. Cabello breathes hard. He raises a fist.

“You-If they get through, if they get this far, we’re going to hold this goddamn crossroad! Yes? ¡No pasarán!”

“¡No Pasaran!” The militiamen chorus. “They will not pass!”

Jughead jogs over to Jason.

“Hey! We have to get out of here.”

Jason shakes his head.

“We have to hold this crossroad.”

“You-“ Jughead stutters, at loss for words. “I…I don’t believe you. I can’t believe you.”

Jason shrugs. “You can go ahead. I’ll meet you later.”

“No! No you won’t. Because you’ll be dead! You moron!”

They duck under another fusillade of artillery shells.

“I can’t leave. Remember…remember after the bombing raid. You were angry then. You…”

Jughead squeezes his eyes shut. He opens them and looks down. His rifle is still in his hands. The bayonet glints in morning sunlight. The snap of rifles and the rattle of machine guns and screams carry from the south on the wind.

“Damn…damn it damn it damn it!” He takes an involuntary step forward. He remembers the blood on his jacket. The burning homes. He remembers Cliff Blossom landing blow after blow on him in the basement of Thornhill. He remembers counting out the coins in his pocket and realizing he can buy breakfast or dinner, but not both. “Fine! Fuck these guys!”

“Come on!” Mariano yells.

The boys clamber up the side of the impromptu barricade. Jughead leans his head against a slab of wood.

“We’re going to die.”

“We’ll be fine.”

In the front window of La Llama, an old Great War machine gun faces due south.
They stare out onto the Alcazár beyond. The men fighting atop its shattered walls look like ants. The banners look like little strips of linen. But by those strips of linen, it’s clear enough the battle isn’t going their way.

The defenders of the Alcazár, bolstered by Franco’s troops, are holding their ground and indeed, pushing the Republicans back. The two sides move and shift like waves, like grains of sand tossed by the wind. They crash against each other and break. Retreat, regroup, and surge forward again.

The miliciano Carlos produces a pair of binoculars. He squints through, and shakes his head.

“Can I see those?” Jughead asks. He hands them over. Jughead peers through.

On one side, pushing steadily from the south, he sees a disciplined army of fighting men. Deployed in lines, moving like soldiers. Advancing with systematic precision. Clearing out the foe like exterminators.

On the other-on their side-he sees a mass of disorganized, desperate people, throwing all their courage and all their will against infinitely superior arms. There is no discipline. No regimentation. Only raw valor. And that counts for little against lead and steel.

The outcome of the battle is never really in doubt.

“What’s going on?” Jason demands.

“Well, Jason.” Jughead sighs. “I think we’re about to win the dubious honor of being the first Americans to die in the Spanish Civil War.”

“That’s not funny.”

“It’s not a joke.”

The Alcazár is captured for the Republic for a little more than an hour, before the newly arrived insurgent forces retake it.

Jason lays his rifle across the crest of the barricade. The sounds of battle draw closer.

An artillery shell strikes a two-story shop some three blocks down. The blast nearly knocks them backwards off of their feet. A cloud of dust and debris slams into them. Jughead almost drops his rifle, hacking violently. The ground shakes beneath them. The smoke finally clears, leaving them all covered in a fine layer of pulverized stone. Jughead coughs again.

“Are you alright?” Jason asks, through his own heaving.

“I’m-remind me to never smoke a Lucky Strike again.” Jughead groans.

The boys wipe dust from their eyes, and a horde of terrified milicianos rounds the corner a block down. The frightened men charge towards them, bound right over the barricade and keep going, throwing off their weapons and packs, scrambling over stone and through doorways.

“¡Corred! ¡Corred!” They cry. “Run! Run!”

Cabello blunders into the fleeing milicianos’ path, waving a pistol.

“Stop running you cowards! Hold your gr-“ The herd of panicked militiamen pay him no mind. They charge right past, around, and then over him. The bewildered commandant is thrown to the ground, and narrowly avoids being trampled to death. He stumbles to his feet and yells after them,
firing two rounds in their direction. “Cowards!”

The milicianos still on the barricade train their rifles south, in the direction whence their fleeing comrades came. It's evident enough that the lines to the south of the city have failed to hold. Any minute now, the fascists will come charging up this street.

“Jason. Do you have a will?”

“I’m disowned, remember? I don’t have anything t-“

The man to Jughead’s left crumples, a bullet in his head. He watches in awe as the militiaman goes limp, the rifle sliding from his useless arms, blood pumping out of the clean little wound above his right eye. Jughead follows the trajectory of the bullet, down the street, to the monstrous fascist tank that’s just rounded the corner two blocks away. A dozen men are perched on the machine’s armor, hanging from its guns. A Moroccan regular draped over the tank’s aft section works the bolt on his rifle and aims again.

Jason pulls Jughead down behind the barricade just before the man fires. The bullet snaps over his head. The barricade comes alive with the crack of rifle fire as the milicianos fire back at their foes.

Two of the fascist soldiers clinging to the tank jerk back and tumble to the street dead. Jughead clutches his rifle to his chest, petrified.

“Shoot! Shoot!”

Jason shoulders his rifle, and with trembling hands, squeezes off one shot. The bullet goes wide. The tank trundles closer.

Bullets rend the air. The earth trembles with every meter the tank covers. Artillery shakes the entire city on its foundations. Jughead’s head spins.

“¡No pasarán!” Someone cries.

One of the fascists taps the tank with the stock of his gun, signaling the crew inside. The vehicle grinds to a halt. The light machine guns affixed to its face rise.

“Oh, no.”

The machine guns open up with a sound like cloth ripping. The bullets fly with magnificent speed. Two milicianos are blasted right off the barricade, tumbling dead onto the cobblestones. The militiaman Carlos leaps up to return fire. Some ten rounds strike him in a second. The rifle slips from his slack fingers. The fury of the attack nearly cuts him clean in half. He slumps over, dead before he hits the ground.

The machine guns rattle on. Jughead cowers as low the ground as he possibly can. With the milicianos unable to return fire, the fascist tank continues its relentless push.

Willing himself to act before he can register fear, Jughead slips the muzzle of his rifle through a gap in the barricade’s construction. He fires. The bullet glances off of the tank’s armor. Commandant Cabello gestures to the rest of them. Before he can make clear his intentions, the crack of a rifle splits the air, and Jughead feels something warm trickle down his arm. He registers the tear in his coat, and the spreading flower of blood.

The next few seconds pass slowly. He looks up. Leaning out of a window on their right flank, a fascist soldier aims down and prepares to fire again. Jason brings up his rifle. He adjusts his sights. Fires. The shot strikes the fascist square in the chest. He tumbles backwards into the building,
dead.

“They’ve turned our flank!”

That means, of course, the danger of encirclement.

And that’s enough to shatter what’s left of their courage.

Just as their comrades before them, the milicianos run.

“You’re hurt.” Jason says, reaching out for the wound on Jughead’s bicep.

“Wh-forget about it, let’s go!”

The milicianos scatter, fleeing in every direction.

“Are we-“

“Yes, we’re running!” Jughead yells. And he duly takes off, Jason on his heels. Jughead tosses his rifle aside. Then turns over his shoulder and yells: “Jason, drop the damn gun!” Reluctantly, he does so.

Behind them, the tank crashes effortlessly through their shabby barricade. They round a bend in the road, chased by machine guns and the angry war cries of the regulares.

Jughead throws the pack off his back. An artillery round soars over their heads and strikes the street some fifty meters ahead. They fall to the ground as concrete and mortar rain down around them.

They take a sharp right.

“Hey. Look.” Jason gasps. He points out a tall, sweeping old building. It was a monastery, once. A hand-painted sign reading ‘Heridos’ hangs over the ancient archway. It’s been repurposed into a hospital for Republican wounded. Without another word, they dash inside.

Inside, the thick walls dull the sounds of cannon and machine gun fire. There are other noises in their place.

The cries of the injured and dying echo through the hallowed place. All the nurses and medics, and all those capable of moving under their own power, have already fled. Left to their fate are those too grievously wounded to stand, the bleeding wrecks of war.

Jughead passes by a man swaddled in bloodstained blankets, missing both legs, wailing. He flinches.

“Help me…help me…” Some cry.

“I don’t want to die…” Bellow others.

The two boys compartmentalize. There is nothing they can do, anyways. They clear a stairwell up to the monastery’s second floor. Down a hallway and through a curtain, opens a sweeping chamber that reminds Jughead something of a chapel. There is no screaming or wailing here. The beds lining the old limestone walls, under the guardianship of stained glass saints and angels, are silent. The faces of their occupants are pallid and calm.

Very occasionally, there is a cough or a sigh.
Here are those beyond help, on the verge of death.

“We can hide here.” Jason breathes. Bile rises in Jughead’s throat. Nevertheless, they trudge together towards the back of the room.

Then a crash sounds as the gates to the monastery below clatter open. Shouts in Berber and Spanish blast up the stairwell.

“Our friends are here.” Jughead says dryly.

They hear the heavy cadence of boots against the stone floor. The shouts of a fascist officer. The cries of the injured. Then gunfire. Screaming.

The sound of footfalls on the stairs.

The boys crouch behind one of the beds, trying to avoid the bloodless face of the man lying in it. “Oh God.” Jason moans. “I want to go home.”

Jughead turns to him in disbelief.

“You want to go home? Whose idea was this? You better rediscover some of that revolutionary zeal right now, because if we’re going to die here, then I want to know that at least one of us was okay with it!”

Before Jason can respond, the curtain into the room is torn away and four soldiers, three regulares and one legionary, burst inside. Their bayonets glisten with fresh blood. The boys duck down.

“Good afternoon, red dogs! The legionary thunders. “Now rise and shine!”

One of the regulares says something in Berber. Another shoves him in the chest. The legionary struts up to the nearest bed, and prods its occupant in the chest with the stock of his gun. The man groans in agony. The legionary spins his rifle around, and runs the bayonet clear through the dying miliciano’s heart. The poor wretch coughs up blood, shudders, and goes limp, with nary a shout.

The fascists move down the rows of beds, dispatching their occupants into eternity with a touch of the bayonet. Slowly, methodically, they move towards the cowering New Yorkers, who remain unseen for the moment.

“Jones…” Jason says, throat dry. “I’m sorry.”

“I should have listened to Betty.” Jughead says, sad more than anything else. “She told me this was a terrible idea. She told me.”

“Compañeros…” comes the sudden whisper from the man in the bed.

“Wh-”

“Tomad mis granadas. Por favor. Salvaros.” The miliciano, with what little strength he has left, gestures to the belt of grenades slung over his shoulder. Jughead licks his lips. Not much of a choice. He reaches out, slowly and cautiously. The fascist soldiers are some ten beds away. He unclips two grenades from the man’s belt. Hands one to Jason.

“On three?”

They count. Pull the pins. Leap up from behind the bed. The insurgents jump at the sudden flash of
movement.

“Fascist bastards!”

The grenades arc through the air. Jughead’s rolls to a stop at the feet of a fascist trooper. Jason’s lands in an infirmary bed.

One of the fascists shouts something.

The grenades’ explosion rocks the room. The ancient stained glass shatters outwards, the shards raining down onto the street below. One of the fascists falls dead in the explosion. The others reel from the force of the blast.

“Come on!”

Jughead starts for one of the newly opened windows. Two stories down.

“Wh-that’s two sto-nevermind.”

Jughead leaps out and slides down. They tumble down one floor worth of the monastery’s sloped roof and then fall a story into the street below. Jughead lands on his ankle and cries out in pain.

“Ah! My ankle!”

“Fuck your ankle, let’s go!”

“Kill those goddamn reds!” Roars the legionary from the window above them, and a hail of bullets slams into the street around them. They spring up and dash down the block, pursued by fascist rifle fire.


“Remember…when we blew up…the factory.” Jason forces out as they run. Toledo crumbles around them.

“Yeah.”

“That seemed…earthshaking at the moment, didn’t it?”

It seems like hours of running before they run into a convoy of Republican lorries heading north, their beds jam packed with dirty, injured, dejected milicianos.

“Hey!” Calls a familiar voice. Isidora waves at them from one of the trucks. Blood pours down her face. Her right arm is wrapped in soiled bandaging. “Come on!” Mariano sits next to her, chest bloodied, silent.

“Where are we going?”

“North! Madrid! Toledo is lost!”

Jason and Jughead climb into one of the few trucks with space remaining. And it’s not much. Jason’s leg bumps a miliciano’s mangled shoulder and the man groans in pain.

“Perdon…”

They settle into an empty corner of the truck bed. The floor is slick with blood. Jughead shivers.
The convoy moves out.

“Jason…” Jughead sighs. He examines the wound in his bicep. It’s nothing serious. Grazed flesh. Still he winces each time the shredded cloth of his jacket brushes the injury. “I guess we’re friends.”

Jason beams.

“Well! That's just aces!”

The convoy moves in ignominious defeat. Toledo is lost to the fascists. The last obstacle between Franco’s forces and the capital is gone. The corpses of the milicianos who gave their lives to defend her are heaped together and burned in mass pyres. Republicans are rounded up and summarily shot in the city’s graveyards. Franco fans the epic of the Alcazár into a legend. In the cities under insurgent control, festivals and parades are thrown in honor of the ‘heroic defenders of the Alcazár’. Te Deum masses ring out in Salamanca and Burgos and Seville, thanking God and the Virgin for the great victory. The disorganized Republican militias flee like frightened deer. The Army of Africa rejuvenates itself through an orgy of murder and destruction, preparing for the final stretch of their northward campaign.

The road to Madrid lays wide open.
The New Order

General Queipo de Llano is rather miffed by Veronica’s ‘incident’ at the bullfight.

He takes the falangist Santiago aside and spends a good ten minutes screaming at him for suggesting the outing in the first place. Santiago slinks out of Queipo’s offices with his head bowed.

The man offers a solemn: “Please forgive me, Miss Veronica.”

Hermione apologizes profusely for her daughter’s ‘behavior’, and Queipo assures her that it’s quite alright. “What was done at the bullring was justice.” He says. “But it was not necessarily something for a young lady to see.”

The general offers Veronica a curt bow.

“My sincerest apologies, señorita,” He offers in his oily, commanding voice. “You are my honored guests, and I will take to great care to avoid any…incidents like this in the future.”

Veronica keeps a stone face and nods curtly.

In the days since, Hermione and Queipo have spent most of the time discussing business in the Plaza de España’s patio, or in one of Seville’s fashionable cafes, leaving Veronica with little to do. Her mother allows her to travel the city at will, but Queipo insists she take Santiago or one of his other soldiers with her, for the city is ‘not yet fully pacified’.

Unfortunately, once Santiago learns that she is a cousin, however distant of Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, it is all he wants to talk about.

“What is he like?” The man demands to know of the Falange’s illustrious founder.

“Take deep breaths, friend. I’ve only met him four times or so.”

“And yet I’ve pledged my allegiance to him,” Santiago gushes.

She wants to gag.

“You know, you tell me? What is it you do in the Falange, exactly?” Veronica asks. “Besides, you know, breaking shop windows, beating up trade unionists, stuff like that.”

The sarcasm seems entirely lost on him.

“We do plenty!” He asserts. “We raise funds and food for our soldiers at the front. We keep order in the rear. We educate the people on how to be good citizens and on the Nationalist cause.”

They stroll down one of Seville’s grand thoroughfares. A palpable current of fear grips the old city. Though the streets are thronged with men and women who smile and laugh and salute and go about their daily business, there is the unshakeable impression that it’s all maintained at gunpoint. The red-gold flag of fascist Spain flutters from the rooftop. The tricolor of Mussolini’s Italy and the Nazi swastika, colors of the insurgents’ allies, are ubiquitous. There are posters everywhere promoting fascist youth groups and calling men up for service. They walk past a massive signboard reading “Advertencia: A traicionar es morir!”-“Warning: To betray is to die!” painted in the violent red and black of the Falange.
“You boys have done a bang up job with this city.” Veronica mutters.

“Haven’t we?” Santiago beams.

“You said you raise food for the front. Why aren’t you at the front?” She asks. He flinches. The question wounds him. There’s a chink in the armor. She suppresses a smile.

“I—I’m needed here,” He stammers.

“Can’t imagine you’re needed anywhere more than in the fight, killing off those evil reds.” I suppose that would necessitate courage. She swallows the last bit.

He’s about to answer when a loudspeaker crackles. They’re affixed to every balcony and rooftop through the city so that the newborn fascist regime can broadcast itself to the people with ease. Queipo’s unwelcome voice assails Veronica’s ears. It must be time for the daily broadcast.

“Attention! People of Seville! The Alcazár has been relieved! Toledo is ours! The glorious National Army is marching on Madrid! The red rats flee like the cowards they are! All of the forces of international Jewish communism and its pawns are arrayed against us, but never fear! We will triumph! The reconquista has begun anew! Arriba España!”

A great cheer ripples through the streets. Veronica watches intently. She can pick out distinct, minuscule variations in the citizenry’s response. There are those whose acclamation is genuine and thorough. She can see the fervor in their eyes and hear the joy in their shouts. Then there are those who conceal apathy, disdain, disgust, or sadness behind masks of adulation. There is no luster in their cheers or conviction in their salutes. The fascists could place an iron yoke upon Seville, but they could not reach into the hearts of her people and turn them by force.

At her core, perhaps Seville is still Red Seville.

Santiago claps her on the shoulder and snaps her out of her musings. She peels his hand away. He ignores that.

“See!” He exults. “The war is almost over, already. We’ll be in Madrid in a few weeks, no doubt.”

“Never doubted you.”

“Uh…”

They return to the Plaza de España an hour or so later. Santiago, his enthusiasm never dampened, insists he isn’t done showing her around.

They pace one of the great gothic hallways up to the roof, where Santiago insists there’s a lovely view of the city that she couldn’t care less about. They pass by a room with the door ajar. Through the crack Veronica can make out a number of young men in blue Falangist shirts seated at shortwave military radio sets.

“What’s in there?” She asks, genuinely a bit interested.

Santiago pauses. He opens the door for her and ushers her inside.

As she surmises, it’s some sort of communications hub. Rows of shortwave radios and telegraph receivers line the walls, attended to by the boys and girls of the Falangist youth.

“It’s a radio station, more or less,” Santiago informs. “Just so we can keep in contact with our
comrades in other parts of Spain and on the front.”

Veronica nods. She commits the station and its location to memory.

A distant, gravelly voice emerges from one of the radios.

“Diez tanques rusos llegaron al porte de Cartagena ayer.”—“Ten Russian tanks arrived at the port of Cartagena yesterday.”

Veronica figures they’re contacting fascist moles ensconced in Republican Spain.

They finish their tour a little before sunset. An elated Queipo de Llano greets them, storming down from his office, exuberant, having completed another torturous broadcast.

“Vivan los heroes del Alcazár! We’ve got the Marxist bastards on the run!”

He calls an impromptu dinner party to celebrate the victory, inviting every man and woman of note in Seville. Including, of course, Hiram Lodge’s wife and daughter.

A great oak table is prepared, its tablecloth patterned after the red-gold fascist banner. Portraits of Franco, Mola, and the ancient Spanish kings are hung upon the walls of the dining room alongside the faces of Hitler and Mussolini. And of course, that of Queipo de Llano himself. Hermione drags Veronica upstairs to oversee her last minute preparations for the feast.

“I want you to wear this, mija.” Hermione produces a stuffy black dress alongside a white mantilla. She thrusts the articles at her daughter. “It’s very…Spanish. It’ll make a good impression.”

“It isn’t 1835 and this isn’t Don Carlos’ court.” Veronica drawls.

Hermione’s face darkens. She takes a step towards her daughter.

“Veronica…I’m getting tired of your attitude.”

Veronica crosses her arms.

“What attitude is that?”

Hermione’s right hand, the one unoccupied by the dress, balls into a fist.

“The disrespect you’ve shown me since we left and New York. And the disrespect you’ve shown our hosts!”

Veronica scoffs.

“Oh, you mean the fascist murderers th-“

With greater speed than Veronica’s ever seen, Hermione claps a hand over her daughter’s mouth. Her eyes burn with fury but Veronica notices something else there, too. Fear. Her mother glances around, as if to see if they’ve been overheard.

“You keep your mouth shut! Don’t ever say anything like that again? Understand!”

“It’s true!” Veronica spits back.

“You don’t understand just how important it is what I’m doing here! Or just how important it is that Genera-“
“Oh, stop! I understand fine! In fact…” She thrusts her face towards her mother. Hermione flinches. “I understand everything!”

Hermione scoffs.

“Mija, what are y-“

Veronica nods, swallowing hard.

“Everything. I know daddy’s guilty. I know what your…business here is. I know what daddy and the Blossoms and their friends are planning on doing back home. So just…just stop.”

Hermione purses her lips. Her face pales. She visibly trembles.

“Veronic-“

“I used to think you were a good person, even if…” Veronica’s voice falters. She stands up straight and collects herself. “Even if daddy wasn’t. But…these people. You saw what they did at the bullring. You saw those people die. And you want to help bring that back home? You want to see people machine-gunned in Madison Square Garden? Why? So…so Hiram and his friends can conduct business a little easier? So they don’t have to worry about strikes or stoppages? That’s evil.”

For a moment, it appears her words might have some effect on her mother. Hermione blinks. At a loss for words. Then her eyes narrow. Her jaw sets. She storms forward and grips Veronica by the ear, like she did when she was a little girl. Veronica squeals in shock and pain.

“Listen to me,” Hermione hisses. “Your father and I raised you to understand that family comes before anything else. Do you think I like everything he does? But family stands by one another. And if you’re not willing to do that, then you have no right to call yourself a Lodge. We raised you to understand loyalty. And I expect you to act like it.” Veronica pulls away like a wounded animal.

“Loyalty, right? Sort of like your traitor friends waiting for us downstairs.” Veronica snatches the dress and mantilla away from her mother. Before she can respond, she continues. “I’ll put on this damn dress. I’ll go to this dinner with you and smile and nod. But don’t think for a second I’m not rooting against daddy, against your fascist friends, and against you with everything I’ve got,” She hisses. “Do we have an understanding?”

Hermione regards her daughter with a cold, detached eye.

“Get dressed. Ten minutes.”

They descend together to the dining hall, false smiles plastered over their faces. Queipo stands at the head of the table when they appear, spreading his arms wide.

“Ah! There they are! My honored guests! Ladies! Come, come. Take a seat. You’re just in time.” He sweeps a hand towards the rest of the attendants jammed in around the great table. “Damas y caballeros, let me introduce you to Señora Hermione Lodge, wife of our movement’s generous friend and benefactor Señor Hiram Lodge, and to their lovely daughter, Señorita Veronica.”

The dinner table erupts into applause. Veronica bows dutifully. The mantilla flows over her raven hair and scratches uncomfortably at her shoulders.

They slide into their assigned places at the table, thankfully not next to one another, at least. The main course has not yet been served. Queipo’s illustrious guests pick at hors d’oeuvres.
Much to her displeasure, Veronica finds herself seated next to Santiago, in his freshly pressed blue shirt. He smiles at her and she rolls her eyes. To her left sits a rotund bishop in his churchman’s robes. A heavy cross hangs round his neck, shadowed by a meaty face with two pinprick black eyes. The rest of the attendants are a collection of insurgent army officers, falangists, great landlords, and local men and women of means. The cream of Seville’s society.

Also present are a few German and Italian officers, here in Spain as advisers to the fascist army.

Veronica finds herself immediately bombarded with questions, primarily concerning Jose Antonio (of course) and life in America.

Is Jose Antonio as handsome as they say?

Is America really so full of gum-chewing gangsters?

How do you stand living in a country without the Roman Church’s guidance?

Is it true that President Roosevelt is a communist?

“Oh, yeah. Absolutely. You can barely go out into the streets without fear of being…picked up by one of his red death squads.” She almost chuckles at her own joke, before she takes stock of the faces around her and realizes they probably don’t realize she’s jesting.

“What’s it like where you’re from?” Asks the young wife of a German Luftwaffe officer. The girl is blonde, blue eyed, and evidently rather excited. She reminds Veronica a little bit of Betty. She feels a twinge of homesickness.

She shelves the acid, if for only a moment.

“It’s…it’s a nice place. A little town in upstate New York. Called Riverdale.”

“Not hit too hard by the depression, I hope?”

“Hit pretty bad, actually. Riverdale has…a lot of problems. But for the most part I think it’s full of good people. People who want change for the better.”

“In Germany we’ve solved our economic woes, you know,” The girl’s officer husband cuts in. “All we had to do was get rid of those Jewish bloodsuckers.” And Veronica suddenly remembers where she is. “You do the same in America, and I promise you, you shall see results. Ought to fix all of the moral decay too.”

“Right.”

“Tell me, child,” The Bishop to her left asks. “Is it possible to attend mass and receive the sacraments regularly in your home town? I know the church has little presence there.”

“Uh…there’s no Catholic church in our town,” Veronica admits. The Bishop looks scandalized. His broad face gets a little red.

“You are baptized, at least?”

“Oh, of course,” She lies, because she gets the inkling that if she admits the truth, the Bishop will try to baptize her here and now with the pitcher of gravy.

Regardless, he still seems displeased.
“You see,” He says to no one in particular. “This is exactly the sort of Godlessness the reds want to bring to Spain. They’ll have it so our young ladies spit on the host. This is why we’re fighting!”

Before he can continue his ranting, Queipo stands up at the head of the table.

“I’d like to raise a toast. To the defenders of the Alcazár and the brave soldiers who lifted the siege.”

The table lifts its glasses.

“Al Alcazár!”

The German officer stands.

“And to our glorious National Army. May we soon raise our flag in Madrid.”

A colonel of the Legion, chest sparkling with medals, shoves a bite of roast into his mouth and asks: “Tell me, Mrs. Lodge, what business do you have in Spain?”

Before she can respond, Queipo opens his mouth and answers for her.

“The Señora is here on behalf of Señor Hiram Lodge, who, as you all know, has been a very generous supporter of our cause.” A round of applause. “Señor Lodge and his good associates are trying to bring about a positive change in their country…” He waves a hand. “Similar to the one we’re bringing about in Spain.” A ripple of laughter. “They’ve been kind enough to entrust a good deal of money to us for that end, and we’re trying to release it to them forthwith.”

“Very forthwith, I hope.” Hermione says.

“As soon as Madrid falls and the fighting ends, Señora,” Assures Queipo.

“How long, General, would you say until we take Madrid?” Santiago inquires.

Queipo waves a hand dismissively. A smirk colors his narrow features.

“The Marxists are cowards. The way they ran at Toledo—I should think a week or two at most.”

“Once you take Madrid,” Veronica begins, with a painfully forced smile. “What then?”

“Then we’ll clean her up, like we did Seville and now Toledo.” Visions of the bullring massacre blaze in her mind’s eye. “Make her Spanish again.” He takes a sip of wine. “At this rate, there won’t be a trace of red left in this country by the time we’re done.”

“Except for all of the blood,” Veronica mumbles.

“What was that, señorita?” The Bishop demands.

“Nothing.” Veronica clears her throat. “With all due respect, General.” Hermione eyes her cautiously. Surely something confrontational is coming. “How can you be so sure Madrid will fall so soon? After all, you expected the red government to fold the moment you brave fasc—excuse me, Nationalists rose up, didn’t you?” She smiles sweetly. Queipo’s mouth twitches. His face discolors. His eyebrows knit.

“Well, Miss Veronica. We can’t be sure of anything. But we have better guns, better machines, and better men than the reds.” He huffs. Conversation dies down round the table.
“I have an idea!” Santiago says. He slaps a hand down onto the table. “His Excellency” He gestures to the Bishop. “May disapprove of gambling, but I say we make a bet! When will Madrid fall?”

The Bishop clucks. Everyone laughs.

The German officer is the first to accede.

“Eighty pesetas. One week.”

Queipo himself follows up.

“Maybe a bit bold, friend.” He downs the rest of his glass of wine and pours another. “100 pesetas. Three weeks.”

“90. Two weeks.” Santiago puts up. The table comes alive. Most everyone, Hermione excepted, places down a few pesetas. No one wagers on more than a month. The boldest bet is five days.

Veronica’s turn comes around. The dinner party’s collective eye falls on her. She swallows.

“150 pesetas.” She sits up a little straighter. “Never.”

Queipo nearly chokes on his wine. The German’s wife shifts uncomfortably. Hermione stares daggers at her daughter. An uncomfortable silence reigns. The portraits of General Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini glare down at her from the walls.

“Well. It’s nice to see the young lady has a sense of wit.” He finally hisses. No more bets are placed. Dinner winds down after that. The general announces he has to make an evening broadcast to the people. The guests rise, salute the red-gold banner, and take their leave. Veronica excuses herself, disappearing before her mother can tear into her for the transgression. She barricades herself into her room.

She flips the radio on and then realizes it’s still tuned to Queipo’s ramblings.

“Tonight, I will take a Sherry! Tomorrow, I will take Málaga! The re-“

Click.

Veronica tunes in and out of a dozen stations. Grainy music. Snippets of radio communication between warships, fascist and republican alike. She turns the knob again.

A chill goes down her spine as she realizes she’s tuned into Radio Madrid, the propaganda mouthpiece of the People’s Front government. Forbidden in fascist territory, of course. A woman’s voice crackles over the radio waves. She recognizes the fulminations of Dolores Ibarruri ‘La Pasionaria’, the famed communist deputy and orator.

“Anarchists, socialists, communists, republicans, and the soldiers loyal to the Republic have already inflicted the first defeats upon the fascist traitors who drag through the muck of treason the military honor of which they have so often boasted. All the country trembles with rage before these soulless creatures that want to plunge the people’s democratic Spain into a hell of terror and of death. But they will not pass! ¡No pasarán!”

She sighs. It’s refreshing to hear something from the other side, after days of incessant fascist preening and bluster. Everywhere. The airwaves. Posters on the walls. Banners. Soldiers in the streets. Veronica reminds herself that they haven’t won yet. The insurgents are still opposed on the
battlefield. And beyond. There is a world outside this Seville in its fascist chains.

“Workers of all tendencies! The government has put into your hands the arms, that you might save Spain and her people from the horror and the shame that would follow a victory for the bloody hangmen of October! Let no one tarry! Prepare yourselves for war! Long live the People’s Front! Long live the Spanish Republic! The hangmen of October shall not pass! They shall not pass!”

She falls asleep to that.
"I had a friend, a brave lad, who made off on his own each time our company took up a new position. When I asked where he was going, he would reply: 'to see where we're going to retreat to'. He was right. Each time we took up a new position, we could be sure we'd be retreating again the next day. But when we got to Madrid, I said to him: 'You won't have to look behind you any longer. There's nowhere to retreat to now'."

~unnamed Republican militiaman

"I will destroy Madrid before I leave it to the Marxists."

~General Franco

Crammed into the back of a lorry rolling north through the dusty Castilian country, surrounded by dirty, bleeding milicianos, Jughead begins to write a letter.

Dear Betty, I don’t know when, or if, I’ll get a chance to send this. Frankly I doubt the international mailing services out of Spain are functioning at peak capacity at the moment. I’d lie and say things are going swimmingly, but then you’d probably just pick up a newspaper and figure out the truth pretty quickly. The Republic just lost Toledo.

He scratches out ‘the Republic’ and replaces it with ‘we’.

I know I told you I wasn’t going to be doing any actual fighting, but it didn’t quite work out that way. I wish there was some way to describe in writing how loud cannons are. It’s like thunder, but all around you. Like you’ve been swept up into the middle of a thunderstorm and the world is crumbling everywhere. My ears are still ringing. And the bullets—

Jason leans over his shoulder and Jughead has a flashback to Archie’s incessant interruption of his writing in Pop’s.

“What are you writing?”

“A letter. Like you said.”

“Oh. Right, right. I might…leave some things out if I were you, though. No need to worry anyone unnecessarily.”

“I’d hardly call worrying about someone in a warzone ‘unnecessary’.”

“We got out okay,” Jason says. He pauses for a moment to reevaluate what he’s just said. “For the time being.” Another pause. “You know, you had a point earlier.”

“Really? When was that?”

“When you told me I should be a little less blasé about…all of this. Back in Barcelona.”

“And all it took was a little brush with fascist bayonets?”

“Come on. Cut the sarcasm for a moment.”
Jughead grimaces.

“Sorry.” Jughead touches a finger to the wound on his bicep. The blood has begun to crust over black. He winces. It’s hurting a little less now, at least. “It’s just my way of relating to the world.”

“Let me see that,” Jason says.

Jughead raises an eyebrow.

“You know any first aid?”

“Not really. They taught us a little bit in JROTC.”

Jason rolls up Jughead’s sleeve. He examines the injury. Runs a finger across the length of it. Jughead flinches. “Ah!”

“Sorry. It’s not so bad. It’s barely broken the skin,” He assures. “There shouldn’t be any real nerve damage. I bet it hurts a little bit, but it should heal fine.” He pats Jughead on the shoulder. Jughead feels a twinge of guilt for his ceaseless hostility towards his companion.

“Thanks.” The sun begins to set. The dry, red-brown Spanish earth glows in the dying light. “I have to ask” Jughead begins. “Are you still glad we came over here?” Jason thinks for a moment. He draws his knees up to his chest, creating a little more space in the jammed truck bed. He runs a hand through his dusty, matted red hair.

“Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“That was about as clear-cut a defeat as I’ve ever seen.

“It’s not over yet.” He opines.

“Ten minutes to midnight,” Jughead replies. He keeps his voice down. No sense in getting a drubbing from the other milicianos for defeatism.

“Madrid might still hold.”

“Very optimistic.”

“Okay. Say you’re right. Say this is all hopeless. It’s still—“

“I know, I know. It’s our duty to do our part in the great global crusade against fascism.”

“Well, think about it this way. Think about everyone back home. Your friends. Archie, Betty. My sister. This country is full of people just like them. You’ve heard—you’ve seen—how the fascists do things here. Do you want them to suffer that? Do you want the people we care about to suffer all of that?”

Jughead has a sudden image of a bomb falling on Riverdale’s main street. Sweetwater River overflowing with bloated, butchered corpses.

“No. No. God, of course not.” There’s a long, deafening silence. None of the other militiamen speak English anyhow. Darkness falls. “So…” Jughead finally says. “You have to have a personality beyond communism, right?”

Jason laughs.
“Maybe.”

The corner of Jughead’s mouth twitches.

“So. Tell me. And here’s a challenge: I don’t want to hear the words ‘Marxism’, ‘democracy’, ‘socialism’, or ‘revolution’.”

“I uh…”

Jughead rolls his eyes.

“Just tell me something you like.”

Jason blinks.

“I uh…I really enjoyed the movie M.”

“M? With Peter Lorre? Try again, that movie is as political as it gets.”

Jason shakes his head.

“M wasn’t political. It was about a child killer!”

Jughead drums his fingers on the barrel of his rifle, slung across his thighs.

“It was commentary on the social decay in Germany. Come on.”


“Camping?” Jughead thinks for a moment. “Never could afford a tent, but I’d go out into the woods and sleep some nights. Archie and I.” Jason smiles.

“There you go. I love camping. And there’s nothing Marxist or political in that. I bet fascists love camping, too.”

“Except I bet you could afford a tent.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t like using one. Can’t see the stars.” Jason looks up into the sparkling heavens. “Sorry. I know that sounds a little corny.”

“The stars. Right. Ever read Princess of Mars?”

“No.”

“Edgar Rice Burroughs. It’s about a…prospector, back in the west, who gets transported to Mars. It’s inhabited by all of these alien races, and he goes on all of these adventures, typical pulp stuff, you get it.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I like those kinds of stories.”

“I’d just sit up in a tree branch, and imagine all of the possible worlds that might exist up there. Well…I figured…this couldn’t be the only one, right? And if there are more, there’s got to be one where things aren’t so miserable.”

Jason cocks his head.
“Well…it could be this one. If we made it that way.”

“Ah! You’re trying to steer things back to politics! Tell me what you liked about camping.”

Jason shrugs.

“You grow up wealthy, and everything’s very artificial. All gilded and curated to hell. You go out in the woods, and suddenly that’s all gone. I guess it felt more real. Or…maybe not real, but more lively, at least.”

“Mosquitoes are some lively bastards, I’ll give you that.”

Jason chuckles.

“Ticks were always a bigger problem for me.”

Jughead smiles.

“I remember teaching Archie how to burn off ticks when we are about…God…what, eight? Poor guy. He thought he was dying. Then I pull out a matchbook and he looks at me with these big, miserable eyes and asks why I’m about to burn him.”

“Cheryl didn’t think ticks were real.”

“What?” Jughead laughs.

“The one time she ever came out camping with me. She thought I’d made them up to scare her. She was adamant about it.” He grins at the memory. “She didn’t think they were made up anymore by the next morning, let me tell you. And that was the last time she ever ventured into the forest.”

Jughead cackles. He raises an imaginary glass.

“To people who don’t understand ticks. They may be hopeless, but we love them all the same.”

“I’d drink to that,” Jason says. “I wish I could.”

“Another fake toast—and yes, you can get political now.” Jughead raises his invisible glass once more. “To all of the Cheryls and the Archies of Spain. To their freedom.”

Jason smiles and returns the gesture.

“Now and forever.”

“No pasarán.”

“No pasarán.”

Jughead taps a half-dozing miliciano on the shoulder.

“Friend, how far to Madrid?”

The man shakes his head.

“Shouldn’t be more than another hour or two.”

“Well, to Madrid then,” Jughead says. “Let’s get dug in.”
Madrid’s population of a million has swollen, thanks to the constant stream of refugees from the south, fleeing into the city ahead of the insurgent advance. On their tails come the Republican militiamen, beating a fighting retreat back to the capital. They suffer defeat after defeat. By and large, they are city boys, hopeless in the open country between Toledo and the capital, where Franco’s Moroccan regulares, hardened in the cruel guerrilla wars of the Rif, make short work of them.

By late September, Madrid is thronged with these despondent, defeated men and women. They pack the cafes and the coffee houses, bemoaning the unmatched skill of the fascist soldiers. Their rifles are useless against German warplanes and tanks, they say. There is no use in fighting; the war is already lost.

A wave of panic sweeps over the city as the refugees bring with them tales of insurgent terror from their home provinces to the south.

How the fascists rounded up everyone suspected of Republican sympathies in some Andalusian town or another, bound them in pairs of two, and tossed them alive over a ravine.

How they had a trade union leader torn apart by dogs somewhere in Old Castile.

How they force-fed sugar to a diabetic socialist mayor until he collapsed and died writhing in agony.

How they let the legionaries and regulares parade through the streets with the heads of milicianos on their bayonets, and rape and loot for days on end before their officers saw fit to restore order.

A sign goes up in one of Madrid’s great plazas: When the fascists took Badajoz, they shot 3000. If they take Madrid, they will shoot half the city.

The convoy from Toledo arrives the next morning.

“Cowards! Why couldn’t you hold them at the Alcazár?”

“You should have died in your trenches!”

“Why are you running?”

“Doesn’t exactly smack of high morale around here.” Jughead mumbles.

“No. No it does not,” Jason agrees.

They disembark at the Plaza de España in the center of Madrid. The wounded are taken off to beds in the city’s overstuffed hospitals or old breweries and convents converted into medical wards. Not more than half are likely to live. The milicianos themselves wander dazed into the great crowds of Madrid. Some continue their flight. They go on to Valencia, or Barcelona, or even the French border.

But others decide that the flight stops here. That they will run no further. This is where the defenders of the Republic will make their stand. Madrid. It is victory or extinction. Liberty or death. They reorient themselves. They shake off the dirt and the sweat and the gore.

This far will you come, and no further.
Mariano and Isidora stroll up and inform them that the Columna Libertad lost so many in the fighting at Toledo that it can only be dissolved.

“So we don’t exist anymore?” Jason asks.

“No. Not under that name, anyhow,” Isidora says in Spanish.

“What are you—what are we going to do? From here?”

Mariano shrugs.

“Me? I’m going to defend Madrid. If I must die, then fine. I’ll die standing up. With my gun in my hand. Like a Spaniard ought to.”

Isidora nods her assent.

The Spaniards stare at their American comrades.

“And us?” Jughead prods.

“You two? We appreciate that you’ve come, but you don’t have any duty to die here.”

“Well, I don’t have anywhere else to go. I sure as hell can’t go back to Riverdale. I can stay here and get a fascist bullet in the head, or I can go back home and let his old man do the same thing.” Jughead jerks a thumb in Jason’s direction. “Either way, my luck goes the way it always has: south.”

Jason shrugs.

“I’m not leaving. We’ve used up all our cash, anyhow.”

Mariano smiles. He claps Jughead on the shoulder.

“Well, in that case, welcome to Madrid, Torombolo. I’ll see you two on the field.” And they jog off, with an eye to marshaling together what remains of the column.

Jughead looks over his shoulder, as if expecting to see Franco himself barreling down at him.

“How far behind us do you think they are?”

“Depends on how fast they can march.” Jason says. “There are a lot more of them than there were of us. It could take them a few weeks to move up in force.”

Curious Madrileños crowd around to gawk at the newly arrived milicianos still coated in the blood and dust of battle.

“Well, while we sit around waiting for the fascists to show…”

“You want a coffee?”

They stroll down the Gran Vía, the great thoroughfare that cuts through the heart of Madrid. Jughead tries to ignore the sting from the bullet wound. Madrid has an irritatingly unmilitary manner. Men and women go about their daily business, young couples head down to the parks hand in hand, children play along the roadside. It is as if the war is all a distant dream to these people.
The two boys stop outside the Café Molinero, Madrid’s most famed café, though neither knows that. The café is packed with milicianos and workmen in their caps and blue monos. The chatter is lively, with hardly a hint of fear or even healthy concern.

Jughead catches sight of an untouched cup of coffee centered neatly in the middle of an empty table. A placard sits before it. He squints. The little note reads: RESERVED FOR GENERAL MOLA. He knows Mola to be one of the rebel generals.

“Que es eso?” He asks a passing waiter in his halting Spanish.

The waiter smiles.

“Have you heard General Mola’s address over the radio? He claims he will be ‘enjoying a coffee at the Café Molinero within two weeks’. Well, we’ve got his table and his order all set up. We’ll see if the fascist bastard makes good his appointment.”

Jughead laughs.

He and Jason slide into a vacant table just opposite General Mola’s. They are brought their coffee with impressive speed.

“God, this is terrible,” Jason blurts out upon taking a sip. The waiter glares down at him. “Sorry.” He mumbles, ashamed.

“The fascists have taken over half the country,” the waiter snaps. “Our supply lines are…strained. We’re making do with what we have.”

“Not that bad,” Jughead opines, sampling his own cup. “Then again, I’m not royalty like you.”

“I usually take it with cream, too,” Jason says.

“Bourgeois swine,” Jughead teases. He stares down into his pitch-black cup.

“Where do you think we can pick up some new rifles?”

“How the hell should I know?” Jughead gestures to the dozens of milicianos seated through the café. “Ask one of these guys. Half the people in here have got guns.”

There are weapons everywhere. Rifles lean up against tables. Revolvers sit next to cups of coffee. Jughead even catches sight of one young woman with an old cavalry saber hanging from her hip. And yet few of the would-be warriors have so much as a speck of dust on their clothes. Their faces are clean and untroubled. It’s impossibly clear that none have yet seen battle. Jughead wonders how many will hold under the pressure when the war reaches them at last.

“My arm’s getting better,” He finally mumbles, dispelling his bleak reverie.

“Good. Good,” Jason says, nodding and choking down a sip of coffee.

“Right.”

Halfway across the café, a fellow in soldier’s dress stands up. He pushes through the crowd towards the two boys. They only register his presence when he’s already taken a seat at their table. The man looks like country gentleman on the further side of middle-aged. He sports small, bushy eyebrows and a heavy mustache over his thin upper lip. The sandy brown hair on his head has long begun to recede. He pushes a pair of spectacles up his nose.
“I overheard you talking. You boys Yanks?” He asks, his accent pure upper class Lincolnshire.

“Uh…yeah,” Jason replies, cautious. The man smiles. He offers a hand and Jason takes it tentatively.

“Tom Wintringham, Thälmann Column, International Brigade.”

“I’m sorry, international what?”

“International Brigade!”

“I think what he meant was ‘we don’t know what that is’,” Jughead interjects.

“Yes, thank you, Jones, that’s exactly what I meant.”

Wintringham takes a sip of Jason’s coffee.

“What the hell?” The boy protests.

“Didn’t look like you were drinking it.” The Englishman says. “The International Brigades—volunteer force fighting for the Republic. Foreign volunteers like you.”

“Wai—“

“Anyhow.” He takes another sip. “I suppose the first of many questions is—you boys are aware there’s a war on in this country right now?”

Jughead points to his messily bandaged shoulder.

“Yeah. We’re aware.”

Wintringham raises an eyebrow. He looks the boys over once more, taking in their tattered clothes and dusty faces. “Ah, so you’re already in for the fighting, then.”

“We were almost bayoneted to death by fascists a few days ago. Yeah, we’re ‘in for the fighting’. The International Brigades are…” Jughead leads, curious.

“Comintern initiative. Labor parties all over the world recruiting young men to come and join in the struggle against Franco.” He gives the clenched fist salute. “All expenses paid.”

Jason makes a sort of weird snorting noise.

“Calm down, Jason,” Jughead says. Then he turns to Wintringham. “What, with actual soldiers? Because the guys we’ve been fighting with…they’re brave, but most of them can hardly tell one end of their rifle from the other.”

“There are plenty of veterans of Ypres or Verdun. A lot of boys without a mite of training, too. But we’ll make them the pride of the Republican army. But let’s skip all of the pleasantries. Fascists are trampling Spain, after all. I simply want to know if you lads are interested in joining up. A few more Anglophones would come in handy. All the more now that I know you’ve already seen a bit of action”

The two exchange looks.

“Might be nice to serve in an English-speaking unit, huh?” Jason says. Jughead shrugs.
“You just…go around recruiting in coffee shops?” Jughead asks.

Wintringham shrugs yet again.

“Sure. We’ll take who we can get where we can get them. The Republic is in…dire straits, as I think you saw in Toldo.”

“What about our column?” Jughead asks.

“What column? Because as far as I know, the Liberty Column was wiped out in Toledo,” says Jason, evidently excited by the prospect of the International Brigades.

“You boys did your fighting in Toledo?”

Jughead gestures to himself.

“You’re looking at the guy that blew the Alcazár’s walls down.” He brags. “Just in time for Franco to sweep in, take the city, and render the whole damned affair pointless, but still.”

Wintringham seems positively ecstatic.

“I helped.” Jason clarifies.

“Well, in that case, I can hardly give you any choice but to list with us. For propaganda value if nothing else.” He reaches out to take another sip of Jason’s coffee. Then he nearly spills it all over himself as a heavy, oppressive droning blows into the café. The patrons turn their heads. Jughead recognizes it immediately. And some of the milicianos do as well. The terror on their faces is palpable.

It’s the same sound he heard in Toledo, seconds before the fascist craft had delivered its ruinous payload.

“Air raid.” He sighs, all but frozen.

Outside a gang of street urchins scurrying down the sun-splattered thoroughfare stops and looks up at the sky.

“¡Aviones! ¡Aviones!” They shout, pointing up at the sky. ‘Aviones’. Planes. Plural.

The café erupts into pandemonium as patrons stuff themselves beneath tables or counters or even behind potted plants. A waiter jams himself into a cupboard, and a gang of milicianos jostles each other out of the way as they struggle to get into the kitchen.

“Hell…” Wintringham mumbles.

“Should…should we get under the table?” Jason asks.


The roar of the engines rises and reaches a crescendo. The café fills with prayers.

The first bombs fall slowly, almost peacefully. Looking through the window, Jughead can see the distant, avian shapes of the Nazi warplanes massed together in the grey sky. He watches as their bellies open and the little black specks tumble down onto Madrid below.

The first bomb strikes an office building some two blocks away. The structure goes up in a brilliant
blast of red-yellow fire and raining bricks. Ash and dust explode, coating everyone and everything for five streets over. The ground trembles beneath them. The café’s windows implode with the force of the blast. The three men are thrown to the floor. Jason winces as a shard of flying glass slices open his forearm. Jughead throws his hands over his head.

The next one strikes closer. Much closer.

It seems almost jumpy. Like unstable frames in a movie. The bomb falls without a sound. It impacts in the center of the street, just outside the café. The explosion is blinding. Hunks of cement and shreds of metal and the ruined flesh of the unlucky fly upwards. Jughead braces himself, and in a moment he’s again covered in dust and ash. He coughs. The entire café coughs. The remaining windows are duly destroyed.

The force of the blast clears, the ground stops shaking, and the extent of the damage becomes clear.

A massive hole is gouged out of the street. Cars and trucks are twisted into unrecognizable hunks of metal. Rows of scattered corpses cover the pavement, those who could not flee in time. Men and women without limbs. Torn in half. Without heads. Jughead stops counting after twenty. His head spins. His stomach turns.

The next several bombs land farther away. He can see the flashes from the corner of his eye. The droning of the warplanes fades. It seems forever before the first brave souls trickle out into the street, checking the twisted corpses on the flagstones for signs of life.

Jughead stumbles to his feet, and yanks Jason to his. Wintringham rolls over and springs to attention like a cat. The men wipe ash from their eyes.


They watch as mutilated corpses, many too torn to identify, are dragged away, leaving smears of blood and flesh across the shattered street.

“Your Brigades—the International Brigade.” Jason begins. “Are they already in Spain?”

Wintringham nods.

An old apothecary, its face sheared away by the bombs, collapses inward in a flurry of pulverized stone.

“Some of them. We have a lot of Frenchmen, Poles, and Germans mustering in Albacete. They’re not in Madrid, yet. We’ll have them here in a few weeks—when the fascists arrive, we’ll be ready for them.”

“Alright.” Jughead says.

“Alright what?”

“Alright, do we have to sign something or what? We’re with you.”
“Well, I’ve got a bit of good news, señora,” Queipo de Llano drawls. He slithers behind his desk.

“Oh?” Hermione pushes.

“Mmm. I’ve spoken with General Franco in Salamanca. He tells me that, though he will not rescind the general order freezing foreign assets in Spain, he is willing to make an exception for your husband, considering the…great help the illustrious Lodge family has been to our movement.”

Hermione beams. Queipo returns the smile.

“We are as thankful as can be, general.”

Queipo nods. He rummages around behind his desk, nearly toppling his microphone. He retrieves a half-emptied bottle of red wine and slams it down atop the mahogany. His other hand follows, clutching two glasses. He pours two drinks. Hermione graciously takes one, used by now to the general’s affinity for spirits.

Queipo slouches into his chair and takes a sip.

“So, señora. Your daughter.”

Hermione raises an eyebrow and stops her wineglass halfway to her lips. She balances the drink between index and middle fingers.

“What about her?”

Queipo shrugs. The smile on his face, immediately amicable, hides something else beneath.

“She’s a bit of a firebrand, isn’t she?”

Hermione snorts.

“What young Spanish lady isn’t?”

“Oh, surely,” Queipo agrees. “Only…we’re in a…sensitive place in a sensitive time. Certain people might be…rankled by statements that could be taken as, say, defeatist.”

Hermione squints over the rim of her wine glass.

“Defeatist?”

Queipo waves a hand dismissively.

“The other day at dinner. When she made her little joke about Madrid never falling. I know she was only joking but it has the potential to upset people. And like I said, these are volatile times.”

“What are you saying exactly?”

The general sets down his glass of wine.

“I’m only saying you might want to caution her against statements like that in the future. At least in public. Understand?”
Hermione swallows.

“Of course.”

“Of course. Now…” He stands again. A droplet of wine splashes over the rim of his glass. He doesn’t notice. “As far as your money, we’re burdened by bureaucracy, like every other state in the damn world.” He snorts. “General Franco estimates that we can have it ready for shipment by February of next year.”

“But that’s nearly four months away!” Hermione protests.

Queipo shrugs again. Sips his wine.

“Señor Lodge had it stored with various banks and personal acquaintances of his ‘round the country. Mostly in Salamanca, but there’s a good deal of gold and banknotes in Burgos, Pamplona, even here in Seville. Your husband had the wits to keep it all in the Whitest areas of Spain. But it will still take a while to collect and ship out.”

Hermione stares the general down. He stares back, eyes lidded, unimpressed. Clifford Blossom and friends, her husband included, would not be particularly happy about this development. The Silvershirts are growing restless.

“So we’re just supposed to wait until…February?”

“Well…”

Queipo reaches into his desk again. He fumbles around. Swears. With an exclamation of victory, the general retrieves a slip of paper. He slams it down onto the desktop. A cursory glance reveals it to be an official missive of some sort. The Spanish coat of arms is stamped at the top, over the words Burgos National Government. Hermione examines the paper. She cocks her head.

“Just a formality, señora,” Queipo assures. “A form so that we can release your funds to you. Necessary for administrative purposes, nothing more.” He slides a pen into Hermione’s hand. She shakes her head and signs her name near the bottom of the page, on the line provided. She squints and raises the pen. “What’s the matter, señora?”

“It’s…damn it!” She swears. Hermione clutches the pen in her fist. “¡Madre de dios!”

“What is it?”

She shakes her head.

“We-I need another signature here,” She pronounces, voice tight. Queipo shakes his head.

“Whatse?”

“The signature of the…chief legal officer of Lodge Industries.” She sighs.

“And?”

“It’s my daughter. Veronica.”

Queipo’s brows furrow. He shakes his head.

“I don’t…”
“Hiram gave her the position a few years ago. Honorary. It hasn’t meant anything. But then… we’ve never needed anything like this before.” She looks to the general. “Can’t you just ask General Franco to waive these requirements?”

“Well I could, but I’m afraid it goes beyond General Franco. We won’t be able to ship your money out of the country without the assent on this form. We’re in a tenuous position as it is. Very few foreign countries even recognize us as the legitimate government of Spain. Can’t you just compel Miss Veronica to sign?”

Hermione shakes her head.

“It’s not that simple.”

“No? Why not?”

“Because…well…she’s my daughter.” Hermione sighs.

Queipo plays with his mustache.

He fixes her with that steely reptilian stare.

“I do hope you will do your level best to…convincesee, señor."
It’s early October when Betty, disheartened by Jughead’s flight and set on edge by Cheryl’s heroics, invites Kevin Keller over for dinner in hopes of recapturing a bit of normalcy.

It hardly works.

“Betty, you haven’t touched your potatoes,” her mother admonishes.

Betty touches her potatoes.

“That’s not funny, Betty.” Alice snaps.

Hal sighs.

Kevin shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

“I’m just not hungry. That’s all,” says Betty.

“You look dreadful. You look wan and…underfed. I don’t want the town thinking we starve you.”

Betty lifts her head to look her mother in the eye.

“Mom, we’re in a depression. Nobody’s eating well,” she mumbles, eyes vacant and mind elsewhere.

Alice purses her lips.

Hal turns to Kevin.

“Kevin, son, do you like the potatoes?”

“They’re great,” Kevin says with a rictus smile. “You can really taste the uh…the ground,” his voice trails off.

“Well,” Alice says, sweetly. “If the Register had sold a few more copies this week, we might have been able to afford meat, and then you wouldn’t taste quite so much…ground.”

Hal scowls.

“That’s…too bad,” Kevin says vaguely.

Alice turns on her daughter. “Betty! I digress, but I hear you were…about town with Cheryl Blossom, a few days back? Of all people?”

“Yeah, mom, I talked with Cheryl Blossom a little bit. Once. For a few minutes.”

“About what?” Alice presses.

“Is there butter…on these potatoes?” Kevin inquires.

“No,” Hal says flatly.

“About…politics,” Betty says. And that is the truth, technically.

“Really,” Alice says. “She never struck me as the kind of girl who cares anything about politics.”

Betty begins to grow exasperated. She sets her fork down. Kevin begins to panic.

“So what do you think about the WPA, Mr. Cooper?” Kevin asks in a last-ditch, desperate attempt to avert disaster.

Hal smiles, as eager as his houseguest to avoid a collision between mother and daughter.

“I’m uh…I’m taking a wait-and-see approach to it, Kevin,” Hal says. Kevin nods eagerly. Hal continues “I want this country to recover as much as anyone else, and if Roosevelt can do it with this…well, then I’m inclined to let him. But I am skeptical. I—”

“The WPA is about two steps removed from communism,” Alice says flatly.

“Oh my God,” Kevin whimpers.

“God, mom. You sound like Cliff Blossom,” Betty says.

Alice’s face reddens. She jabs her fork in Betty’s direction.

“I do not ‘sound like Cliff Blossom’, Elizabeth!” she seethes. “And don’t you ever imply such a thing again! Honestly, Betty, I don’t know where you get this red streak. It certainly isn’t from me.” She fixes her gaze on Hal. “It must be your father.”

“Alice, goddamm—“ Hal begins. His daughter cuts him off.

“I don’t have a red streak, mom,” Betty snaps. “I—“

“Kevin, sweetheart,” Alice says. “Please keep an eye on Betty. Make sure she doesn’t join the Young Communist League or anything.”

Kevin offers a mock salute.

“Will do, Mrs. Cooper,” he says. Betty glares at him.

“Mom, can I ask you something?” Betty suddenly asks.

“Yes?” Alice pokes at her potatoes.

“Have you ever sent anything in to the New York Times?”

Hal scoffs, and then falls immediately silent.

“‘Sent anything in’? Like what?” Alice demands.

“I don’t know. An editorial. Something like that.”
Alice sighs.

“Yes. I have. A few times.”

“Have they ever…published any of it?”

Alice closes her eyes for a moment, and then reopens them. Her lips twitch. Betty doesn’t mean to needle her, but that’s how it comes across. It’s clear on her mother’s face.

“No, Betty, they haven’t—listen, are you making fun of me?”

“No! I’m just…but they would, theoretically, publish something sent in anonymously…if it was a real story?”

Kevin watches her, curious.

“Yes, Betty,” Alice says, voice thin and worn. “I suppose they would.”

Betty nods rapidly.

“Okay.”

“But the only thing any of the big papers want lately is news about the war in Spain,” Alice says bitterly.

Hal comes alive. He slams his palm down onto the table.

“We are going to have one dinner without talking about the Spanish Civil War,” he growls.

Betty and Alice exchange glances, and decide to spare him. Kevin exhales deeply.

Dinner finishes soon after with little fanfare. And Betty has made up her mind. She leads Kevin out into the yard.

Dead, curling leaves bowl over the ground and flit away in the October breeze. Naked trees shudder. Kevin rubs his arms. Betty reaches into her pocket.

“Kevin—do you remember how Cheryl was supposed to help us out?”

“Yeah. I figured she’d stab you in the back at the first opportunity.”

Betty pulls Cheryl’s tape from her pocket. She raises it up to her ear, and motions Kevin to lean in and listen.

“As a matter of fact…”

“What’s that?”

“Before I show you, I need you to promise to keep mum about it. Tomorrow I’m going to show it to Archie, too. And then we’re going to send it to the New York Times, and pray.”

“Alright. Sure. My lips are sealed.”

“I’m serious,” Betty says, fierce and stern. “Not a word to anyone. Especially not your father.”

Kevin puts a hand over his heart.
“Betty, I swear on my yet-empty grave, that I will not tell a soul. Is that a tape?”

“Yes. And it’s the most valuable tape in the world, as of today. Now, listen.”

Breakfast holds a surprise for Veronica Lodge.

The morning newspaper, flush with news of glorious Nationalist victories over the red hordes, carries an article that draws her attention.

¡Los Extranjeros que Luchan Contra España! The headline cries—‘The Foreigners That Fight Against Spain’.

The article, soaked with fascist ideology and jargon, concerns the foreign volunteers fighting for the Republic. The writer’s words drip with vitriol as he describes the ‘degenerates’, ‘red agitators’, ‘Soviet agents’, and ‘pure scum’ who have ‘come across the sea to make Spain a Russian colony’. He finishes with hearty praise for the insurgent army’s new policy on international volunteers: they are to be shot out of hand.

Beneath this rambling screed is a photograph, explained in the caption as seized from a captured American reporter. The photograph depicts two young American volunteer militiamen, arms slung around each other’s shoulder, smiles on their bright faces.

Veronica recognizes them immediately as Jason Blossom and Jughead Jones.

“Oh my God,” She exclaims aloud.

Hermione’s head rises across the breakfast table. She stops a bite of eggs halfway to her mouth.

“What?” She asks.

“It’s—nothing,” Veronica says. She shakes her head and sets the paper down.

Hermione snatches it up. She scans the article. Veronica sees her eyes catch the photo.

“Say…isn’t that the Blossom boy?” Hermione asks, incredulous.


“It is!” Hermione says. She almost laughs. “And the other one…he looks a bit familiar, too.”

“No he doesn’t.” Veronica blurts out.

“It’s FP Jones boy!” Hermione gasps in disbelief. She shakes her head. “My God…is this where they’ve gotten off to after that nastiness with Mr. Blossom’s factory?”

“No. That’s not them,” Veronica lies firmly.

Hermione shrugs.

“Either way, Americans have got no business fighting in a Spanish war.”

Veronica decides not to push the matter any further. Or to point out the hypocrisy.

“I suppose not.”

Hermione stares at her daughter across the breakfast table. They are alone, free of Fascist officers.
or the ubiquitous Queipo de Llano. Beneath their open window, Veronica can hear the steady tramp of boots as a column of falangists departs for the front, singing the Cara al Sol amidst red-gold streamers and roaring crowds. She shudders.

“There’s something else I need to talk to you about,” Hermione says. Veronica immediately goes on the defensive.

“What’s that?” She asks.

Hermione sighs deeply. Veronica does not expect to like whatever is coming next.

“Mija, do you remember…a year or two ago, when your father made you an honorary legal officer for the company.”

Veronica stiffens.

“Yes…what about it?”

Hermione stirs her plate of food. Outside, the autumn sun beats down on Seville.

“Well, it just so happens that the position may have proven to be more than honorary.”

“What do you mean?” Veronica asks. She already knows just what her mother means.

“It means that we may need your consent to completely iron out all of this malarkey here in Spain. Before we can go home.”

Veronica scoffs.

“Excuse me?”

“I can’t do what I need to do without your signature, mija.”

“Good!” Veronica says, triumphant. She jumps up from the table, her breakfast forgotten. Her dark eyes burn. “Well in that case looks like I’ve got a veto on your…conspiratorial dealings. And you best believe I’m going to use it!” She thunders.

Hermione leaps up, too.

“This isn’t a game, Ronnie!” She snaps.

“Damn right it isn’t! You’re playing with the lives of millions of people! Of entire countries! Of our country! And guess what? I’m not going to let you!”

Hermione scowls.

“Veronica, this is not even a question. As your mother, I-“

“What do you need the signature for?” Veronica demands, her voice softer.

“What?”

“What do you need the signature for? If I’m going to sign something I deserve to know what it is, don’t I?”

Calmed by her daughter’s evident cooperation, Hermione’s rage subsides.
“It’s…a sort of technicality to do with international shipping. In order to move a shipment out of the country, we—“

“By ‘shipment’ you mean the gold daddy and his friends back home ned?”

“Well…yes,” Hermione admits with much discomfort.

Veronica nods.

“Well, if you want that signature, then you better be ready to quite literally force my hand, because there’s no other way you’re going to get it. I may be a lot of things, and maybe not all of them good, but I am not going to go down in the history books as the girl who helped condemn not one but two countries to fascist slavery with the stroke of a pen.”

Hermione buries her face in her hands. She sighs. If Veronica didn’t know better, she’d almost think her mother was on the verge of tears.

“Do you understand our position here, Ronnie?” She demands. “Do you get it? This isn’t about us! We don’t get to decide what parts we want to play, or where we want to place our allegiances, or how we want people to remember us! Whether you like it or not, you’re the daughter of Hiram Lodge. And I’m his wife. And those are our parts. And you have to play yours.”

“Well I’m ripping up the script.”

Hermione shakes her head. She turns around and moves to leave the room.

“You can’t do that, Veronica,” She says, tersely. “We’re guests here, but we’re conditional guests. You should remember that we’re in the heart of Nationalist Spain, and Queipo de Llano has more than enough men with guns.”

“Are you threatening me?” Veronica demands, disgusted. Her heart beats furiously. She balls up her fists. Hermione sighs sadly.

“No, Veronica. I’m not threatening you. I’m advising you, okay?”

Before Veronica can conjure a biting rejoinder, her mother steps out of the room.

“I’m sorry, can you play that one more time?” Archie asks, crammed into the corner seat of their traditional Pop's booth.

Betty hits the buttons on the tape, and the gravelly voices spill out of the tape again.

“Talk about red-handed,” Kevin breathes, though it’s the second time he’s heard the recording.

The tape is indeed, as Cheryl had put it, priceless. They have Cliff Blossom and his friends dead to rights. Clear cut, vocal confessions of intent and conspiracy to destroy the lawfully constituted government of the United States of America, in collusion with the fascist governments of Italy and Germany. What could be more damming?

“Cheryl got this for you?” Archie asks, a hint of incredulity in his voice.

Betty nods.

“Yeah.”
“I guess she’s got more of a conscience than she lets on,” Kevin says.

“I think she always has.”

“So…what now?” Kevin asks.

“Well…this is the flimsiest part of the plan,” Betty admitted. “We don’t really have any better idea than sending the recording in to some big city paper and hoping their journalistic interests override their commitments to any…moneyed interests.

The two boys nod.

“Well, who knows the address of the New York Times?” Kevin asks.

“I’m sure my mom’s got it somewhere,” Betty assures them. “She’s never given up trying to get an article published.”

“Have uh…have either of you heard anything from Jason or Jughead?” Archie asks, his voice colored with worry.

Betty shakes her head sadly.

“My dad was listening to the radio last night,” Archie says. “They’re saying Franco’s going to take Madrid in a week or two. Franco’s uh…Franco’s the bad guy, right?”

“Oh my God. It just hit me that Jughead Jones and Jason Blossom are going to die fighting fascists in Spain,” Kevin says. “This is insane.”

Betty leans over the diner table.

“I know it’s bad. But there’s nothing we can do. Look, they’re probably safer over there than they are here. Jughead is, at least.” She waves the recording in the air. “This is what we can do to help them. Alright?” She gets no response, but takes the silence as assent. “Alright, well, I’m going to go home and find the mailing address for the New York Times, and then I’m going to go and mail it in. You fellas are welcome to come along.”

Chapter End Notes

When I first wrote this chapter back in maybe October of last year, I thought Veronica's dialogue was a little over-the-top and dramatic, even for her.

Then I watched season 2 and suddenly this seems tame.

I will literally never get over the fact that they had her say the sentence "Word of my exploits serving Nick his comeuppance has seeped into the demimonde of mobsters and molls my father used to associate with, so the five families are sending their youngest and brightest, their "princes," as it were to, well, come court the rare Mafia Princess who can belly up to the bar with the big boys."

I tip my hat to the Riverdale writers for firmly outpacing me in the ridiculous writing
department.
Sincerely, your loving brother, Jason

Wintringham officially lists the boys in the XII International Brigade with the ranks of privates, but informs them that the brigade is still in training in Albacete, some 150 miles to the south of Madrid, and won’t be ready for combat until early November. They don’t, he assumes, require any further training considering their lived experience at Toledo. They don’t contradict him. He shakes their hands and promises to let them know as soon as XII is ready for action.

“What do we do until then?” Jason asks.

Wintringham shrugs.

“Madrid’s a lovely city. Go have a look. Take in a movie. Flirt with the locals. And keep your heads down whenever the Germans start dropping bombs.”

The first thing Jughead wants to do is find a post office so he can write home to Betty and everyone else. Jason agrees.

That proves difficult. The exigencies of the war severely hamper Madrid’s mail services. The government censors insist on reviewing every bit of mail leaving the city, lest something demoralizing or militarily sensitive slip through. And with all of the press correspondents thronging Madrid, the letters of a couple of kids from New York are no priority.

One morning early in October finds the boys drinking in a little tavern called Emiliano’s Bar near the Puerta del Sol. As with every other venue in the city, the place is filled with milicianos packing pistols. They’ve met with Mariano, Isidora, and a gang of other militiamen for a drink, and learned in the process that Madrid’s bartenders are less than particular about the age of their customers.

“I don’t care. I won’t fight again,” one miliciano, a man named Ausencio, asserts.

“Coward,” Isidora charges.

“So you’ll sit on your hands when the fascists come to burn Madrid?” Mariano demands.

“Coward?” Ausencio spits back. “I’m no coward, but I’m not foolish enough to die for nothing.” He punctuates his words with a sip of beer. “I fought at Badajoz. You should have seen the slaughter. And our forces? We did not know where the next unit down the line was. There were no radios. No communication. Half of our guns didn’t work! There is no organization. If this government wants men to risk their lives for it, then it’s going to have to demonstrate we have a fighting chance.”

“So you want officers barking orders and drilling?” Isidora demands. “You want—“

“I want order,” Ausencio retorts.

“You both have points,” Jason cuts in. Everyone’s eyes swing to the young American. ”The war effort is being…mismanaged. The government ought to have every able-bodied man and woman in the city out digging trenches and tank traps before the fascists get here. Not to mention turning out bullets and shells instead of…I saw a pencil factory still operating on the way here. Why the hell hasn’t that been converted to produce munitions?”

“It’s not that simple, Jason,” Jughead says, setting down his beer. “One factory isn’t equal to another. You need new equipment and new training before you can start churning out bombs and
guns from, say, a cosmetics firm. How long would it take to turn your dad's syrup refinery into an armaments manufacturer?"

“My point is there’s a serious lack of discipline around here and—“

Mariano pounds his mug on the table, spraying his companions with flecks of foam.

“Barracks discipline is the enemy! My father served in the army bef—“

“Discipline is not the enemy,” Jason retorts. “Look, I know you’re an anarchist, but your ideals are going to have to get on with reality at some point.”

He and Isidora glower.

“He’s right,” Jughead says, glad to agree on something. “Do you want to win this war or not?”

“No, if we’re just going to end up taking orders from new bosses,” Isidora says coldly.

“We can beat the fascists, then we can worry about getting rid of all the bosses,” Ausencio says. “Did you hear how our boys ran at Talavera de la Reina? Again? The Moors flanked them and they broke and ran.”

“They won’t run at Madrid,” Mariano says, firmly.

“How do you know that?” Jughead asks.

“Because this is Madrid,” Isidora says. “This is the heart of Spain. They won’t have the guts to be cowards, here.”

“Look, if Madrid falls—“ Jughead starts.

Mariano jabs a thick finger at him.

“Madrid won’t fall. If she somehow does, we’ll keep fighting.”

“But you need Madrid,” Jason says. “If Franco takes the city the war will be as good as finished.”

“Well, it won’t matter, because Madrid won’t fall.”

The conversation winds down. The milicianos eventually stand, salute their American comrades, and then leave the two boys to themselves.

They’re sipping their beers and mumbling about home and war and fascism when an attractive young woman with dark hair and bright, keen eyes joins them at their table.

“Hey,” Jughead says, flatly, downing the last of his beer and handing it off to a passing waiter.

“Hi.” She responds in English, with a perfect American accent.

Jughead’s head snaps up.

“Hey,” Jughead repeats, paying much closer attention.

Jason watches cautiously.

“Sorry for the intrusion.” She apologizes and smiles. “I just heard you boys speaking English and had to introduce myself.” The young woman extends her hand. “Toni Topaz, Associated Press.”
Nice to meet you.”

Jason shakes her hand.

“Jason Blossom.” He jerks his head towards his companion. “That’s Jughead Jones.”

“Your name’s Jughead?” She raises an eyebrow.

Jughead opens his mouth to defend himself.

“You know what? I’ve heard worse.” She says. Jughead smiles. She brings her beer to her mouth and takes a swig. “So, what brings you fellas to Madrid? You do know there’s a war on, right?”

“If I had a peseta for every time we got that question.” Jughead grumbles.

“Sorry. It’s just every other American I’ve met here so far has been another reporter.” She leans in close. “And we’re a solitary species. We don’t get along well with each other. But you two don’t strike me as newsmen.”

“We’re not,” Jason says.

“So then…” Her eyes fall to the pistols at their hips. “Ah, you’re a couple of those…International Volunteers I keep hearing about, huh? Thought so.” She smiles. “Seen any fighting yet?”

“Toledo.” Jason replies.

“I blew up the Alcazár.” Jughead sips his beer.

Toni’s eyes go wide.

“Wait, that was you? I’d heard some foreigners were involved but—wow. Well, you’ve got to let me do a story on you.”

“I’m a little in my drink right now.” He mumbles.

She shrugs.

“When you sober up a little.” Toni says. Her eyes dart from one boy to the next, very much intrigued.

“Say.” Jason starts. “You’re a reporter, huh? So you send a lot of dispatches out of the city?”

“God.” She moans. “Try to. The censors are impossible. They won’t let anything through that hints at how bad things are going for the Republic. A few weeks ago the Republican militias were absolutely routed at Talavera de la Reina. I tried to put out a report on that and one of the press officers nearly shot me for my trouble.”

“But you can get messages out of the city?” He presses.

Toni shrugs.

“Sure. Can’t promise they won’t be cut to pieces.”

“We’ve been trying to get letters back home.” Jason says. “But we’ve been having…trouble thanks to—well, like you said, the censors. Do you think you could help us out?”
Toni smiles and takes another sip of beer.

“Well I’ve just met you,” she teases. “You could be fascist spies for all I know.”

“We aren’t fascist spies,” Jason assures her.

“Hmmm. Sounds much like something a fascist spy would say.”

“Do you run into a lot of fascist spies around here?” Jughead teases.

“Oh, the city’s crawling with them,” she half-laughs. “They call them the ‘Fifth Column’. Last week I was walking past the National Palace when a fascist sniper started firing on people in the street. I had to lie down in a gutter with my hands over my head until some militiamen smoked him out.” She draws her finger across her throat. “They also plant bombs. Spread nasty rumors. The works.”

“Good, I was running out of reasons to fear,” Jughead sighs.

“Oh, don’t worry. You’re much more likely to be killed by a Nazi bomber.”

“God. How long have you been in Madrid?” Jason asks.

Toni counts off on her fingers.

“Three…no, four months. I got here in late July. Just four days after the uprising in Morocco, actually.”

“You got here that fast from the States?” Jughead asks.

She shrugs.

“Well, I was already in Europe. It was a short trip from Berlin to here.”

Jason almost chokes on his beer.

“Berlin? What were you doing in Berlin?”

She snorts.

“Reporting. To the extent they let me, anyway. I got a visit from the Gestapo every time someone in the Party took exception to something I wrote. Which was…about every other night.”

The two boys stare, much impressed.

“Did they…torture you?” Jason asks, like a child taking in a bedtime story. “I’ve heard—“

Toni giggles.

“They had a little restraint, considering I’m a foreign national and all. They arrested me more than a few times, though. I could find my way through Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse blindfolded.”

“So then, what is it like?” Jughead asks.

“What is what like?”

“Berlin. Besides the Gestapo.”
“It’s a nice city, at first. It stays nice if you’ve got the right name, the right blood, and the right politics. Needless to say, I didn’t pass muster in any of those categories.” She shrugs.

“You’re brave,” Jason says, shaking his head. “I wouldn’t have the guts to set foot in Berlin.”

She squints and looks the tall, fair-skinned young man over.

“No? You look perfectly uh...how would they have put it? Rassenhygienische. ‘Racially clean’. Unless—” she turns to Jughead. “He’s a communist, isn’t he?”

Jughead snorts into his beer.

“You’ve said more than you know.”

Toni smirks.

“How did y—“ Jason tries.

“I can tell. I can always tell. If I had a nickel for every communist I’ve met, I’d uh...well, I’d be a capitalist.”

“You...don’t like communists?” Jason asks, sounding a little hurt.

“I’ve liked some. Disliked others. The doctrine itself I have points of—“

“It’s not a doctrine,” Jason cuts in. “It’s a—“

“No. No. No,” Jughead half-shouts. “I am not having this today! Do you have any idea what I—“ he points at Jason. “This one. You give him an opening to talk about Marx and he will not stop. Find something else to talk about. Please.”

Jason rolls his eyes. Toni smiles.

“Well...” Jason ventures. “About those letters. If you could mail something out of Spain for us...”

“The first time you asked, I’d known you for about...five minutes,” Toni says. “Now I’ve known you for about...thirty? That is a six-fold increase.” She sips her beer. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Jughead clarifies.

She nods.

“I can probably take you boys down to the Telefónica now.”

“Telefónica?” Jason asks.

“It’s Madrid’s biggest telephone exchange. From where every correspondent in the city sends their...correspondence. And where the censors roost.”
The three finish their drinks, and then set off.

The boys follow Toni out of the bar and into Madrid’s ancient, winding streets.

They pass a theater with a great hole gouged out of its roof by fascist bombs. The marquee still cheerfully advertises the day’s shows, and nonplussed madrileños still stream in and out of the old building. Today’s picture is El acorazado Potemkin.


Jughead smiles.

Toni leads them Telefónica, the massive telephone exchange that dominates the city skyline, and lately a communications hub for the legions of foreign correspondents occupying Madrid. The boys follow their new companion up to the fifth floor, past rows of girls at switchboards and shabby, disheveled reporters scribbling last minutes notes.

Their journey ends at the door of a tiny office ensconced between densely packed shelves of papers and envelopes. She knocks once and then again. When there’s no response, she simply opens the door and steps inside. The room is painfully cramped. Dust swirls through the air, catching the incandescence of a single burning blue light bulb. The overpowering stench of ink and pulp curls through the air.

A tall, dark-haired Spaniard with a mournful face and downturned greets them from behind a little desk, his face pure displeasure. His eyes are bleary and bloodshot. His skin is waxen and sallow. He looks as if he hasn’t slept in days. “Señorita Topaz, who are these men and why are they here?” He demands.

“Relax, Arturo.” She says. ”They’re buddies of mine.” Toni makes introductions. “Uh, boys, this is Arturo Barea, Chief Press Officer of the Spanish Republic. Arturo, this is Jason Blossom and this is Jughead…last name.”

Barea crosses his arms.

“‘Buddies of mine’ does not give these boys clearance to storm in here and…and…why are they here?”

“They’ve got mail to send, and I was hoping you could give us a hand?”

Barea snorts.

“If it was up to me, you vultures—excuse me, ladies and gentlemen of the press—wouldn’t even be here writing up your little stories while our country tears itself apart. It’s bad enough without my having to play mailman for a pair of kids.”

Toni rolls her eyes.

“We’ve caught him in one of his moods.” She not-so-quietly whispers to her companions. The Spaniard glowers. “Look, Arturo. You see this ‘kid’ here?” She puts a hand on Jughead’s shoulder. “He helped bring down the walls of the Alcazar. They both came here to fight for the—for your Republic. On their own dime and at their own risk, so I think the least you can do is arrange for them to get a few letters back home.”
Barea sighs. He pinches the bridge of his nose, groans, and lets off a string of Spanish vulgarities.

“Let me see your letters.” He grumbles. “I will see them, and that’s all.”

“Well, we haven’t written them yet…” Jason squeaks

“Of course you haven’t.” He turns to Toni, the image of exasperation. “Come and find me when you have something concrete to send and I’ll see what I can do.” Toni smiles and salutes him.

“You’re a good man, Arturo Barea.”

“You’re lucky I don’t hate you quite as much as I hate the rest of this…viper’s pit.” He snaps.

Toni slings her arms around her new friends’ shoulders.

“Come on. Let’s go find you boys some pen and paper, yeah?”

She leads them away from the irritable press officer, down a winding corridor thronged by antsy bureaucrats, into a long, low sixth story room lined with telegraphs and packed full of reporters jostling for space.

The boys take a seat and write.

Dear Cheryl,

Sorry I haven’t written anything to you, yet; things have been a bit hectic over here (and over there, too, I bet!). We’ve gotten into battle once, already (don’t panic, I’m alright). We fought the fascists at Toledo, and we might’ve beaten them, too if we’d only had a few more men or a few more guns. Turns out Jones, despite his reluctance, isn’t a bad soldier (and neither am I, if I allow myself to brag for a moment). He saved my life. We’re in Madrid now, and we’re preparing to meet Franco at the edge of the city. You mustn’t believe all of the reports saying that Madrid is going to fall any day now. The soldiers and militiamen here are untrained and green, but they’re the bravest men you’ve ever seen. I hope everything is well (as well as is possible) at home. I hope you’re getting along okay with Miss Cooper and that you haven’t killed each other yet. Know that I love you and miss you every day. I’d ask you to give my love to mom and dad, but considering the past few months, I will refrain.

I have to ask, too. Are you having any luck regarding you—know—what? Sorry—Time is short and we really need something to replace those papers. As soon as you get your hands on anything that might incriminate our father and his friends, you’ve got to let me know, okay?

By the way, Spain is an absolutely lovely country! When this is all over and we’ve crushed fascism into the dust, we should consider a vacation (sans rifles).

Love, well wishes, and long live the working people of Spain.

Sincerely, your loving brother, Jason.

Jughead keeps his letter brief. He scrapped the one he’d written on the truck from Toledo, in which he’d spoken of the battle for Toledo. He’d decided Jason was right; there was no need to worry her unnecessarily. So he tells a little white lie.

Dear Betty,

How are things? Things over here are terrible by absolute standards, but not bad relatively
speaking. I assure you we’re far from the front and haven’t seen any real fighting. There’s no real chance we’ll be injured, barring an unlucky accident. I’d ask about Cliff Blossom and all that, but I’m sure Jason will take care of that. I’ll just say I miss you, Archie, and everyone else, and send you all of my love. I hope I’ll be able to come home soon.

With all my love, Jughead.

Toni collects their letters when they’re finished and heads off to run them by Barea.

“I’ll let you know the minute someone writes back.” Toni promises. “If they do.”
Cheryl Blossom picks up today’s issue of the *Times*, scans the headlines, and then tosses it back down.

On the second page is a headline proclaiming the ‘**FALL OF MADRID IMMINENT**’.

It’s early morning and she’s still shaking off sleep. Clad in a bathrobe, clutching a cup of coffee, she shuffles towards the sitting room. She stops halfway there at the sound of her father’s clipped, voice.

“Again?” Cliff hisses over the phone. Cheryl listens intently through the door. “Christ! How long are these damned people going to make us wait? We don’t have forever! When Madrid falls? Well when the hell is that going to be? Isn’t your General Franco supposed to be some sort of great war hero? He can’t whip a bunch of bootblacks and farmhands with rusty rifles?” There’s a pause. Cliff snorts. “*On credit?* Yes, Mrs. Lodge. *You’d damned well better!*”

Cheryl cringes. She’s not daft. She surmises there’s yet another hold up. That’s a relief. It means there’s time, yet.

She steps into the sitting room with all the nonchalance she can muster.

“Morning, daddy.”

Cliff whirls around like he’s been caught out in a crime. And he has.

“Cheryl! Sweetheart! Good morning.”

She sinks into a chair and sips her coffee with an easy, smooth smile on her face.

Cliff groans and digs his fingers into his scalp.

“What’s wrong?” Cheryl asks.

“It’s nothing, darling; just some business…nonsense. As usual.”

“If you say so,” she beams. He grimaces.

Cheryl finishes her coffee, goes back into the dining room, and picks up the paper again.

After she’s finished with the human interest section, chuckles mildly at a caricature of Henry Wallace, and eats a slice of toast, Cheryl decides to see if Betty has sent the tape off yet, and if not,
to compel her to do so. Frankly, she doesn’t trust Betty Cooper to get anything done on her own. That isn’t personal, though. She doesn’t trust many people to get anything done. People are, as a general rule, incompetents.

She showers quick, dresses just as quick, and then bustles out of Thornhill before her father can stop her. Cheryl slips out into the garden and passes by three silvershirts smoking leisurely in the shadow of a hedge. The men salute lazily as she passes by. Cheryl waves and nods briskly.

She unlatches the mansion’s front gate and steps into the warm, familiar embrace of her hometown.

Riverdale is deceptively peaceful. The tumult of the preceding months has finally died off with the restoration of the iron maple syrup dictatorship and the disappearance of the Blossom and Jones boys. Things are back to normal. Men tip their hats to Cheryl as she passes them in the streets, as they always have. Shopkeepers and custodians—those still turning a profit—open their places of business for the day.

Cheryl turns off of Main Street and onto Elm Boulevard. She counts four blocks, and then finds herself at the Cooper family’s doorstep. A sturdy, if unfashionable Ford sits idly in the driveway, so someone’s home. She hesitates to knock. Normally she loves a bit of verbal sparring, but right now she isn’t keen on a confrontation with Mr. or Mrs. Cooper.

She swallows her fears and knocks. She waits a moment then knocks again. Finally she hears footsteps.

The door swings open.

Much to Cheryl’s relief, it’s Betty.

“Oh, thank God. I was afraid I’d run into Dorothy Thompson instead.”

Betty rolls her eyes.

“I’m not in the mood for jokes right now, Cheryl. What do you want?”

“Can I borrow a cup of sugar?”

“Stop!”

“Alright, alright. Look, have you finished up with that recording I gave you?”

“No.”

“What do you mean ‘no’? What, are you adding a musical score?”

Betty crosses her arms.

“I thought you didn’t care what happened.”

“I don’t.” Cheryl affirms, unconvincingly. “But I went out of my way to help you, so if you don’t mind I’d like to know you’re doing more than whistling Dixie.”

“You know what, Cheryl—“

“I do know what, actually. I’m heading to the post office right now, just so happens. Go grab it and come with me.” Cheryl peeks over Betty’s shoulder into the house. “Are your parents home?”
“No, b—“

“Wonderful. Let’s go.”

They stare into each other’s eyes wordlessly for a good thirty seconds.

“Fine. But if you get any fresher with me…”

Before Cheryl can formulate a response, Betty dashes upstairs.

She reappears a minute later with a purse slung over her shoulder.

“It’s in there?” Cheryl demands.

“Yes.”

“Let me see it.” Cheryl extends her hand. Betty huffs. She reaches into the purse, impulsively looks over her shoulder, and then produces the tape. Cheryl takes it, examines it to her satisfaction, and then reluctantly hands it back.

“Happy?” Betty asks.

“Come on,” Cheryl says.

They start in the direction of Riverdale’s little post office. Betty periodically clutches her purse close to her, as if someone might leap from the bushes and steal it. Perhaps it is not a completely unfounded fear. But as far as Cheryl knows, her father is entirely unaware of what she’s done. For the time being.

Betty won’t stop throwing her aside glances, and it’s painfully obvious she wants to say something. She doesn’t. Cheryl doesn’t help her along.

As they pass by Pop’s Diner, they nearly collide with two tall, broad men in grey shirts and campaign hats cinched by red braids. Cheryl deftly steps aside and pulls Betty out of their way. The pair swaggers by, pistols on their hips and self-satisfied smiles on their faces.

“What the hell was th—“ Betty starts.

“Silvershirts,” Cheryl says grimly.

“Silvershirts? What, you mean like Pelley’s Silver Legion? What are they doing in River—“

“My father called them in. As a good-will gesture towards Pelley. And for security. He’s a little paranoid ever since Jason and your boyfriend blew up his factory and skipped town.”

“Well, how many are here?”

“A dozen? Maybe a few more? Don’t worry, they’re bluster and bragging more than anything.”

“Even though they have guns?”

Cheryl doesn’t answer that.

They round the last corner before the post office, and Betty opens her mouth again and asks: “Have you heard anything from Jason?” ‘And by extension, Jughead?’ is the implied ending of that sentence.
Cheryl’s lips twitch. Her eyes dim a little.

“No,” She says flatly.

“Oh,” Betty says, disappointed. “Well, how do you think they’re doing?” She flinches with the after-the-fact realization that it’s a bit of a dumb question.


“Jughead said they wouldn’t be anywhere near the front,” Betty says weakly.

Cheryl shakes her head. “So? They’ll just as easily die in a bombing raid. Or an artillery barrage. Who knows? War’s full of fun uncertainties.”

“This is a nightmare,” Betty sighs.

“No, Betty, darling. This isn’t a nightmare. This is a bad political potboiler.” Betty doesn’t say anything. “By the way; do you even have the address?”

“What address?”

“What adder—“

“The Times. That’s where you’re sending the damned thing, isn’t it?”

“Oh. Yes. Yeah, I’ve got it from my mother.”

Cheryl nods.

“Let’s assume—for the sake of assumption—that you do get it to the Times and they do publish a lovely little expose. What happens next?”

“Well then your father and everyone in the Fraternity go to prison for high treason.”

“Or the hangman’s noose?”

“They don’t hang people anymore, Cheryl,” Betty says. ”They shoot them. Or electrocute them.”

“Pity. There’s nothing quite like a short drop and a sudden stop to get the blood going.”

Betty scowls and stops walking. She crosses her arms. Cheryl steps back.

“You know, Cheryl, sometimes I really don’t like you very much.”

“I know,” Cheryl chirps. She pats Betty on the shoulder. “It keeps you fun.”

Betty groans and picks up the pace, leaving Cheryl behind.

Riverdale’s post office is a tiny little building built like a rectangle, painted stark white and blue, and distinguished by the bright red letters announcing, ‘post office’. It’s as serviceable as it boring.

The two girls step inside.

Riverdale’s resident postman, a friendly, big-eared veteran of the Philippine campaign named Willie Lumpkin, shuffles out from the back room.

“Well, well, well!” he exclaims. “Just who have we got today?” He inclines his balding head in a
gesture of deference. “Betty, Cheryl. Lovely to see you ladies.”

“Hi, Willie,” Betty says with a thin, affected smile. Cheryl hovers behind her, face dull and grim.

Lumpkin’s own smile does not fade.

“We have something to…post,” Cheryl says at last.

Lumpkin nods, excitedly.

“Sure, sure. You’re the first ones to come in today, actually. So what have we got? Love letters?” He freezes up when no smiles are forthcoming. “Joking, I’m joking!”

Betty steps forward. She reaches into her purse and produces the tape.

“Do you have something we can package this in? Something soft. It can’t be damaged.”

Lumpkin strokes his chin. He reaches out two wizened fingers and takes the tape from Betty, who releases it with great reluctance.

“I should think so. I should think so…” He turns the thing over in his hands. “Is this a recording, Betty?”

“Yes,” Cheryl answers for her

“What of?”

“Just…something,” Betty replies, hoping he won’t pry.

Lumpkin nods eagerly. He disappears into the back room, and returns a moment later with a little brown package.

“Thank you,” Cheryl says.

“What’s the address for this?”

“1475 Broadway, New York City,” Betty says firmly.

The postman squints.

“The New York Times? You girls have a scoop?”

Cheryl, becoming fast fed up with the questions, forces a sharp ‘yes’ out through her teeth. Lumpkin nods and smiles in condescension.

“Thank you,” Betty says one more time. The girls turn to leave.

“Oh! Wait! Actually, I’ve got something for you, miss.” The postman calls after them.

“Who?” Cheryl asks. They stop and turn.

“Both of you, as a matter of fact. They came together. Funny that, huh?” He hurries into the back room again and returns a minute later with two letters in hand. “They’re postmarked to Paris, but before that, Spain. Madrid.” He cocks his head. “You…don’t have any friends in that mess, I hope?”

The girls’ eyes pop. They thank him for his help, collect their letters, and depart from the post
office post haste.

Cheryl heads home and opens her letter. She breathes in a sigh of relief deeper than she thought possible. It’s from Jason. And he’s alive.

She reads it some fifteen times in the next hour.

It’s all so surreal. Wars in Abyssinia or Spain or wherever aren’t supposed to have any bearing on their lives. Riverdale is supposed to be safe, shielded from the woes of the world behind the ‘idiocy of rural life’, as Marx put it (she hates that she knows that). Her father’s supposed to be a hard-bitten, implacable robber baron, but not a dime novel villain. Her brother’s supposed to be a flighty rich kid, not some rifle-toting Bolshevik.

But ought is not is and is is not ought. She must make her peace with things the way they are.

So Cheryl retrieves a pen and paper and scribbles out a letter of her own.

Dear Jason,

I’m tickled to know you haven’t gotten yourself killed just yet. Everything is quite all right here insofar as we’re all alive. And isn’t that all you can ask for, these days?

Besides that, I’ve got something I think you’ll like. I’ve managed to procure a recording of our father and his comrades friends discussing quite openly their insidious plans for our glorious republic. Betty and the gang had us ship it into the Times, for lack of better options. All we can do now is wait (remember, I still don’t care about any of this. Nor do I care about the Spanish Republic or the ‘working people of Spain’).

I do care about the fact that if you don’t return home post-haste, the next time I see your name is going to be on a casualty list. Whatever happens here, in Spain, or anywhere else, it’s not worth you dying for. Not to me, at least. Please come to your senses before it’s too late.

All my love, Cheryl.

She finishes the letter and decides she’ll mail it in the morning.

Betty opens her letter before she gets home. She reads while she walks, weaving around pedestrians and telephone poles.

She feels a hundred pounds lighter. As of two weeks ago, at least, Jughead was still alive. And he allays her fears with the assurance that, no; they are nowhere near the front. They are safely in the rear.

When Betty gets home, she flops down onto her bed, presses the letter to her face, and just lies like that for a while. She squeezes her eyes shut and revels in the deep, torrential relief.

She dares to believe that maybe, just maybe, everything will be okay.

Of course, she’ll write a letter back. But she doesn’t have the energy right now. Betty Cooper is quite tuckered out by her part in the fight against fascism. Face buried in her pillow, letter clenched in her hand, she very soon falls fast asleep.

An hour later, Alice Cooper slips into her daughter’s room, as she’s wont to do. She came home in
quite a tizzy, so clearly something's the matter. Betty's never been a very good liar. Carefully, she pries her daughter's fingers apart and retrieves whatever it is she’s got clenched in her hand. Unfolding the crumpled slip of paper reveals a letter filled out in a messy, fervent hand. Alice reads it, her lips moving soundlessly. She crumples it back up the way she found it and shakes her head.

God help the Jones boy.

Alice slips the letter back into Betty’s hand, and decides no one needs to know about this just right now.

The next morning, Cheryl posts her happy letter back to Madrid.
Kevin munches slowly, and spits a piece of eggshell into his palm. He lays it down on the kitchen table alongside the other bits of eggshell.

“Eggshell?” his father asks.

Kevin nods.

A sheriff makes better money than most folks in town, but not enough that he can afford to pass up the last carton of eggs at the general store. Even if half of them are cracked.

Kevin sifts through the plate of scrambled eggs with his bent fork. He tries to dig the shells out of the mess before they ever get to his mouth, but finds it’s impossible.

“Why don’t you just eat your toast?” his father asks.

“I like the eggs.”

Sheriff Keller nods.

“Alright.”

“Dad…” Kevin starts, mustering up the courage to broach the question. “Why did you let Cliff Blossom call his own private militia into Riverdale? His father shakes his head, but Kevin knows he understands just fine.

“You mean those boys in the silver shirts?” the sheriff asks.

“Well…yes.”

His father shrugs.

“I can hardly keep Cliff Blossom from hiring whoever he pleases to serve as security on his estate. ‘But do you have to let them walk around town brandishing their pistols?’”

“They’ve got a right to their weapons like everyone else,” says his father.

“I guess they do,” Kevin mutters.

They finish their breakfast of broken eggs and burnt toast. Kevin washes it down with a glass of tepid water. The birds chirp outside. The autumn sun shines bright through their window.

“I’ve got a question for you, Kevin,” his father says. “Before you head out.”

“What might that be?” Kevin asks, slipping on his jacket.

“You’re friends with Betty Cooper. With FP Jones' boy.”

Kevin puts himself on guard.

“…Yeah?”

“Do you have any idea where he and Jason Blossom might have gotten off to?”
Kevin purses his lips. He can assume from which authority the question derives. Cliff Blossom is surely eager to get his hands on both his errant son and the Jones boy who slipped through his finger.

“Who’s asking, you or Cliff Blossom?”

His father pauses for a moment.

“Let’s say ‘the law’.”

Kevin nods.

“Dad, I’ve got no idea.”

November of 1936 draws near, and so do Franco’s armies.

Madrid waits in silent terror. After the fall of Toledo and Talavera de la Reina to the advancing fascists, nothing except the disorganized militiamen stand between the fascists and the capital of the Republic. Franco marches leisurely up the roads from Andalusia and Estremadura.

To soften up the population ahead of their armies, the rebels subject the city to a program of heavy bombardment. Their German allies, eager to test the power of their burgeoning new *Lufwaffe*, gladly comply. So Madrid becomes the first European city to feel the fist of that new form of warfare: terror bombing.

The people of Madrid learn to fear the whining of Junkers engines, but it is still so hard to comprehend that those little black specks up in the spotless sky are responsible for the blasts of fire that destroy and kill by the hundreds.

Today suffers a particularly nasty round of bombing. It levels a hospital filled with wounded militiamen and slaughters a plaza’s worth of civilians in a horrific display of fascist military might. After the butchery is done, the planes drop little leaflets.

“*People of Madrid! Your resistance serves only to increase the severity of our punishment! Do not be fools. For each one of ours you kill, we shall shoot ten of yours. Do not take the side of the enemy of our fatherland. To oppose our movement is to die like dogs. ¡Viva Franco! ¡Arriba España!*”

Jughead reads the leaflet slowly, practicing his Spanish. When he’s done, he dutifully rips it in two, throws it into a puddle, and grinds it into pulp under his heel. All around him men, women, and children do the same. Then they turn their faces up towards the sky and curse Franco’s warplanes.

He and Jason are on patrol this evening. Blackout duty. Joining a section of Madrid militiamen, they paint light bulbs and windows black, to prevent them from serving as beacons for the fascist bombers.

Jughead kicks aside another rebel leaflet and dips his brush into the can of black paint. He gently coats the windows of a little tailor’s shop. The tailor himself looks on, sadly. It’s for the defense of the city, of course, but he can hardly attract customers when his windows are blacked out.

Jason argues the merits of the state with an anarchist militiaman.
“But how do you expect to defend the revolution without a state?” Jason asks. “You’ll leave yourself wide open for the reactionaries to regain power.”

“The state is the root of all evil.” The militiaman drags his paintbrush across the windowpane. “It is what creates wicked and power hungry men. Be rid of it and we will be rid of their abuses.”

“The state emerges from class society,” Jason responds. “You can’t get rid of it until class distinctions are leveled, and that can only be done under a dictatorship of the proletariat.”

“You can’t do away with dictatorship through dictatorship,” The militiaman says. Then he turns to Jughead. “Hey, Torombolo, what do you think?”

Jughead sighs.

“I have no idea what you two are talking about and frankly I doubt I care.”

The miliciano looks honestly offended. Jughead feels a little bad.

“Anyway,” Jason says. “You really should read Marx.”

“I can’t read,” the miliciano grunts.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I am learning. But I don’t need to know how to read to know that Stalin’s firing squads aren’t much better than Franco’s.”

“There’s a difference; no one is sent to the firing squad in a workers' state without reason,” Jason asserts.

The militiaman laughs and shakes his head.

“You’re very naïve, young man.”

“Got that right,” Jughead mumbles

“Hey! Hey!” some cries.

The boys turn around. Toni Topaz jogs across the street towards them, waving, and narrowly dodging a careening taxi packed full of militiamen.

“Oh. Hey.” Jughead waves back.

“What a happy coincidence! I was looking for you boys, actually.” She gives a once over to the militiamen, the cans of paint, and the blacked out tailor’s windows. “Blackout duty?”

“Blackout duty,” Jason affirms.

“Ah. Right.” She shakes her head. “Anyway, I’ve got good news; your friends at home wrote back. I had to pry their letters out of Barea’s hands, but I’ve got them.”

The boys’ faces light up.

“Really? Fantastic! You’ve got them with you?”

She shrugs apologetically.
“Eh…not exactly. Sorry. I didn’t expect to run into you just now. I’ve got them in my hotel room, though, it’s just four or five blocks that way.” Toni gestures north. “I’m heading back now, if you fellas want to come along.”

“Go ahead,” one of the militiamen says. “We’re almost done here, anyway.”

“Thanks.” Jason pats the man on the shoulder and salutes. "Talk more later?"

The boys wave goodbye and walk off with their friend.

“So where’re you staying?” Jughead asks.

“The Hotel Florida. That’s where the government sticks all of the foreign reporters. Keep us all in one place and hopefully they’ll keep all of the trouble in one place.” She grins and winks. “Doesn’t exactly work.”

They round a corner. A sprawling mass of marble looms up in front of them, crested by a sign in bright red letters: HOTEL FLORIDA. The building is a crisp, modern structure seven stories tall, a mountain of stolid white stone and glass. Mostly stone now because German bombs have blown out every last window. The marble façade is splintered and a section of the crenellated roof has been blown away.

“Jesus,” Jughead breathes. “Do the Germans have a grudge against against this place?”

Toni shrugs.

“You get used to the bombing after a while. Most of the time they miss.”

She pushes open the hotel’s front doors.

The lobby resembles a ballroom more than a war zone. A Spanish girl dances with a miliciano who can’t be more than fifteen under a great crystal chandelier, while a Hungarian strums at a guitar and an English reporter snaps pictures from the stairwell. In the corner, three men play a game of what Jughead dearly hopes isn’t Russian roulette. At the bar, a portly server pours five glasses of beer (for that’s all there is) for as many customers. A pale gentleman with a small, frantic face hammers something out on a typewriter next to a shattered window. A Galician makes up an obscene rhyme about General Franco in step with the Hungarian’s strumming.

Jughead takes a tentative step forward. “Almost makes you forget there’s a war on.”

“Newsmen aren’t the type to let civil war get in the way of a good party.” She heads towards the stairs. “Come on, I’ve got your letters up in my room.”

Halfway to the stairwell, they’re intercepted by a lean, keenly dressed young man wearing a great smile. He brushes a few curls of dark brown hair out of his eyes.

“Toni! Hi!”

Toni plants her hands on her hips.

“Hi, Nick.”

“Now that’s no way to greet a colleague.” His grin widens.

“Not now,” she barks. “I’m busy.”
Jason and Jughead hang back.

The one called Nick swings his head around.

“And these gentlemen…”

“Jughead Jones,” He hastily introduces himself, hoping to speed things along. Nick nods.

Jason moves forward to do the same. “Jason Bl–“

Nick squints. His face fogs over with confusion. But then it’s gone, and his bright little smile is back.

“Actually, I know who you are, Jason Blossom,” Nick says with sudden interest. “Though I do wonder what you’re doing here.” He looks over the boys and their dirty, dusty clothing. His eyes roll towards the pistols at their hips. “And on the red side, too.”

“What side are you on?” Jason asks.

Nick’s teeth flash, brilliant white.

“I’m a reporter. I’m impartial.”

“Okay, I don’t have time for this. Nick, go bother somebody else.” Toni grabs Jughead by the hand and drags him up the stairs. Jason follows close behind. He spares a moment to glance in Nick’s direction. The young man steps aside and allows them to pass.

“You fellas enjoy your time in Madrid!” He calls after them, with a lilt in his voice.

“And that was…” Jughead prompts, as they reach the first landing.

Toni rolls her eyes again and shakes her head.

“A man that I’m tragically forced to call a colleague. Nicholas St. Clair. Joker whose rich dad landed him a cushy press job.” She turns to Jason and qualifies; “no offense.”

“None taken. I know who he is. Well, I know his family, at least. Small world,” Jason says.

“He’s partial to the fascists?” Jughead asks.

“Partial’s a little generous,” Toni snorts.

“Right.”

Toni ushers them into her second story room. She digs into her bureau and brings out two envelopes. Both have been visibly opened and re-sealed. The censors have had their look.

“Here are your letters.” She steps back into the hall. “Come on, you can read them downstairs. We’ll have a drink and try to avoid Nicky.”

They head back down into the lobby and take up three seats at the bar. The server, a burly Castilian named Ricardo, materializes and provides them with three glasses of beer.

“So you boys still like Madrid?” Toni asks.

“It’s nice enough. All things considered.” Jughead sips his beer. “The people are…surprisingly
optimistic."

“It’s a Spanish trait. You get used to it,” Toni says.

Jason pulls his letter from his pocket. He unfolds it and skims the contents. His face lights up as he finishes. He brings his fist down onto the bar with a triumphant shout.

“Christ!” Jughead jumps and almost spills his beer. “What the hell, Jason?”

“Sorry! It’s just…” Jason smiles and runs his hand through his hair, breathing hard, like a drowning man who’s been plucked from the water. “Good news. Great news, actually.”

Jughead and Toni lean in.

“Yeah?” Jughead asks. “We haven’t had any of that in a good while.”

“It’s from Cheryl.” Jason says. “She says—listen to this. My father held a conference with his… associates a few weeks back, right?”

"Okay,” Jughead says. "And?"

"Well, he had her sit in, and she recorded the minutes. She says she’s got them dead to rights, admitting everything."

“As in-“

“As in voicing their intent to overthrow the legally constituted government of the United States in favor of a totalitarian dictatorship, with the material and moral assistance of foreign powers. Let’s see him or Hiram Lodge try to weasel out of this one.” Jason slams his fist onto the bar again.

For the first time in quite a while, Jughead allows himself hope. This is good news. Fantastic news.

Toni listens intently.

“So what are they going to do, now?” Jughead asks.

“She says they’re going to try to get the tape to some big New York paper. I guess all we can do now is wait and hope.”

“I’m—I’m sorry. What the hell are you two talking about?” Toni asks. She cocks her head.

Jughead isn’t particularly keen to tell the story again. But there’s no harm, he figures. Not now.

“Do you remember all that hullabaloo in the papers a few years back? They called it the ‘Business Plot’?”

Toni nods.

“Sure. You mean those wall street goons who wanted to put over a coup in the US?”

“Right.”

“Right…that uh…Lodge fellow…he went to jail for it, didn’t he?’’

“Yes. Except that his friends decided to give it another go while he was locked up.”

He spills the story to her, while Jason hovers on the fringes and occasionally offers a correction or
a comment. Toni nods along, leaning closer with every word. Her eyes sparkle with awe. When he’s finished, she sits back and sucks in a deep breath, like she’s been holding it the whole time.

“And you’re not jerking me around?” she asks.

Jughead raises his right hand.

“I swear on the precarious altar of liberty,” he says, failing to suppress a smile.

Toni blinks.

“Well—you’ve got to let me write about this. I—”

“I wouldn’t. Unless you want a target painted on your back by some of the most powerful men in the world.”

“Anyway. It doesn’t matter, now,” Jason beams. “It’s over. We’ve won.” He nudges Jughead with an elbow. “I told you Cheryl would come through.”

“Can’t blame me for my skepticism,” Jughead says. But he smiles broadly and claps his friend on the back. “Anyway, it isn’t over quite yet. Not until your father and his friends have joined Lodge in a jail cell.”

“All in due time,” Jason says, still grinning.

Toni stares down at her lap, still processing the fantastic story.

Jughead feels good. This is good. They’ve caught a break. Soon Clifford Blossom and all of his confederates will be staring down the wrong end of a firing squad for high treason. There will be no fascist dictatorship back home. And best of all, he can go home again. He feels almost dreamy.

Toni rouses from her shocked stupor and raises her watery glass of beer; “Well, let’s drink to the failure of fascism. In the US, in Spain, and everywhere else.”

The trio raises glasses and cheers.

Then Nick St. Clair materializes and slides into a seat alongside them.

Toni groans.

“What are you fine folks discussing?” He asks, with that same little smile.

“The weather,” Toni says dryly.

Nick squints through a shattered window.

“I predict cloudy skies, with a strong chance of air raids.”

Jason does an about-face to stare down their unwanted companion, less than amused. He looks about ready to cave in the other man’s face.

“I’m glad you find bombing civilians funny, St. Clair.”

Nick raises an eyebrow.

“Oh, relax. I’m just trying to lighten the mood.” He waves the bartender over and orders himself a
“Drink.

“Nick, you’re a war correspondent. Don’t you have some correspondence to send?” Toni snaps.

“So are you.”

“These men are interviewees,” she spits back. “Human interest.”

“Oh? And what makes them so interesting?” Then to Jason and Jughead; “No offense.”

“They’re foreign volunteers,” Toni responds, shaking with frustration.

“Oh,” Nick says. “Of course.” He chuckles. “Well, gentlemen, I wouldn’t choose this hill to die on, if I were you.” He looks out the window again. “If Madrid holds for two weeks it’ll be a damn miracle.”

“Well—glad to know there’s a military expert in the room,” Jughead snaps.

“I’ve seen the Nationalist Army in action. And I’ve seen the red militias fight, too. If you can call it fighting.” He sucks his teeth and clucks in disapproval. “Let’s just say I know what side I’m betting on.”

“Not that you’d be risking much in a bet,” Toni grumbles.

Nick cocks his head.

“Envy doesn’t become you, sweetheart.”

“Okay, Nick. How’s this for a bet? If Madrid hasn’t fallen in two weeks, you shut the hell up and leave me alone for the next two weeks? How’s that, huh?”

He looks taken aback. Then he quickly regains his composure and chortles.

“You are too much fun.” Nick stands and takes his leave. He abandons his drink.

“God, I hate that son of a bitch,” Toni groans, taking Nick’s drink and downing it. “I don’t know why in God’s name the government ever issued him press credentials. He couldn’t be any more blatant about his…sympathies.”

“What do you really think, though?” Jughead asks.

“About what?”

“Do you think Madrid can hold?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure. I hope so.” She shrugs. “I hear rumors that Soviet Russia is going to send tanks and planes. I guess we’ll see if there’s anything to that.”

“Madrid will hold,” Jason says with that solid, idealistic conviction of his. “It’s got to.”

“Unfortunately the world doesn’t function on ‘ought’, ” Jughead replies.

“Ugh. Don’t I know that?” Toni sighs. “You know…when I was in Germany…” she trails off.

“What?” Jughead asks.

“Mark my words, a few years and all of Europe is going to look like this.”
A patrol of militiamen gathers on the street outside, rifles over their shoulders, chatting up passerby. There are five of them, just back from the front, clothes covered in the dust of battle.

Tires squeal. A sleek black car pulls up alongside the milicianos. A window rolls down. A pistol slides out from the passenger seat. It fires five times. Three of the militiamen fall. The car speeds away. The hotel and the street explode into action. Jughead jumps up and races out the door. On the curb, two of the milicianos lie dead. A third, shot through the leg, leans against a wall, groaning in agony. The last two are unscathed.

“Call it in!” The wounded militiaman snaps at his comrades. The two unwounded men salute and rush off.

Jason kneels down next to the two bodies. He checks their pulses. Nothing. One has caught a bullet through the skull, the other the heart.

“Necesitas un hospital.” Toni puts the wounded man’s arm around her shoulder. “Alguien encontra un doctor!” She shouts to the gathering crowd. “Someone find a doctor!”

“What the hell was that?” Jughead demands.

“La puta quinta columna!” The wounded militiaman groans. “The fucking fifth column!”

A tall, elderly gentleman emerges from the crowd.

“Give him to me.” He says to Toni. She hands the wounded man off to him. He gently lays the militiaman down on the sidewalk and examines the round in his leg.

“What did he mean ‘fifth column’?” Jason asks.

“One of the fascist generals, Mola,” Toni explains. “I told you the other day at the bar, remember? He told some reporter that he had ‘four columns advancing on Madrid, and a fifth already inside the city’. Hidden Fascist sympathizers. Madrid’s crawling with them.” She looks at the two corpses on the curb.

Jughead scans the rooftops and shuttered windows around them. The sky overhead is stormy and grey. Suddenly, Madrid seems an even darker place than before.

From the lobby window, St. Clair watches intently.

That night, Nick St. Clair slips quietly out of the Hotel Florida. Head low, he creeps along the dark streets of Madrid, sticking to the shadows and dodging militia patrols until he reaches his destination.

The Guatemalan Embassy.

Madrid’s foreign legations are islands of safety for the thousands of Franco supporters scattered across the city. The Republican militiamen will not dare risk an international incident by attacking foreign soil.

Nick steps up to the front gate. A guard there looks him over.

“Arriba España!” The guard cries.

“Viva Franco,” Nick responds, and offers a snappy fascist salute.
The guard steps aside and lets him pass.

The embassy is packed full. Mattresses and cots litter the floors and hallways. Men and women, landlords and officers and even a few dukes and counts, sleep crammed into rows like sardines. Some sit awake, chattering excitedly, sharing rumors of Republican military reversals and insurgent advances.

Soon, they say, Franco will be here with his army, and we will be free to leave this goddamn place. We will retake Madrid, and we will have our revenge upon this red rabble.

Nick greets familiar faces as he goes by.

He finds the men he is looking for around a table, fat cigars in their mouths, playing cards in their hands.

“Ey! Nicolas!” A colonel of the Spanish Army shouts excitedly.

Nicolas waves.

“Don Manuel!”

He takes a seat at the table. He knows the men here well. Associates of his family. Associates of his. Three officers, two civilians, and a duke.

“So, how are things out there in Red Madrid?” Asks the colonel.

Nick shakes his head.

“A mess. But by all accounts, the red militias are falling apart. They don’t stand a chance, trust me. There are even rumors the government’s going to flee to Valencia. Franco should take the city any day now.”

The men cheer and whistle.

“And thank Christ for that. I’ve been in this goddamn embassy for four months. Any longer I’ll go barking mad. I need some sun, damn it!”

Everyone laughs.

“You know, some fellow gunned down a few red militiamen outside of the Hotel Florida this afternoon,” Nick says. "Was that one of your boys?"

The duke slams a fist onto the table.

“Of course! A dedicated young man named Miguel and his friends.”

Nick smiles.

“Well, he certainly put the fear of God into the red bastards.”

“The Marxists didn’t catch him, did they?”

“No, the car was long gone by the time they could gather up their wits.”

“Mmm. Good. good.”
One of the men produces a bottle of wine.

“Would you like a drink, Nicky? We may be trapped in this damn place, but that doesn’t mean we can’t still live like gentlemen.”

Nick waves him off.

“No, thank you. I actually can’t stay long, but I do need to use the embassy phone, if that’s alright.”

“Of course, of course! Go and find Carranza. Short little Guatemalan fellow. Runs the embassy line.”

Nick stands, thanks his friends, and salutes.

He finds Carranza, who is indeed a short Guatemalan fellow, and has him dial the number he needs. The phone rings once. Twice.

“Hello?” Comes the voice.

“Hey, dad.”

“Nicky!” His father exults. “How are things in Spain?”

“Fine, fine.”

“Is Franco in Madrid, yet?”

“Not yet. Give it a few days.”

“Fantastic!”

“Listen, dad. There’s something I thought you might find curious. Or rather, that Mr. Blossom might find curious.”

“What’s that?”

“His son is here. Jason. On the red side.”

There’s a brief silence.

“Well. That is curious.” Mr. St. Clair rumbles from across the ocean. “And I’m sure he’ll be happy to know.” Another pause. “Is he alone?”

“No. He’s with some kid. Jones, I think he called himself? Funny first name.”

“Well, I think Mr. Blossom would very much like to hear about all this.”
The Cause of All Mankind

Chapter Notes

For the purposes of the story, I have attributed some of the exploits of the XI International Brigade to the XII.

“For your freedom and ours”
~Motto of the International Brigades

“Goddammit!” Jughead tosses another dart at the target. It goes wide and sticks itself into the wall.

“Bad luck,” Toni smiles. She flicks her wrist and sends a dart sailing into the target, an inch off from the bull’s eye.

Jason throws his dart. He comes nearer than Jughead, but not as near as Toni.

The darts are rapidly exhausted.

The lobby of the Hotel Florida watches their game with vague interest. Of much more pressing concern are the recent shifts in political fortune. Mugs of beer grow warm and coffee grows cold beneath the hushed whispers and wild rumors that pass from tongue to ear.

It is the first week of November. The government has fled to Valencia, just as the gossips predicted. The final hour is upon the Spanish Republic. Franco prepares his sword to strike at the heart of Red Madrid. The denizens of the Hotel Florida at once bemoan their predicament and refuse to recognize the stark reality of impending defeat.

Toni lands another dart on the target.

“Where’d you get that arm?” Jughead asks.

Toni shrugs.

“In Manhattan there’s a bar. Me and my friends would head down there every day after work. We’d play darts for hours because…well…it was free.”

“Never got bored?”

“Nah. See, we worked out a scheme after a while. Two of us would go up and play, and I would act like they I was losing bad. Like I really couldn’t throw worth a damn. Then some drunk would come up and demand to play me, just to show some girl up in front of the bar. So I’d bet him a few dollars, he’d accept, and then I’d take him to school. We made some good cash like that.”

Jughead chuckles. Then he informs his friends he’s going to get a drink, and starts towards the bar, leaving Toni and Jason alone.
“A few more darts land and miss.

“So why did you become a reporter?” Jason asks.

“When you want to get out and see the world,” Toni responds. “You can be a journalist or a sailor. And I get seasick.”

Jason nods, and then asks the question he truly wants to.

“The other day…when we first met…when I gave you my name, you…gave me a bit of a look. If you don’t mind me asking…”

“Oh!” Toni says quickly. “It’s…it’s nothing personal. It’s just—my father is…well, you might have heard his name, actually.”

“Someone important?” Jason asks.

“A congressman. Senator Thomas Topaz?”

Jason’s eyes widen. He smiles.

“Ah! Of course! Yes, yes, I know him. Good man. I’m sorry I…I didn’t make the connection. Is it…”

“Well, it’s just that he doesn’t get on with your family. But you know that.”

“Of course…the liquidation—slaughter of the Uktena,” he said.

“And more recent grievances. Your family—your father isn’t exactly a friend of labor. My grandfather grew up poor. Very poor.”

“Yes. It’s understandable—“

She shakes her head and throws another dart.

“Don’t worry about it. You aren’t your father.”

Jughead returns from the bar.

“I’m back.”

“I see that—“

The Hotel Florida’s doors swing open. A tall, strapping figure in uniform swaggered in. The beret askew on his head sports the three-pointed red start of the International Brigades.

“Excuse me!” he calls out in Spanish. A few people offer him clenched fist salutes. Then in German-accented English he calls: “I’m looking for a Blossom and a Jones?”

“We are being arrested?” Jughead deadpans.

“Look at his hat,” Jason says. “He’s from Brigade.”

“Over here!” Toni calls, singling out her two friends. ”Your men are right here!”

The German walks over. He smiles, black mustache crinkling.
“Hans Beimler, International Brigades,” he introduces himself. “Jason Blossom and Forsythe Jones?”

“Selfsame,” Jughead says. He points to himself: “Jones.” Then he points to Jason: “Blossom.”

“Wonderful,” Beimler replies. “I’m here on behalf of Captain Wintringham—you’re familiar. The XII Brigade has been transferred into Madrid.” He looks from one boy to the next. “You are stationed in Vicálvaro. It is a little bit to the southwest. Please report to your new unit by tomorrow morning. Understood?”

Jason nods. He looks down at his hands.

“See you in the morning,” Jughead answers.

Beimler nods.

“Until we meet again. Good to know you.” He salutes, and then exits the hotel.

“I guess that’s your cue,” Toni says.

“I guess we’re real soldiers, now,” Jughead responds.

“If we’re killed—write us a eulogy, will you?” Jason requests.

“If Madrid falls, I think we’ll be in the same boat,” Toni responds.

The next morning, just ahead of the bloody red sun, Jughead Jones and Jason Blossom arrive in the little Madrid suburb of Vicálvaro. Their lorry rolls to a stop before rows of cramped, crooked little peasant houses. Puffs of dust settle down around the old tires. A horse trots by, laden with bags of ammunition. The pair hops out of the truck bed. Their boots hit hard-packed Spanish earth.

A dozen or so men in weathered tunics and mud-spattered pants greet them. One of them grabs Jughead’s hand and shakes hard. He winces. The man mutters something in a foreign language.

“What was that?” Jughead whispers into Jason’s ear.

“Hungarian?” his friend whispers back, shrugging.

“Welcome to Vicálvaro,” one of the soldiers says, smiling. “Are you Englishmen?” His accent is thick, and for Jughead at least, untraceable.

“We feel welcome,” he assures them.

Then Wintringham jogs up, trailing a cloud of dust.

“Boys. Welcome to the XII.” He nods towards the other soldiers. “I see you’ve already met some friends. Come on, let’s get you settled in.”

The brigadistas are billeted in the houses of the locals, who, as a general rule, greet the foreign volunteers with a cautious optimism. Even those wholeheartedly devoted to the cause are leery about sharing their hearths and beds with alien soldiers.

Quality of life aside, Jughead is glad to find a military manner and discipline sorely lacked by the militias.
There are helmets, even if they are useless French surplus from the Great War. There’s a uniform, even if it’s a set of guidelines more than anything. Jughead is glad to receive an olive-colored tunic and a pair of unsoiled trousers. Best of all, the rifles work. Most of the time.

The other volunteers, having completed their months’ worth of training in Albacete, are excited to meet their new comrades. Wintringham has spent the past few weeks talking up the mysterious duo of Blossom and Jones with epic stories of their exploits at the Alcázar.

The soldiers of the XII, in the main Great War veterans or else hard-bitten street fighters, are more than a bit bemused when the smooth-faced American lads finally arrive.

“Du?” asks a German communist. “Du hast der Alcazar zerstört?”

“Yes,” Jughead responds with a bit of pride. “I blew up the Alcazar.”

A Pole saunters over.

“How old are you?” he asks in broken English.

Jason steps up.

“Twenty,” the young redhead says, like a liar.

Their interrogators squint and nod and acquiesce.

Wintringham assigns them to the 500-strong ‘Thälmann Battalion’. The Thälmann is German in the main, comprised of communists, socialists, and trade unionists driven from their fatherland in the wake of Hitler’s rise. There is also a contingent of Britons, and a smattering of Irishmen. It’s good to hear English again.

Jughead is billeted in the little home of a young peasant couple, along with Jason, a German steelworker, and a longshoreman from Liverpool.

There is only one bed, and that is for the man and woman of the house. The Internationals sleep in bunches of blankets on the floor.

It hardly matters, because Jughead gets little sleep the first night there. There are no glass panes in the little windows, and the curtains do nothing to keep out the biting autumn breeze. He sits up in the dark, watching slivers of moonlight stream in through slats in the walls. Restless, he lights a candle, produces his journal and begins to write.

The XII International Brigade was a sight to behold. Frenchmen, Germans, and Yugoslavs made up the bulk of the volunteers, but there had to have been at least one man of every nation. Nevertheless, everyone was stripped down to his essential humanity here. Distinctions of nation, race, and tongue melted away. The brigade took in Rhinelanders, Parisians, or Glaswegians, and made humans out of them. The enemy was at the gates. There was no time for sectional vanity.

A sense of anticipation, dark and palpable, hung over our every action and clung to our every breath. By the time we came to, Franco’s troops were only a few days away from Madrid.

The shadow of fascism lengthened. But if ever a group of soldiers were convinced they could beat back darkness itself, it was the XII. Morale was unshakeable. Everyone here was a volunteer, after
all. There were no conscripts.

If someone was here, it was because fundamentally they wanted to be.

“What are you writing?” comes the low, deep voice.

Jughead jumps. He instinctively shoves the journal into the ragged folds of his blanket. Ever since Cliff’s goons had destroyed his first journal at the Twilight, he finds himself fiercely protective of the little book.

“Who is it?” Jughead whispers.

“Me,” comes the voice again. There’s a faint accent.

Jughead recognizes the German volunteer.

“Oh. It’s just a journal I have. I’m…well…I’m writing a novel. God willing.”

Jughead’s eyes acclimate to the dark. The German sits up from the floor. He’s a big man, with broad shoulders and powerful arms. His face is simple and common, with a pair of bright green eyes framed by sandy, nearly blonde hair.

He nods.

“Over what?” the German asks.

“The comic tragedy that is my life,” Jughead responds.

“Ah. Me also. Well, I am not a book wr—I am not writing a book, but…”

“What’s your name?” Jughead asks.

“Arno Reisman. And you?”

“Jughead Jones.”

He cannot see his conversation partner well in the gloom, but Jughead imagines he is smiling sardonically.

“Jughead? That’s not a common name in America, I imagine.”

Jughead smiles.

“No. It’s not.”

“Well, I wouldn’t know. I’ve never met an American.” Arno lays back down, resting his head on his pack.

“And I’ve never met a German,” Jughead says.

“I hope I’m not disappointing.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. My opinion of man has been lowered so precipitously in the last year or so that that it won’t take very much at all to win me over.”

They are silent for a while. Jason snores lightly. Their hosts toss and turn in bed.
“How did you come to be in Spain?”

“How did you come to be in Spain?”

“Long story,” Jughead tells him. “Suffice it to say it involves a strike, a conspiracy, a few fascists, and one very confused wealthy young communist.”

“Your story sounds much like mine,” Arno says.

“I’m willing to bet mine’s a good bit more farcical,” Jughead assures him.

Arno mulls that over.

“Are you afraid of going into battle?” Arno asks, finally. Jughead detects a light tremor in his voice. The German is afraid, and wants to be assured that such fear is not cowardly or treasonable.


“Not with a rifle,” Arno says.

Jughead smiles.

“But without one?”

Arno grins, and his fear seems to dissipate.

“I grew up in Wedding, Berlin. That’s home for me. I miss thrashing Nazi stormtroopers in the streets with my friends,” Arno says. A broad smile spreads out over his face. “Bricks, pipes, fists. Best days of my life. If that counts as battle…”

Jughead shrugs.

“If you were fine swaggering into battle without a gun, you should be fine with one, right?”

Arno nods a little.

“Hmm. I—“

“Christ’s sake!” the Liverpool dockworker growls. “Go to sleep! The both of ye!”

Jughead laughs.

“Good to know you, Arno,” he says.

The German inclines his head.

Jughead rolls over and goes to sleep.

There are only a few days to be spared for any further training. Battle will be joined within the wake. Very soon, the fascist army will be within artillery range of the city.

Nevertheless, every available moment is put to good use.

The days consist of training, punctuated by brief meals of Garbanzo beans and a five-hour respite at night.
Jughead begins a typical day by spending a few minutes just opening and closing the bolt on his rifle, marveling at the fact that it’s well oiled enough not to jam with every shot.

“Hey,” Jason asks. “What are you doing?”

“Appreciating a working firearm. A rarity in Spain.”

Jason nods and slings his rifle over his shoulder.

The first exercise of the day is simple: firing while moving. The *brigadistas* line up in a deserted little gulley just south of Vicálvaro. A number of scattered targets await them, consisting of sacks filled with sand and tied to poles about as tall as a small man.

Jughead slides a clip of ammunition into his gun.

Arno comes up behind him. He lays a hand on the stock of Jughead’s rifle.

“Hey—you’ve got a *Mexicanski*,” the German says, beaming.

“Sorry, I’ve got a what, now?”

“A Mexican rifle. They are good. They do not jam. Hold on to it.”

He nods, and commits that to memory.

The two commanding sergeants are a Frenchman and a German, both veterans of the Somme on opposite sides. Now good socialists, pledged to never again take up arms against their fellow proletarians, the old soldiers are nevertheless, at heart, still soldiers.

“What’s your name, boy?” the Frenchman demands of Jughead.

Jughead knows well enough that he’s learned his name by now and is merely needling him.

“Jughead Jones, sir,” Jughead responds.

The French officer does not question the name, which confirms to Jughead that he did, indeed, know who he was.

“Jones—do you have conviction enough to ram a bayonet through your enemy’s throat and slit him chin to navel?”

“I’ll do what must do,” Jughead replies, deadpan.

The Frenchman spits.

The sergeants order them into ‘battle’. Captains Wintringham and Beimler watch the proceedings from an elevated little hill.

The Internationals line up against their targets.

Jughead charges forward. He drops to one knee, fires, and leaps up, and keeps running. As he passes by the target, he sees he’s hit his mark. A little off-center, but still.

“Come on! Come on! *Scheisse!* Keep your heads down!” the German sergeant barks.

The internationals spread out over the ‘battlefield’. They fire at their targets, dashing from rocky
The mock combat action and firing practice takes up the better part of the day.

A few minutes after two, Jughead plops down onto a rock for a break. He heaves, wiping pouring sweat from his brow. It may be autumn, but the Spanish sun at high noon is hardly gentler. He unclips his canteen from his belt and takes a few swigs of tepid water. It’s hardly refreshing, but it’ll keep him from swooning.

“Oy!”

Jughead turns around. The English dockworker with which he shares his quarters comes toward him, rifle on his shoulder. He waves, exhausted.

The Englishman sits on the rock next to him.

“Top of the morning,” Jughead says, tipping an invisible hat.

“It’s three in the bloody afternoon,” the Englishman snaps. Then he remembers he’s about to ask a favor and softens up. “Can I’ve a sip of that water?”

“You drained your canteen already?” Jughead asks. “You’ve got to pace yourself a little better than that.” Nevertheless, he hands the canteen over.

The grateful Englishman drinks heartily.

“Thank you.”

“What’s your name, anyway? Since we’re roommates.”


“Good to meet you, Henry. Welcome to the vanguard of the working class.”

The Englishman nods, and Jughead isn’t sure whether he took it as a joke or not.

Henry waves a hand in a vague circle, gesturing to their comrades and officers.

“You really think all this larking about in the heat will do a lot of good?”

Jughead shrugs.

“Well, it can’t hurt. At the very least all the boys will learn which end the bullet comes out of. Which is more than you can say for most of the Republican Army.”

Henry chuckles.

“I—he’s cut off, because a figure emerges from behind an olive tree. Jughead picks out the bright red hair against the glaring sunlight, and groans.

“Fellas!” Jason cries. “Come on! Get up! Break’s over! Back into the fight!”

“Christ, lad!” Henry moans. Then to Jughead: “Don’t you ever tire out?”

“He doesn’t eat or sleep. He just reads Marx,” Jughead mutters.

Nevertheless, they stand up, put away their drained canteens, and spring back into the ‘fray’.
That night, the exhausted soldiers of the XII Brigade gather around the little campfires built to guard against evening breeze. They eat a meager dinner of garbanzo beans, and choke down more tepid, grainy water. Their muscles ache, torn and bruised with the day’s exertions.

A German complains of his exhaustion.

“If you can’t handle a day’s worth of target practice and marching—you’ve no place in a war,” a Slovak admonishes him.


Jughead dips his spoon into his bowl of beans and swirls them around. In the pale, uneven firelight, they look even less appetizing than usual.

“I wake up in cold sweats,” Jughead mutters. “From garbanzo bean nightmares. Then I haul myself to my feet and eat garbanzo beans for breakfast.”

No one laughs.

Arno dips his finger into his bowl and extracts a single bean. He raises it to the light, examining it like a scientist with some rare specimen.


When they tire of complaining about their fare, the Internationals fall silent. Insects rustle in the sparse brush. Someone fiddles with the bolt on his rifle. Dust trickles down the sides of gulches and bluffs. The stars twinkle almost audibly.

A young Viennese German purses his lips, and then begins to sing.

“Wir sind das Bauvolk der kommenden Welt. Wir sind der Sämann, die Sat, und das Feld…”

Another German joins in. And then another.

Jughead leans in towards Jason.

“What’s that song?”

Jason shrugs.

“I don’t speak much German. Something about a field, I think? I don’t know.”

“He’s singing ‘we are the workers of Vienna’,” Arno says. “‘We are the builders of the coming world.’”

As the night drags on, the soldiers of the XII go around and offer the songs they’ve brought from home. They sing Warszawianka from Poland. They sing Bandiera Rossa from Italy. They sing La Marseillaise from France. They sing the International in every tongue.

And then Henry fixes the two American boys with a curious stare and prods: “a song from Yankeedom?”

“Something from Yankeedom…” Jughead mumbles. He turns to Jason for help.

Jughead considers it.

“I’ll do you one better,” He finally says, clapping Jason on the shoulder. “How about this one?”

“What’s that?” Jason asks.

“Come on—you’ll know it when you hear it. Just sing along and our motley crew here will pick it up.”

He clears his throat and begins. *“There is power, there is power in a band of working folks, when they stand hand in hand…”* Jason beams and joins in.

*“That’s a power, that’s a power that must reign in every land: one industrial union grand!”*

The volunteers, Anglophone or not, pick up the tune. Soon, the familiar words are returned in a coarse Irish brogue or a lilting Finnish accent.

“You see, comrades?” Jughead jokes, when the song is finished. “We’ve got nothing to worry about. The fascists may have planes and tanks, but we have some damn good songs.”

The Internationals clap and whistle.

Jughead smiles.
Here in Madrid is the universal frontier that separates liberty and slavery. It is here in Madrid that two incompatible civilizations undertake their great struggle. Love against hate; peace against war; the brotherhood of Christ against the tyranny of the church…this is Madrid. It fights for Spain, for humanity, for justice, and with the mantel of its blood shelters all the world. Madrid!

~Republican deputy Fernando Valera on the eve of the Siege of Madrid

“So we’re springing to the call from the east and from the west
And we’ll hurl the rebel crew from the land we love the best!”

~’The Battle Cry of Freedom’

The days grow short and the air grows cold and Madrid grows dark.

November 1936 rolls in.

The populace of the great capital awakens each morning, clutching the daily papers or leaning in towards the static-choked radio, hearts in the grip of terrible fear.

Each day brings new reasons for despair. Little hamlets and villages fall like dominoes, one after the other, as Franco’s Army of Africa continues its inexorable northward advance towards Madrid.

On the morning of the 5th day of November, the Thälmann Column of the XII International Brigade marshals to a terrible sound: in the distance, on the Manzanares River to the west of Madrid, sounds a low growl like thunder. The song of Franco’s artillery.

The fascists are here.

Jason Blossom stumbles out of bed, swearing. At first, he thinks there’s a storm massing on the horizon. It only takes as long as it does to clear his head of cobwebs to recognize the sound of cannon on the wind.

“Damn it!”

The young peasant couple—Jason’s hosts, hop out of bed.

“Mierda!” the young man growls. “Los fascistas han llegado.”

His wife mutters and shakes her head, lips moving silently.

“No os preoccupies,” Jason assures them. “Don’t worry.”

We’ll stop the fascists cold, he promises. They seem less than certain.

In truth, Jason is far from certain himself. Cold needles of fear shoot through his gut. At the same time, a rush of excitement washes over him. Even in the face of all that’s happened, he is eager to do his part. History will remember this day forever. He will be proud to say that, when it came
down to it, he was ready to stand and fight.

He shakes awake Jughead Jones, Arno Reisman, and Henry Brooke. The four men stumble out of the little shack, to find most of the XII Brigade already milling about outside, talking excitedly amongst each other.

“You hear that?” Arno says. “Those are German guns the fascists are firing. I can recognize them.”

The sun slides up over the Guadarrama Mountains in the north.

Jason snatches up his rifle. The mass of volunteers stares west where if one’s imagination is active enough, he can already see the dark impression of Franco’s army cresting the horizon.

“They’re here,” Jughead says, shaking off sleep. “We’re good and properly fucked, now.”

“No we aren’t,” Jason tells him. And he refuses to believe otherwise.

The Thälmann volunteers chat excitedly in their myriad languages. Snippets of German, French, Polish, Hungarian, Italian, and English flit through the chilly Spanish air. They talk, fearful and excited, of going into battle for the first time. The veterans among them stand silent. They’ve fought at Tannenberg and on the Somme. They know what to expect.

The commanding officer of the XII International Brigade, Pavol Lukács, storms out onto the field and stands up ramrod straight at the head of the assembled soldiers. They quickly shape up and shut their mouths. Lukács wears a broad, weathered face beneath a simple soldier’s cap. His voice is sharp and begs attention.

“Men of the XII International Brigade! The press of every nation predicts that Madrid will fall within the week! If the fascists take this city they will drown it in blood. They will not discriminate by sex or age. They won’t care who held a gun and who did not. And they will not stop in Spain. They will keep on, until they reach your homelands. Your loved ones. If they have not already.” He pauses, allowing indignation to rise in the breasts of his audience. “But I will tell you that they won’t take Madrid. Not while we and our Spanish comrades still have life in us! Men of the XII International Brigade! The Spanish people are counting on you! Humanity is counting on you! Will you disappoint them?”

“No! No!” The crowd of soldiers cries in its dozen languages. Jason is swept up by emotion, joining in the shout. “Never! Death to fascism! Freedom! Freedom!”

“Long live the Republic!” Lukács cries, raising a clenched fist into the air. “Long live liberty!”

“Liberty! Liberty! Liberty!” Comes the thunderous rejoinder from the men. It’s nearly loud enough to drown out the sound of the fascist guns in the distance.

“This is better than running the projector at the Twilight, I guess,” Jughead mutters.

“Much better,” Jason says, tamping down his fear with an affected grin.

“The Republican People’s Army engages the fascists’ advance guard just south of the city as we speak,” Wintrighman pipes up, fiddling with his mustache. “Tomorrow—we go into action to support them. I suggest you all collect yourselves, inspect your weapons, and remember that Brigade does have a mailing service. If there’s any message you’d like to get out to dear ones back home, I’d say now’s the time to do it.”

Jason feels a chill in his ribs. Toledo was different. It was in the spur of the moment. By the time
he picked up a rifle, it had been too late to give it much thought. Most importantly, there had been the ultimate option of retreat. That does not exist here. Madrid is the final line of defense. If Franco’s army seizes the capital, morale will melt away. Foreign governments will recognize him as the legitimate ruler of Spain. The war will be lost then there and then.

The specter of death hangs over Jason’s head. Death had hardly seemed real in Toledo. That first taste of battle was surreal. It was a game. He was a rich young boy from upstate New York. Wars in lands across the sea existed only in the newspapers and adventure novels. All his newfound proletarian consciousness had not wiped out all of that affluent apathy in a day. Only slowly, with an agonizing pace, did the grim reality of it seep into his bones.

Franco’s guns roar at the edge of the Manzanres. The earth trembles.

Jason shivers. He wonders just how bad a round in the gut or the chest would hurt. He thinks of his ancestor Alexander, slain in America’s own civil war with a rebel bullet through the heart. Did he suffer? How much?

“Are you okay?” Jughead asks, snapping the redhead out of his reverie. “Don’t tell me you’re going to disappoint the international working class now?”

“I’m fine.” He waves a hand in dismissal. “I’m only letting it all sink in.”

Jughead claps him on the shoulder.

“Well, you aren’t allowed to get cold feet. The way I see it—we’ve come this far, right?”

“Right.” Jason is silent for a moment. “You know what this reminds me of?”

“What?”

“Battleship Potemkin.”

It takes Jughead a moment to process the comment. Then he remembers the movie. Remembers screening it that night at the Twilight Cinema, all those months ago.

“Oh. Yeah. Good movie. That was back when I still thought you an irredeemable son of a bitch.”

“So…you’ve changed your mind.”

Jughead punches him gently in the shoulder.

“Yeah. It took some industrial sabotage, my near lynching, a plot to bring down American democracy, and a civil war, but I think I’ve changed my mind.”

“Does this make me an honorary proletarian?”


Then there is the cadence of a different cannon as Franco’s guns are answered by the wonderful sound of Republican artillery. Madrid resists. Jughead smiles.

Jason returns the smile.

“Those are our guns,” He says.
“Right,” Jughead says. “Let’s go into Madrid, find Toni, and have a drink. We’ve got a war to win, tomorrow.”

The boys locate her at the Telefonica building, feverishly telegraphing through a last minute dispatch.

“No! No—oh, hey fellas!”

Jughead waves.

Toni keeps smashing away at the telegraph.

“What are you doing?” Jason asks.

“Sending fair and unbiased news to the folks back home. Counteracting St. Clair’s pro-fascist dreck.”

From the high up windows of the Telefonica, Jughead watches the streets of Madrid, filled with panicked civilians and desperate milicianos.

“We just thought we’d come by and say hi, see if you wanted a drink,” Jughead says. “On the eve of the apocalypse.”

“Sorry, not at the moment. I’m a little busy. The situation changes—damn it!” the telegraph jams. “The situation changes hourly and I have to at least make a token effort to keep up.”

Jughead notices that the big telephone exchange seems much emptier than it did the last time. There is still an ample number of reporters, but there are not so many as there were. One can actually move through the halls and rooms without brushing against someone else.

“Where’s everyone gotten off to?” Jughead asks.

“The ones with less gall have skipped town. They don’t want to be here when Franco shows up.”

“Well, he’s not going to make his appointment,” Jason says.

“I hope to God he doesn’t. Because if he does, I lose a bet to Nick St. Clair. That’s the real tragedy in all of this.”

“If you’re busy, we’ll let you be,” Jason says.

Toni stops working the telegraph. She looks up. Her face is weary, ragged. Her hair is disheveled.

“You’re going to fight tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“Weather permitting,” Jughead jokes.

She embraces them both, brisk and short, but sincere.

“Good luck. Come what may.”

“Victory’s coming,” Jason says. “For somebody, anyway.”

Cheryl Blossom lies on her comforter, listening to the radio crackle on her nightstand.
NEWS FROM SPAIN! General Franco has reached the capital and rebel troops are massing on the River Manzanares at the western edge of Madrid. The People’s Front government is reported to have fled the embattled capital for the relative safety of Valencia on the Mediterranean coast. A ‘council of defense’ headed by a motley collection of Republican army officers is left in nominal control. Real power is said to lie with the trade unions and parties whose armed patrols rule the streets. The loyalist militias prepare to mount a last-ditch defense of Madrid, but it is the near unanimous opinion of foreign observers that Franco will seize the city if not tomorrow, then the next day.

Cheryl sighs. She hears footsteps in the hall and switches off the radio. Her father passes by.

“What are you listening to?”

“Just some news. On Spain.”

“Mmm. It’s good to keep abreast of things.” He says in a sort of obnoxiously mysterious way.

“Yep.”

Cheryl, in spite of all her pronouncements to herself and others that she absolutely does not care, finds herself suddenly hoping that she and Betty Cooper haven’t bungled this damn thing with the recording.

She switches the radio back on.

The station is recounting an interview given by Franco to an American reporter some months back.

“I will save Spain from Marxism, whatever the cost.” The portly gallego general says.

“That means that you will have to shoot half the country.” The journalist replies.

“I repeat, ‘whatever the cost’.”

Cheryl grumbles and shut it off again.

“Idiots!”

“Wake up!” Henry Brooke thunders. Jughead’s bleary blue eyes snap open. “Every man on his feet, now!” Jughead swears and rolls out of his ruffled blankets. The first rays of sun break through the slats in the window. He sees Jason leap out of bed with impressive speed.

Jughead’s heart constricts into his chest. He hurries to Jason and clutches his arm.

“What’s going on? Is it time?”

Before Jason can respond, Brooke shouts the answer.

“The fascists are in Carabanchel!”

Carabanchel is a working class suburb two miles to the south of Madrid. The fascists are two miles from the city. Two miles from victory. He remembers the air raid in Toledo. Remembers the men and women and children bleeding and crying in the streets. The fascist warplane slipping away into the breeze, having done its bloody work. That is the foe in Carabanchel.

The men line up and take their rifles and uniforms.
In minutes they are dressed and rushed out onto the dusty field outside. The rest of the Brigade is already mustered there, awaiting orders. The cannons have grown closer. On occasion, the dark shape of a Nazi aircraft whips through the sky in the distance.

“Come on!” Jason says, seeming to have regained some of his enthusiasm. “For Toledo.”

Jughead’s stomach tingles. He can’t pin it down as either fear or thrill. Likely, it’s both. The brigade officers herd them into neat files. The few days of marching practice they received upon their induction into the XII will have to suffice.

Lukács, that hoary old revolutionary, sprints up to the head of the brigade.

“Hope he keeps it short and sweet,” Jughead mutters.

He does.

“The fascists are two miles from the Plaza de España!” Lukács shouts. “It’s your job to see they don’t get a damn foot closer! Let’s move out! ¡Viva la libertad!”

“¡Viva la libertad!” Comes the thunderous reply from the brigade. “¡No pasarán!”

In firm military formation, the XII International Brigade turns, and marches away towards the front, thirty minutes away.

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*On the morning of November 7th*, the people of Madrid awoke to the steady, disciplined tramp of soldiers’ boots on the streets. This could not be the Republican militia, as renowned for their indiscipline as their valor. The people rushed to their windows in horror, sure that the fascists had captured the city, preparing to see Franco’s men strolling down the way.

Instead they saw us.

The XII International Brigade marched in formation down the Gran Via; the great thoroughfare that cuts through the heart of Madrid. When the Madrileños saw the scarlet banners and the red-gold-mauvè flag of the Republic fluttering over our heads, they knew we were not Franco’s soldiers. They knew we were here on their behalf.

In all my years since, I have never again heard acclamations like that.

The people cheered in delirious joy. They leaned from their windows, waving red handkerchiefs and little Republican flags. They raised their fists in salute. They lifted their children on their shoulders to see us. They wept in relief.

For the first time in months, since the fascist rebellion first threatened their newfound freedom, the people of Spain had felt abandoned by the family of nations. The other democracies sat on their heels and spat empty platitudes about ‘non-intervention’ and ‘impartiality’. France and Britain actively worked to keep weapons and supplies from the embattled Republic, while the Il Duce and Der Führer openly flouted their declared neutrality to arm the fascists. Spanish democracy was being slaughtered, and the world turned its back.

But when they saw us marching towards the front in our gleaming helmets, uniforms, and polished boots, hope flared up again in the hearts of the Spanish people. When they heard us chanting and singing in our myriad tongues, from English to German to Russian to Chinese, they knew that they...
were not alone. They knew the world had not forgotten them.

In our broken Spanish, we answered their cheers with our own.

“¡Viva la libertad!”

“¡Viva la Republica!”

“¡Muerte al fascismo!”

It was intoxicating.

In that moment, there were no shades of grey, no ambiguities. The enemy of all mankind was poised to enslave this noble people, and we were the warriors of liberty that would stop this evil in its tracks.

I felt a lump rise in my throat. In that moment, all the cynicism and bitter sarcasm that colored my soul vanished. I was a poor, luckless boy from a nameless town in northern New York. Life had rarely been anything but nasty to me, while those above grew fat on our misfortune.

But now I had a chance to strike back. These people, these brave Spaniards determined to die before bowing the knee to fascism, were my brothers and sisters. We all had the same foe, and we would all rise to meet it side by side.

As we marched towards the front, we passed beneath a great banner strung across the thoroughfare.

“Fascism wants to conquer Madrid—“ It thundered. “BUT MADRID WILL BE THE TOMB OF FASCISM!”

The XII Brigade marches, heads high, out of the city proper and southward into the little suburbs ringing Madrid. Pillars of flames and crumbling houses greet them on their advance. Planes scream overhead, dipping low to drop bombs or strafe the troops in their positions. The fascist planes are singled out by the black X decorating their fins. The aircraft of the Republic sport red wingtips.

The poor neighborhood of Carabanchel is transformed into a slaughterhouse. Houses crumble into dust beneath concentrated artillery fire. Torn bodies litter the flagstones.

The milicianos, having recovered their courage after the routed at Toledo, fight with desperate valor to hold off an attacker infinitely superior in training and material. The little suburb’s citizens throw themselves wholeheartedly into the fight. Every man and woman of age is holding a gun, and those too old or young to fight rush back and forth, supplying the defenders with ammunition, food, or first aid.

The Thälmann Column is swiftly dispatched to bolster the battered militia at its positions. The defenders are spread thin, viciously fighting the fascists for every last bombed out shop or house.

The column throws itself into the line running alongside a little cobbled street, the pavement and stones torn up by bombs and artillery. The rattle of machine guns and the whispering snap of rifles rip at the air over their heads. The Internationals leap into the fray alongside their Spanish comrades, ducking behind shattered walls and beneath broken windows, sticking their heads up long enough to fire or toss an explosive.

“Do we just…start shooting?” Jughead asks.
His response comes in a familiar voice.

“Ey! Torombolo! Jacinto!” Mariano lowers his rifle and whirls around to greet them. Isidora jogs up right behind him.

“Mariano?” Jason beams.

“Good to see you two again!” The miliciano exults. “Thought you might have left the country!”

“Good to see yo—“

“Look, we’re bad in—get down!”

Everyone hits the floor as a sound like cloth ripping rends the air and machine gun bullets slam into the ground around them. Little puffs of dirt explode into the air as the gunner peppers the earth.

Jughead duly curls himself into a ball.

“Look!” Mariano shouts over the din. He points to a grand church, gutted by fire, towering over the battlefield. From its belfry comes the steady stream of machine gun fire. Lifting his head just high enough over their meager cover in a bombed out tailor’s shop, Jughead can see the rebel troops moving around in the bell tower. “They’ve got us pinned down from that church tower! As long as their machine gun keeps firing, we can’t advance! They’re using it as a—shit!” A rifle round buzzes past his ear. “They’re using it to spot for their artillery, too! If we can clear out the church, we can shut up their cannons and secure the line!”

Jason peers out through a broken window, mapping out the big church in his head. He immediately draws a barrage of fascist fire and ducks back down just as the hail of bullets passes through the thin air where he was a moment ago.

“So what do we do?” Jughead shouts.

“The moment we step out of cover, we get cut to pieces!” Someone shouts.

“Hey!” Jason yells. “How long does it take them to reload that machine gun?” He points to the bell tower with his bayonet.

“Five, ten seconds?” Mariano says.

Jason nods.

“Next time they reload, we move, yeah?”

“And do what?”

“Storm the church! Take out the machine gun!”

There’s a loud, thunderous booming as the fascist artillery opens up in the distance. Shells sail over their heads, spiraling through the air towards Madrid in the rearguard. The Republican militiamen cover their ears.

“The entire church is going to be filled with soldiers!” Jughead presses his face flush against the ground, eager not to have his brains blown out by a rebel sharpshooter.

“So we’ll take more!” Jason shouts back.
“Look!” Mariano jabs his rifle in the direction of the church. “It’s twenty meters from here to the church’s front doors! If we advance with twenty men, ten will be dead before we ever get inside. Another five by the time we get up to the bell tower and shut that goddamn gun up!”

“How many are going to die if we stay here pinned down all day?”

Mariano whirls around to face the militiamen behind him.

“Who wants to go on a suicide mission?” He gestures to the church again. A surprising number of hands go up. There’s a long moment of silence as the flimsy brick walls between them and the enemy rattle and crumble under the withering fire. Mariano claps Jason on the shoulder. “Alright, Jacinto. But you’re leading the way.”

They collect twenty-five men and women, gripping their guns tight, afraid to die but far more afraid to lose. Jughead closes his eyes and says a quick prayer. The machine gun keeps firing. They wait to hear it fall silent again. When it does, they’ll have ten seconds at most to charge across the road and into the church before it’s reloaded. Jason, the attack being his initiative, dutifully steps out into the lead. He slaps Jughead on the chest.

“Hey. You ready?”

Jughead draws a deep breath.

“I–”

The machine gun stops firing.

“¡Adelante!”

They charge out of the shattered building and make a beeline for the church. Fascist bullets pour down onto them. The German International to Jughead’s right collapses mid-step with a bullet in his throat. Two more men are brutally cut down in a spray of rifle fire. Jughead keeps his eyes on the back of Jason’s head, following closely in his steps.

They reach the church six comrades fewer, just as the machine gunner in the belfry reloads and lets loose another terrific round of bullets.

With a cry of “¡Libertad!” they kick open the church’s doors. A squad of fascist legionaries greets them in the nave. Bullets smash stained glass and ancient idols to dust. Jughead cuts down a legionary before the man can fire on him. Five more of their comrades fall dead. The rest of the fascist soldiers are quickly dispatched. The marble floors of the church glisten with puddles of dark red blood.

They charge up the steeple stairs, falling into vicious hand-to-hand combat with fascist sentries. Jason skewers a Moorish trooper with his bayonet as the man goes for his pistol. Jughead parries an enemy’s knife, twists around, and delivers a punch that sends his opponent over the edge of the banister and tumbling two stories onto the pews below. Isidora fires a revolver directly through a fascist’s ribs.

They burst into the belfry. The machine gunner, still firing down onto the Republicans below, whirls around in shock. Jughead raises his rifle and shoots the man dead. Just as Mariano predicted their number is reduced by half. But the shooting stops. The church is theirs. The position is taken. Someone cheers. The streets below are littered with corpses, theirs and the fascists’. The flames devouring houses and shops lick at the sky. A warplane swoops overhead so low they can make out the pilot in his cockpit.
There’s a brief moment of silence as the militiamen in the streets realize the fascist machine gunner in the bell tower has been silenced. Then a thunderous cheer goes up. Jughead feels his heart swell. Jason claps him on the shoulder.

On the ground by the dead machine gunner’s body, a radio crackles.

“Come in! Come in! We need confirmation! Our guns a—“

A miliciano shoots the radio.

No longer pinned down, the Republican troops advance. Franco’s soldiers are steadily pushed back. The fascists, having lost the all-important church, lynchpin of this section of the front, lose their nerve.

“Let’s get back down into the fight!” They storm back down the church’s staircase and spill out onto the street to rejoin their comrades below. They forge on through the shattered neighborhood, sweeping the fascists out of their positions. Morale soars. The Republican milicianos shout and sing.

In the distance, a fascist plane spirals towards earth, trailing flames, shot down by a Soviet fighter. Jughead watches as one of Franco’s banners is cut down from its perch. The offensive into Carabanchel has been blunted. Jughead smiles. This is the first blow, he tells himself. This is where fascism meets its match at last.

He and Jason move along, flanked by a mixed group of Spaniards and Internationals. They force fascist soldiers out of houses and stores, firing their rifles and thrusting their bayonets, delivering lusty cheers of “¡Viva la libertad!” and “¡Viva la República!” each time they clear out a rebel position.

And then–

“¡Tanque!” Someone shouts in warning. An Italian L3 light tank rounds a corner two blocks away. The milicianos scatter. The tank’s machine guns open up.

Jughead dives into an alley. Three Republican militiamen rooted to the ground in terror fall like ragdolls in the storm of bullets. Blood pools on the cobblestones. The tank creeps closer, firing all the while. The milicianos scramble for cover where they can find it.

The L3 turns, spins its turrets, and puts a stream of fire over the Republican troops’ heads, splitting the advancing militiamen into two groups. Jughead stares out from his hiding place in a little alley. He catches Jason’s eye. The redhead crouches with three milicianos behind a row of sandbags. Jason gestures towards the tank. Jughead isn’t quite sure what he means to say besides ‘there’s a tank, and it’s thrown a spanner into the works’, which is self-evident. Jason gestures to the tank again, and then pantomimes an explosion. Jughead shakes his head. How the hell are they supposed to blow it up? It isn’t as if they have any grenades.

One of the milicianos produces a bottle filled with some unidentifiable dark liquid. Jughead squints for a closer look.

The tank maneuvers unsteadily. Every so often, it lets off another few dozen rounds of machine gun fire, to keep the Republicans’ heads down.

Jason grabs the bottle from the miliciano and jams an oily rag into its open neck. He whistles to get Jughead’s attention. Then he gestures to the bottle and pantomimes another explosion. He points to Jughead, and then to the tank. He mimes throwing.
Jughead realizes now that the bottle is filled with petrol. Once the wick is lit and the bottle thrown, it will shatter and ignite the petrol, making a handy if unsafe makeshift grenade. Only, from behind the sandbags, Jason and the militiamen don’t have a clear line of sight to the tank. Jughead does.

He shakes his head violently. He’s not going to be saddled with this. Jason nods. He mimes striking a match.

Jughead nods. Yeah, he’s got matches, but–

No time for protest. Jason pulls his arm back. Jughead desperately motions for him to reconsider. It is to no avail. Jason throws the improvised explosive. It arcs through the air. The Jughead reaches out. He prays to whatever god might be listening to let him catch the damn thing

The bottle hurtles towards the ground. Jughead dives forward. His hand shoots out. There’s a moment of sheer terror as the hot glass impacts his palm.

But he catches it.

The tank spins slowly around, and suddenly its guns are tracking towards him.

Jughead admires the weapon in his hand. It’s an old beer bottle, slick with oil. Petrol bubbles inside. He strikes a match and touches it to the dirty wick. The old rag flares up. There isn’t much time. He stands. He draws back his arm. He’d always been the last pick for baseball games back in Riverdale. He remembers Reggie Mantle’s scoffing accusations that ‘my dead grandmother’s got a better arm than you’. The machine gun on the tank slowly turns and focuses on him.

He throws.

The bottle whips through the air. The burning rag traces a flaming arc in its path.

It isn’t a graceful throw. The bottle wobbles.

But it smashes into the fascist tank just below the chassis, near the treads. The wick sets off the petrol. A burst of orange flame flares up. Burning oil leeches into the vehicle’s gears. Fire creeps along the metal flanks and up towards the guns.

The tank burns. The treads grind to a halt. The machine guns fall silent.

The machine gunner is the first of the two-man crew to bail out of the flaming tank. He crawls out of the hatch, spilling out of his vehicle onto the street, swearing in rapid-fire Italian. He lands on his knees and staggers to his feet. No sooner has he taken a single step forward than a volley of Republican rifle fire unceremoniously shoots him down.

Next comes the tank’s commander. He leaps out, shouting strings of curses. Almost instinctively, Jughead raises his rifle. The commander pulls a pistol and searches for someone to shoot with it. Jughead draws a bead on the Italian’s head. He fires. The fascist topples over onto the corpse of his gunner.

The Republican militiamen emerge from cover with another cheer.

“¡No pasarán! No pasarán! No pasarán! Viva la libertad!”

Jason rushes forward and embraces his friend.

“You lobbed that bottle right onto their fascist asses!”
Isidora pokes at the dead tank commander with her toe.

“Hey, Torombolo, you killed yourself an officer,” she says.

Jughead turns around.

The commander is—or was—an Italian blackshirt officer. Jughead saunters over to the corpse. He feels a twinge of guilt at seeing the ragged bullet wound in his forehead. He shoves it down. There’s no time for that. Not now.

“Search him,” Isidora goads “Sometimes officers have things on them.”

Jughead tarries. He waits for one of the other militiamen to do the deed. No one moves.

“Go ahead,” Jason says.

Jughead kneels down at the corpse’s side. He rolls the dead fascist over onto his back and pulls his black jacket open. He shoves a hand into the man’s interior pockets. He touches nothing that feels valuable. But then his fingers brush the corner of a paper slip. He retrieves the note turns it over in his hands.

It’s a crisp, fresh piece of paper covered in neatly typed Spanish and stamped at the top with the seal of the ‘National Government of Burgos’—the ‘official’ name of Franco’s regime.

He cannot really read Spanish, of course, so he hands it off to one of the militiamen.

They crowd around to get a look at the mysterious little note, and come the utterances of shock and excitement.

Just before Franco’s troops reach the outskirts of Madrid, the Republican government, certain the city will fall, packs up and flees for Valencia in the dead of night. In their stead they leave a hastily chosen ‘Consejo de Defensa’ to take charge of the city’s defenses. To head it, they choose a certain General José Miaja. The stout Miaja, though a mediocre soldier, is no fool.

He knows precisely why the government had chosen him, an undistinguished officer, to organize the defense of Madrid. It was because the Prime Minister Largo Caballero, President Azaña, and their ministers are certain of the city’s fall. And like most statesmen, they will not bear the shame of surrendering Spain’s ancient capital to the rebel army themselves. Miaja is not here to defend the city; he is here to hand it over to Franco.

But Miaja has no intention of being the fall guy for a lot of two-faced, coward politicians.

As much in the interest of his pride as in the interest of the Republic, he throws himself wholeheartedly into the defense of Madrid.

With the enthusiastic collaboration of the Republican parties and trade unions, he dispatches units of militiamen through the city, haranguing the citizenry to take up arms in defense of their freedom.

Posters go up on the walls:

**DEFEND MADRID! EXTERMINATE THE FASCIST BEAST!**
And the ubiquitous ¡NO PASARÁN!—‘They will not pass!’

Miaja bends over a map, struggling to anticipate the fascist generals’ next move. He had been a friend of General Mola, the conspiracy’s chief architect. He knows how these men think. Surely he could preempt whatever they had planned.

As of now, the brunt of the fascist assault is concentrated on Carabanchel, but that makes little sense. Carabanchel is a traditionally working class neighborhood, strongly supportive of the People’s Front government. Resistance there would be stiff, and the rebels would know that. They’re making little headway, and reports from the front indicate their operations in Carabanchel have stalled. It smacks of a diversion, which means the main thrust of the attack will be somewhere else.

Miaja’s chief of staff, a talented officer named Vicente Rojo, commiserates in the corner with a representative of the CNT.

The door bursts open, and a breathless adjutant rushes in. He offers a hasty salute.

"¡Mi general!" He gasps, stumbling towards a surprised Miaja. Rojo coolly places an arm between the general and the flustered adjutant.

“What is it?” Rojo asks.

"General. Colonel,” He says, addressing Miaja and Rojo in turn. “Some men fighting in Carabanchel took out an Italian tank and killed a fascist officer.” He reaches into his coat and extracts a slip of paper. “They found this on his body.”

“Let me see that,” Rojo says. He reaches out and takes it from the adjutant’s hand. Rojo squints at the paper, as if suspicious. His eyes go wide behind his spectacles. He hands it to Miaja, who has a similar reaction.

The slip of paper is a series of orders, signed off at the bottom by General Varela, the staunch reactionary to whom Franco has entrusted the capture of Madrid. It details the rebel plans for the offensive, including, as expected, a feint in Carabanchel to draw Republican forces away from the main point of attack; the Casa de Campo.

The Casa de Campo is a massive park on the western edge of Madrid, bisected by the Manzanares River. It had long been the royal hunting grounds of the Spanish kings, but after the fall of the monarchy and the proclamation of the republic in 1931, it was converted into a public park. A broad, wide-open space interrupted by trees, it offers a clear path to the heart of the city. It’s the perfect battleground for the rebels’ Army of Africa, whose Moorish regulares and legionaries are used to fighting in open country.

“Yes!” Miaja exults, clenching a meaty fist in celebration.

“Do you think it’s real?” Rojo asks, careful.

“That’s Varela’s signature,” Miaja says.

“It could be a fake. Meant to throw us off.” Rojo says.

“Could be. But it’s the only sort of indication we’ve got. And it comports with all of the rebels’ actions so far.” Miaja sighs. “Look, Rojo. If we do nothing, Madrid will fall. If we do something
based on this information, Madrid may not fall.”

Rojo is silent for a moment. Then he nods.

“Alright. Then we’ll deploy the bulk of our forces to the Casa de Campo. Post haste. When the bastards try to break through, we’ll be ready for them.”

The adjutant nods and turns to leave.

“One more thing!” Miaja calls after him.

“Yes, sir?”

“Who did you say found this?”

“Some men in Carabanchel. A few boys from the International Column, I think they said?”

Miaja nods.

“See to it those lads get a promotion. A few promotions, maybe.”

The adjutant salutes once more.

“Yes, mi general.”
Every Penny Counts

Betty is helpless.

They’ve done all they can do, and it drives her insane. She has to do something but it’s out of her hands, now. They’ve gotten no indication that the Times ever even received their package, and she’s beginning to worry something befell it en route.

The blonde paces back and forth in the foyer, clenching and unclenching her fists.

She doesn’t like feeling helpless.

When the idea finally comes to her, it’s not in any great burst of inspiration. It’s dawns on her slowly. It won’t make any grand difference, but it might make her feel a little better.

The little stand is a lot sadder than it had looked in her mind’s eye. Betty sighs. She can’t say anything mean. Fred Andrews didn’t have to build it, of course. And it is a perfectly sturdy, perfectly solid little booth. It’s just…perhaps it’s the occasion that lent it such a sad, dreary air.

It had taken an hour of intense discussion with a few minor town officials to exact permission to set up her stand at the town’s annual fall festival out in front of Riverdale High. Said officials were leery about allowing anything that made a ‘political’ statement, no matter how much Betty insisted that this was a purely humanitarian effort and she wasn’t trying to ‘recruit reds’.

A hastily stitched Spanish Republican flag hangs from the booth, just over a sign that reads: “Donate to save victims of the Spanish War”

Archie lounges behind her, counting their collection so far. Kevin tacks up a corner of the flag that’s come undone.

“So…that’s $34,” Archie says.

Betty sighs. “That’s not terrible.”

Reggie mantle saunters over.

“Hey,” he mumbles.

“Hi,” Betty replies.

He stands there, shifting from foot to foot, starting at the flag and the signboard.

“So…what’s this?”

“Can’t you read?” She sighs.

“So…which side are you raising money for?” He asks.

“The good guys,” Archie says with much conviction.

“Which side is that?”

“The…not the Franco side?” Kevin says.
“Oh.”

“Look, Reggie, are you going to donate something or not?” Archie demands, a little impatient.


“Reggie, donate or go away!” She snaps. He drops a few coins into the jar. “Thanks,” She sighs.

He smiles and struts off.

Betty leans back in her seat. No great victory.

From across the green, Clifford Blossom, who’s deigned to come down from his tower for the day, glowers in their direction.

Betty shrinks back.

Very shortly, his daughter comes along, too.

“This is adorable,” Cheryl coos. “I could cry.” She scouts out their donations. “$35, eh?”

“You should donate, Cheryl,” Archie says. “Maybe your money will buy Jason or Jughead a pair of boots.”

“I just want to say you’re doing a great job of pretending that you still don’t care,” Kevin says.

Cheryl shoots him a look.

“Listen…” she says. “My dad’s watching me from over there and he’s a bit…ornery lately. So no, I can’t give you any money. Still, as pathetic as this little charity is to behold, I am compelled to help you out for my brother’s sake, if nothing else.”

“Great. So put a dollar in the jar,” Betty says.

“Have you even considered how you’re going to get these donations to Spain?”

“I—“ Betty stammers. “We—we’re going to figure it out, okay?”

“Mhmm.” Cheryl reaches into her purse and produces a slip of paper. Looking over her shoulder to make certain her father isn’t watching closely, she slides it through the booth. Betty takes it.

There’s a New York address written there, in Cheryl’s neat, haughty hand. Just above it what looks to be the name of an organization.

“North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy,” Betty reads aloud.

“It’s what they do. Send donations to the Spanish government, that is. Get in touch with them, and see that your sad little fundraiser here does any good at all.”

“Thanks, Cheryl,” Betty sighs. As she says it, she realizes those words have been coming out of her mouth a lot lately.

“Gratitude accepted. Stay red,” she jokes.

Then she flips her hair and walks off.

“I don’t get her,” Archie says.
"No one does," Kevin says.

Cliff Blossom steps into Pop’s Diner. He doesn’t come here often. This little establishment, the nexus of Riverdale’s fragile community that it might be, is a place fit only for the rabble. It is quite simply beneath him. Still, there are few places in town where one can get a cold beer these days, considering Riverdale’s only actual bar closed down with the coming of the Depression (well, besides the ones on the Southside of course, but he wouldn’t be caught dead on that side of the tracks).

And even a man of Cliff’s stature needs a drink every now and again.

He pays for his drink, and Tate slides it across the counter to him.

Cliff takes it without a word of thanks.

“Hey, Cliff!” He turns around to find the town’s postman, old Mr. Lumpkin, waving at him from a nearby booth. Cliff grumbles under his breath.

“Mr. Lumpkin.” He acknowledges with an incline of his head.

“Busy lately, hmm?” Lumpkin asks.

“As always.”

“How’s your boy? None of us have seen hide or hair of him in quite a while.”

Cliff bristles. Jason is the last thing he wants to think about right now.

“He’s fine, Mr. Lumpkin.”

“Rumor has it he’s off to Europe on some sort of adventure?”

“Rumors are vulgar.”

“Mmm. Well, your daughter seems well enough.” Right. Cheryl had gone and carried out that little errand for him. “Funny, though. I didn’t think she and the Cooper girl got along all that well.”

Clifford’s perks up. His fixes his sights firmly on the rambling old postman.

“Well, she doesn’t. Why do you say?”

“Well they came by together, to drop off some package you charged Cheryl with?”

“She and Betty Cooper came by? Together?” He bristles again. The package he’d given Cheryl is a check made out to the order of a couple hundred thousand, addressed to Krupp Industries, one of the new Germany’s premier arms manufacturers. It is of course given under the condition that it be used to pay for some part of the armaments the Nazi government was supplying Franco’s rebellion with. It is of utmost importance that the National movement in Spain succeed. But that sort of international politicking he didn’t need the Cooper family, particularly that bird of prey Alice, getting any wind of.

Lumpkin nods.
“Most darling thing, too. They had some sort of package addressed to the New York Times. I can’t imagine it was much of anything, but the dear girls must have thought it was.” He smiles good-naturedly.

Clifford’s eyes narrow. The skin on the back of his neck prickles. Something is terribly wrong. He has the sudden terrible feeling of being exposed. It’s the sort he’s had while hunting, when he fears that he hasn’t quite concealed himself well enough, and that his quarry has been alerted to his presence. His stomach turns.

“The Times, hmm?”

“That’s right.”

Clifford stands and strides over to the postman, who maintains his senile smile.

“Mr. Lumpkin, you haven’t sent out that package yet, have you? I’m the one that entrusted Cheryl with it, as a matter of fact.

“Not just yet, no.”

Clifford forces a smile of his own, the muscles in his face groaning in protest.

“I think I’ll need to get another look at it, before you do. Some…clerical issues have come to light, and I don’t want to provide my associates with bad information. Understand?”

“Sure, thing. Cliff. I’m heading back down to the office right now, matter of fact. Care to come along?”

“That would be perfect, sir.”

The old man soon finishes his meal, stands, and brushes off his shirt in an exaggerated manner. Clifford suppresses the urge to roll his eyes. The two men exit the diner and start down the street towards the post office, Clifford expertly shutting down each of the postman’s attempts to ignite further conversation all the while. He cannot shake the uneasy, burning feeling plaguing him. Everything has finally fallen into place. It cannot be allowed to all collapse now.

They reach the post office and step inside. Lumpkin, humming, disengages the needed key from his belt and opens their way into the storage room at the back of the offices, where packages are kept pending shipping. Lumpkin dives into the stacks of deliveries, expertly separating them and locating Cheryl and Betty’s missive.

“Ah! Here we are!” He exclaims. He hands it over to Clifford. Clifford rips it open and slides out the contents. He cannot identify the little black rectangle at first.

Then something clicks. It’s a tape recording. What that might mean, or what it might contain, he doesn’t know. The apprehension at the back of his mind grows heavier.

The address jumps out at him.

Lumpkin watches him intently.

“You know…I think I’m going to have to take this back home with me, as a matter of fact,” Cliff says ‘regretfully’.

“Ah, very well,” the postman nods. “Well, just bring it on back when you’re ready to send it out,
“Will you?”

“I’ll do just that, sir. Have a nice day.”

Lumpkin smiles again. Clifford nods and exits the post office.

Clifford takes the recording up to his study and sets it down onto his desk with shaking fingers. Perhaps it had nothing to do with him. Perhaps Alice really was simply trying to sell some sort of banal story to the New York Times.

But, no, he has the infuriating feeling that there’s a nearly completed puzzle before him. One he still can’t make sense of. Let this be the final piece. His hand shakes as he hits the ‘play’ button.

There’s a strange, surreal moment when he can’t understand why he is hearing his own voice. There’s an even stranger moment, even briefer, when he realizes that he’s listening to the minutes of the conference he’d held a few weeks past. Except he hadn’t preserved the minutes in recording. No one had. And if they had, they certainly wouldn’t have handed them over to Betty Cooper.

Except he’s sitting here, listening to it.

The truth batters away at his mind. He tries to shut it out. He cannot take another filial betrayal. Not right now. A current of rage courses through Cliff’s body.

The name comes out in a venomous, almost inhuman snarl.

“Cheryl!”
They Shall Not Pass

Chapter Notes

Warning for a bit of above-average war violence in this chapter.

I’ve also (again) taken some creative liberties with the exact timing and sequence of historical events.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You came from many countries to fight and save Madrid;
   No one knows just how she held
But the whole world knows she did.”

~ 'The Battlefields of Spain'

“¡Los moros que trajo Franco en Madrid quieren entrar
   Mientras quede un miliciano, los moros no pasarán!”

“The moors that Franco brought over want to enter in Madrid
   But while one militiaman remains, they shall not pass!”

~sung by the defenders of Madrid

The fascist offensive in Carabanchel has ground to a halt. That’s well enough for Franco and Varela, because it has served its purpose, or so they believe. With Republican troops busy fighting there, the lightly defended Casa de Campo will fall with ease. Across Spain, ladies and gentleman of means, officers and landlords, toast to the destruction of the debased Republic.

The world watches the Spanish epic unfold with bated breath. Madrid is surely doomed, say most. So were the French at Valmy, retort others. So were the Greeks at Marathon.

The rebel command does not know that the Republic has captured its plans for the offensive. Franco and his generals do not know that when the Army of Africa moves into the Casa de Campo for its final thrust into Madrid, it will find thousands of Republican militiamen waiting.

It is the final hour. If Madrid is to fall, she will fall now. And yet, the city’s spirits soar. For months, Franco has been bombarding her with Nazi warplanes, hoping to cow her people into surrender. Now that he is in range, he has added artillery barrages to the city’s torments. The people of Madrid have come to dread the sound of engines, and the horrible shapes of rebel Junkers in the sky.
Today a squadron of five German Junkers swoops in over Madrid, gravid with bombs. The people, hearing the engines, barricade themselves inside shops and homes, hoping that today will not be their day to die. Franco’s planes make no effort to strike military targets. The pilots drop their bombs onto women waiting in ration lines, or men leaving work. The bright red crosses adorning hospital roofs provide tempting targets for the German airmen.

But today, the air ripples, and three warplanes of a type the people have never seen before swoop out of the eastern sky. They are magnificent little machines, built stout and compact, their wingtips painted bright red, and their fin flashes blazoned with the colors of the Republic. Spitting fire, they shoot down three fascist aircraft. The remaining two swiftly turn tail and flee.

Minutes later, a column of compact, powerful little tanks splashed with hammers and sickles and draped with red flags trundles down the Gran Via towards the front.

The Russians have come.

The Madrileños come out of their houses and shops, whooping and cheering. Now it is not only the fascists who have foreign powers in their camp. Now, with Soviet planes and tanks, there’s a chance for a fair fight.

The Casa de Campo lies wide open, pristine and lovely. The rich soil thirsts for blood.

Night has fallen over Madrid. The stars burn bright in the sky, twinned with the fire of artillery and the gleam of silver warplanes. The capital trembles as the full force of the fascist army throws itself against the city’s defenses.

A fleet of lorries pulls up to the Republican lines in Carabanchel, illuminated in the fire of 105mm guns.

“Hey!” Tom Wintringham charges out of the evening gloom, jogging into the glow of the headlights. “Yanks!”

Jason Blossom and Jughead Jones turn to meet him, and stop halfway climbing into a truck bed. The lorries are to take them to their new positions, in the Casa de Campo.

“Captain Wintringham!” Jughead greets.

“So I hear you’re the heroes that saved the Republic, now, eh?”

“Uhh…”

“Sure, sure, lads. Don’t be modest. I know all about it. You found Varela’s plans and gave us all a leg up on the bastards. So tell me, which one of you knocked out that tank?”

“He did,” Jason says, pointing at his friend.

“Well, he made the explosive.” Jughead says.

“The hell with it. I’m promoting you both. Miaja himself requested it. You’re sergeant majors in the XII International Brigade now. How do you like that?”

“I—I’m sorry?” Jughead says. “We aren’t exactly experienced veter—“

“Sure you are. Carabanchel, and Toledo before that. That’s more than half the men in the brigade.”

He leans in closer, so to not be heard. “Look, we don’t have very many officers as it is. All the
boys like you now. And frankly, you’re about to go into some heavy damned fighting. If you die tonight, wouldn’t you rather it be as sergeants?”

“I thought we were all comrades, here,” Jason says. “Rank doesn’t matter.”

Wintringham wags a finger.

“Don’t get too carried away with your ideals, son.” He slaps Jason on the back. “Now get your freshly promoted arses in that truck.”

They climb into a grey lorry already packed full of soldiers. The truck grumbles and then sets off down the road towards the Casa de Campo.

Their comrades chatter excitedly in their native languages.

Henry Brooke runs a hand lovingly over the barrel of his rifle.

“She bag myself a fascist officer or two, and I bet they make me a captain.”

“I saw you shoot the other day,” Jughead smiles. “I’m not sure you could bag the broadside of a fascist barn.”

There’s a ripple of laughter.

Brooke frowns.

“Berlin bleibt rot,” Arno mutters to himself. “Madrid bleibt rot.” Then he nudges Jughead in the side and asks: “ready to give Franco a kick in the balls?”

“Him and Hitler, both,” Jughead assures him.

Arno smiles.

The truck rounds a corner. A gang of children cheers them as they pass, raising clenched fist salutes and cries of ‘¡No pasarán!’

As they speed towards the front, the Spanish soldiers in the truck drive away fear with the age-old indulgence of the soldier’s song.

“¡Si me quieres escribir, ya sabes mi paradero! ¡En el frente de Madrid, primera linea de fuego! If you want to write to me, you already know my posting! On the Madrid front, on the first line of fire!”

The Internationals pick up the tune soon enough.

“¡Con la cabeza de Franco haremos un gran balón! ¡Para que juegen los niños de Galicia y Aragon! With the head of General Franco, we shall make ourselves a ball! For the children of Galicia and Aragon to play with!”

The convoy of trucks trundles across the Frenchmen’s Bridge, over the River Manzanares, a crucial target of the fascist forces. Milicianos on sentry duty wave the van across the bridge, saluting as they pass.

The trucks grind to a stop at the edge of the Casa de Campo. The air sizzles as artillery shells explode over their heads. In the distance sounds the rattle of machine guns and the ‘snap! snap!’ of rifles. The fall breeze blows hot with the fire of battle.
The soldiers leap out of the lorries, rifles primed, bayonets fixed.

The militiamen hold desperate positions in the shallow trenches woven through the rolling lawns of the park. Old oaks set alight by bombs or artillery flicker in the darkness. The stench of iron is overwhelming. When the militiamen see their reinforcements coming up from behind, they raise a cheer loud enough to momentarily drown out the gunfire and cannon.

“¡Oye!” Someone shouts. “¡Los internacionales! ¡Vivan los internacionales!”

“¡Vivan!” Thunder a thousand milicianos at once.

“Out! Out, comrades!” roars General Lukacs, urging the Internationals out of their lorries and onto the field.

Jason touches Jughead on the shoulder, to say ‘stay with me’. He doesn’t really have to say it. They charge across a stretch of open ground, heads low, bullets snapping overhead. The militiamen hide behind trees and press themselves down into narrow, shallow trenches, firing desperately at the advancing rebel forces.

The foe comes out of the mist, a mass of seething thousands. Fascist bayonets glimmer in the moonlight, like a forest of steel. Jughead sees a Republican miliciano crumple to the grass, the top of his head taken off by a bullet. He slides into the cover of a bent oak tree and settles into firing feverish, unsteady shots at the foe. A few meters to his left, and just next to Jason, a Republican machine gun rattles. Scores of fascists fall before its withering fire.

He works the bolt on his rifle, muscle memory rather than conscious action. Comrades die. Some go quickly, shot through the skull or the throat. Others writhe in the agony of their bloody ends.

They cannot advance. They can only hold the line in a fierce, desperate defense as Franco hurls waves after wave of human flesh against them. The clouds above are torn apart as German Messerschmitts duel Soviet Moscas against a dark autumn sky.

“¡Arriba España!” The fascist soldiers shriek as they march on, illuminated in the flash of the guns. Jughead’s rifle runs dry. He’s got no more ammunition in his pouch, so he leaps from cover, dodging a spurt of fire, and snatches up the rifle of a fallen comrade. He keeps shooting. The ground around him puffs up as bullets rip into the earth. He is one man on this field of thousands. He does not know if they are winning or losing. He cannot see the two armies smashing against each other in a flurry of steel and lead, two indefatigable titans struggling for the soul of Madrid. He cannot hear Spain herself groaning. All he can see is the gleaming metal and the flashes of fire. All he can hear is the whine of artillery.

He tries to concentrate. The fascists cannot win. Not in Madrid. Not in Spain. Not anywhere. His mind splinters, senses overloaded. A bullet passes so near to his face that it cooks the air and singes his cheek.

Arno crouches beneath a tree to his left, firing slow, measured shots at the enemy. Jughead motions to him, and receives a clip of ammunition from the German. He keeps shooting.

“¡No pasarán!” Someone roars.

“¡No pasarán!” choruses the Republican militia. “¡Viva la libertad!”

The machine gunner to Jughead’s left leans forward. He fires short, desultory bursts, slaying fascists by the score. Then he falls backwards dead as a rebel sharpshooter’s bullet blows his skull apart.
Jughead springs into action, without a moment’s thought. He crawls from behind his tree, covering six meters worth of open ground as the earth shakes beneath him. He takes the fallen gunner’s place.

“Jason! Arno!” He calls.

His companions rush up to him and busy themselves loading ammunition into the weapon. Jughead closes his finger around the gun’s trigger. He stares forward into the mists, past the dark trees and hills of the Casa de Campo. He watches in raw terror as the fascist troops come on like a flood, hundreds, and then thousands strong. A sea of bobbing helmets and fez caps, pouring forth fire and cries of “¡Viva Franco! ¡Viva la muerte!” Arno hands Jason a belt of ammunition and he feeds into the gun. Jughead opens fire. The belt is exhausted. Jason feeds another one in. Jughead holds down the trigger, trying not to think of the lives he’s tearing away with every second the gun rattles in his grip. Blood pounds in his ears.

The fascists are scythed down like wheat. Streams of bullets lash at their iron ranks and cut them down by the dozens. And yet they keep coming, advancing over the corpses of their slain companions. Rivers of blood run through the park’s dew-soaked grass. Jughead keeps firing. Keeps shooting. Bullets snap past him. More fascists crumple like sacks of stones. The bodies lie in heaps, then in mountains. He struggles to maintain his aim, his cool, and his sanity as the ground underneath him shakes with the thunder of heavy guns. The fascists fix bayonets and charge. He keeps firing. The bullets cannot but find their marks. Dark blood spurts high. Legionaries and regulares shot through keep coming even as the blood dyes their shirts and faces. Out of the corner of his eye, Jughead registers an artillery shell impact the Republican lines some thirty yards to his left. Ten militiamen explode into the air, torn into a pulp of shattered limbs and flesh and blood. He can’t dwell on it. They’re still coming. He keeps shooting. A legionary falls forward dead a mere twenty feet from Jughead’s machine gun. Jason begins to run low on ammunition.

“Come on!” Someone thunders in Spanish, loud as the big guns. “Will you let the moors savage your wives and sisters?”

"¡No pasarán! ¡No pasarán! ¡Viva la República!"

Toni Topaz holds the telephone to her ear, hands shaking. The Telefónica building shudders with the roar of artillery.

“Can you hear—dammit!” The phone crackles. The line fails, and then comes back to life. She looks out through the long glass windows on the fifth floor. The stars twinkle overhead. In the distance, she can see the Manzanares River winding around the city’s outskirts. All along its banks, the flash of cannons and tanks illuminate the night. She shudders. If the Republican forces falter for so much as a few minutes, Franco’s soldiers will stream into the city, and all will be lost.

The room is a storm of confusion. Correspondents rush back and forth with their dispatches, putting a serious burden on the city’s strained telegraph and telephone services. Not only this, but a clique the Republican military brass, including General Miaja and Colonel Rojo, have set up their command post in the Telefónica. As the highest point in the city, it provides a prime vantage point from which to view the battle. So it is on this night of November 8th 1936, the Telefónica is a tangled mess of shouting reporters, gesticulating military brass, and a panicked, furious Arturo Barea trying to keep everyone in line.

Toni’s managed to get onto a telephone, from which she’s dictating a frantic report on the military and civilian situation to her colleagues back home, and which she guards jealously against her competitors.
“Yes! Hey Toni! How are things in Madr—what was that?”

“That was an artillery shell!”

“Oh? You’re not in any danger are you?”

“Yes I’m in danger! If Franco’s troops get through, th—“

“‘Get through?’ But we’ve been informed that Franco has already captured the city center.”

“What?” She shakes her head and looks out the window, as if to make doubly sure that’s not true. It isn’t. The plaza de Espana, six stories below, is full of troops. But they are not Franco’s. They are the defenders of the Republic. Columns of militia assemble and march out towards the sound of guns at the river’s edge, cheered by throngs of Madrileños. “Informed by who?” She demands.

“Well, Nick.”

“Ni—that lying son of a bitch! Listen to me! I’m sitting in the center of Madrid right now and I can tell you with absolute certainty that Franco’s still trying to get past the river.”

“B—“

“Don’t publish anything that slimy little bastard sends you. Sneaky—“ She suddenly finds herself thrown to the floor as a Republican office shunts her aside and takes the phone from her hand. “Hey!”

“I need this! Military matters!” He shouts.

Just then, Nick St. Clair himself swaggerers into the room. He walks up to Toni, still wearing his insufferable smile.

“Hell of a mess in here, huh?”

“You dishonest prick! You’ve been cabling back home that Franco’s already taken the city!”

He leans in close, to avoid being heard by any Republican officers.

“If it’s not true, yet, it will be in a few hours. How long exactly do you think your friends out there on the river can hold?”

A Soviet fighter plane zips by the window.

Toni jabs him Nick the chest. He steps back, amused.

“Long enough for you to lose our bet, you son of a bitch. You’ve got a day before the two weeks are up. And I don’t know about you, but I don’t see Franco anywhere.”

A battery of fascist artillery rolls into position. In the chaos of the fight, the Republicans hardly take notice. Franco’s gunners feverishly plot enemy positions and perform rapid calculations. Jughead crouches down behind his machine gun, while Jason rams the last of the ammunition belts into the weapon, when the sky lights up over their head. The night disappears, replaced by a brilliant white light. Then comes the thunderous crash as the rebel barrage crashes into the Republican trench. Hunks of earth and human flesh explode into the air. Jughead is blown several feet backwards, as if thrown by an invisible hand. He slams into the trench wall and slumps to the ground. His head spins. His vision sparkles. He tries to stand but finds that he cannot. His legs
buckle. His hands drip with sweat.

“Hey! Hey!” The shout brings the world back into focus. Jughead has no idea how long it’s been. “Jones! Come on! Get up!”

“Wha—“

“Come on!” Jason Blossom yanks him to his feet and hauls him back towards the Republican rear.

Arno Reisman disappears in the flurry of dust and smoke.

“What’s happening?” Jughead demands.

“They broke the line! We have to fall ba—“ He throws Jughead to the ground and falls on top of him, shielding him with his body, as a hail of machine gun bullets sail over their heads.

The fascist artillery barrage is particularly well placed. It destroys an entire section of the trench network and by extension the Republican line of defense. Ripping open a massive hole in the defenders’ lines, Franco’s troops stream in through the gap and then wheel around to attack the militiamen from the rear. Once they realize that the enemy had gotten behind them the defenders panic. A retreat ensues, which fast becomes a rout.

Cheers rise from the fascist lines as the Republicans turn to flee.

“Run, red dogs!”

“¡Arriba España! Arriba España! Muerte al comunismo! Viva Franco!”

“Fall back, comrades!” Someone cries. “It’s no use!”

Jason picks Jughead back up, and with an arm around his shoulder, carries him towards the rear.

“Wait!” Jughead gasps, lucidity returning to him. “We can’t run! They’ll get through! There’s nothing else between them and Madrid!”

It’s useless. The terrified militiamen charge away from their foes, dropping their rifles in flight. Varela’s soldiers resume their advance. The ground shakes beneath the steady tramp of the rebel soldiers. The red-gold fascist flag goes forward. The rebels fire on their fleeing enemies. Miliciano after miliciano falls with a bullet in his back.

Soon, the retreating Republican forces reach the River Manzanres again, and the all-important Frenchmen’s Bridge that spans it.

“Where are you going, comrades?” ask the incredulous militiamen guarding the bridges as their comrades charge past them.

“The fascists have broken through!” Someone cries. “It’s no use!”

Those brave enough to stand their ground pay with their lives.

Jughead feels blood trickle down his forehead. The sky is dark red. The line is dissolving. Madrid’s city center lies undefended. The fascists are coming. The day is lost.

No. No. The day can’t be lost.

“Stop running!” He cries. “¡No corred!” He repeats again. Few heed him.
It was done.

Then, like an image from a dream, a sleek black staff car bursts onto the scene. It skids to a stop on the eastern bank of the Manzanares. A door swings open and a figure steps out.

It’s General Miaja himself. The stout commander draws his pistol and fires it into the air.

“Where are you going, damn you?” He demands. “Eh? Where are you going?”

He races up and down the rapidly collapsing line like a Napoleonic general, waving his pistol.

“Where are you going?” Miaja cries again, as the fleeing militiamen reach the Manzanares, with the fascists on their heels. “Doesn’t it shame you to leave Madrid to the fascists? Don’t you have any pride at all? Die in your trenches, you cowards! Die with your General Miaja!”

Perhaps it is Miaja’s exhortations. Perhaps it is the psychological effect of reaching the river, the last real natural obstacle between Franco and the city center. Perhaps it is the same realization Jughead Jones had, that this is the hour of destiny, and they are the last line of defense against the oncoming darkness.

Because miraculously, the line coalesces again. At the River Manzanares, the Republican troops stop running. They turn and take up their rifles again. They drop to their bellies or kneel, and shoulder their guns, ready for the approaching fascists. Almost spontaneously, a defensive line reestablishes itself along the bank of the river.

Jughead grabs hold of Jason’s arm. He holds him still in the middle of the Frenchmen’s Bridge. Having dropped his rifle in flight, he bends down and picks up a discarded weapon. He shakes his head, and wipes blood and sweat from his eyes.

“No retreat,” he says. Jason stares at him incredulously. “You said it yourself. Defeat here means defeat back home. Come on. You’re quite possibly crazy, but you’ve got more conviction than anyone I’ve ever met. You’re the opposite of your bastard father. You’re a good man, Jason Blossom, and that’s why I know you aren’t going to run any further. Pick up your gun. Let’s fight, goddammit.”

Jason licks his lips. His mouth falls open. His blue eyes sparkle. Then he laughs. He laughs while the guns roar and the enemy advances and the world crumbles.

“Alright, Jones. Let’s fight. But give me a few rounds. I’m dry.”

Jughead digs into his pouch and extracts a few rifle bullets. He places them into Jason’s grimy palm.

Without warning, the redhead lurches forwards and captures his companion in a crushing hug. He buries his face in the dirty shoulder of Jughead’s jacket. A few tears stream from his eyes.

“Are you alright?”

“When we’re done here, you’re going to write about all of this,” Jason says, his voice choked with dust and smoke. “And no matter what happens, the whole world is going to know what we did.”

“¡No pasarán!” Someone roars again.

The cry ripples down the Republican ranks.
“¡No pasarán! ¡No pasarán! ¡No pasarán! They will not pass!” Cries a chorus thousands of voices strong. The chant challenges the rumbling cannons for supremacy.

Somewhere along the line, someone begins to sing the Internationale. Neither Jughead nor Jason knows the Spanish words to the song. Neither do the Germans, the French, the Poles, or any of the myriad nationalities represented in the Republican ranks.

But they know the words in their own languages.

“¡Arriba, parias de la tierra! En pie, famelica legion!”

“Das Recht, wie Glut im Kraterherde! Nin mit Macht zum Durchbruch dringt!”

“Du passé faisons table rase! Foules, esclaves, debout, debout!”

“The earth shall rise on new foundations, we who have been naught shall be all!”

The courage of the fascist troops falters.

Jughead watches as squadron after squadron of legionaries emerges from the Casa de Campo, storming towards the Bridge of the French.

“¡Fuego!”

“Feuer frei!” The cry is repeated in German.

“Fire!”

Jughead opens up with his rifle. He doesn’t know which bullets among the hail are his. It doesn’t matter. Fascist troops fall dead in piles. Republican artillery spirals over their heads and crashes down onto Franco’s ranks, destroying dozens of enemy soldiers in great, singular flashes of light.

A contingent of fascist soldiers thirty strong pushes past the hail of bullets through brute determination. Their boots pound on the flagstones of the bridge. They are so close Jughead can see the sweat on their faces and the fury in their eyes. He can only shoot. To his left, a machine gun laces up five fascists, and they collapse to the ground. Smoke rises up, acrid and heavy, creeping into his eyes and ears and nose. His ammunition begins to run dry.

He works the bolt and fires. Nothing happens. He pulls the trigger again. Still nothing. He clutches at his pouches and pockets. No bullets there. He searches the filthy stones of the bridge for stray rounds. Nothing. Through the smoke and the din, he turns, searching for his companion. Jason lies prone behind the corpse of a slain comrade, flinching each time a bullet whips by him.

“Jason!” He cries.

“What?”

“I’m out!”

“What?”

“I’m dry!”

Jughead’s heart hammers in his chest. The fascists come closer. He leaps to his feet. He holds his rifle like a spear. The bayonet glimmers. He charges, screaming at the top of his lungs.
His example stirs the rest of the bridge’s defenders. They rise, fix their bayonets, and advance. The fascists falter. For a moment, the sheer courage of their opponents fixes them in their places. A moment is all that’s needed.

Jughead rams his bayonet through the chest of a regular. He slashes at a legionary as the man comes for him with a knife. He smashes the stock of his rifle into the skull of a fascist trooper. A bullet grazes his shoulder, carrying away cloth and a strip of skin. He ignores it.

All along the riverbank, the Republicans abandon the defensive. They advance, determined to drive the invaders out of Madrid.

Arno Reisman, the German who fought stormtroopers in Berlin, advances, crying out in his native tongue.

“Comrades! Forward! For the revolution! For liberty! Forward!”

Few understand his words. But all on the field understand their spirit.

The lovely park on the western edge of Madrid descends into hell. The River Manzanares, choked with corpses, runs red. The pristine lawns are destroyed by cannon. Steel clashes. The air sings with the sound of gunfire. Warplanes tear through the dark heavens. The slain, stacked half a dozen deep, clog the lanes and litter the fields.

The new world rises to meet the old.

Chains are shattered.

The face of the world is reshaped.

And Madrid holds.

They do not pass.

Chapter End Notes

It's actually true that Madrid was saved in large part because Republican forces managed to capture the insurgent plans for the offensive from the body of a rebel officer in a knocked out tank. Of course, Jughead Jones, whose character, in any case, would not be conceived of for another five years, played little to no part in this.

And don't worry, there will be something of a respite from the constant warfare in the next few chapters. I do love writing it, though.
Playing for Time

Lying in bed in the depth of the night, the radio very quietly tuned to a Republican propaganda station, Veronica begins to formulate a plan. The details are hazy, because her grasp on the facts is still hazy. To ship her father’s gold out of the country, the fascists were going to have to move it to a port somewhere, naturally. Somewhere in the south, like Cádiz, seems most likely. If she could somehow get word to the Republican Army that the fascists were undertaking a movement of hundreds of thousands of dollars in gold, surely they would see the value in destroying or seizing such a shipment? If the money was confiscated by the Republic or otherwise prevented from reaching its destination, then her father’s and Blossom’s and all of their co-conspirators plans would be dead in the water.

But first she has to find out where the gold is being held, how it’s going to be shipped, and when. And the only way she can see to do that is to play along, for now, at least.

She uneasily drifts off to sleep, forbidden radio broadcasts from across the lines tickling her ears.

It is a chilly morning in early December of 1936 when Hermione and Veronica Lodge attend mass in Seville.

The presiding Bishop, the same who had been a guest of honor at Queipo de Llano’s banquet, begins his sermon with a paean to General Franco and the mighty armies of Nationalist Spain.

“In those parts of Spain still under the unholy power of the red government” he booms. “There is no worship. Men and women of God fear for their lives. The communist militiamen, the creatures of Moscow, desecrate the holy places and the sanctuaries of the Lord. They butcher God’s priests and even violate his nuns. Never has there been so hateful a regime as that which rules in Red Spain. This is the evil from which General Franco seeks to save our fatherland. There are some who say that Christian charity should compel us to treat these jackals with mercy. I say, ‘no!’ I say we deal with them as the children of Israel dealt with the Canaanites. I say we strike the red scum from the earth with such fury that nothing at all of their evil will remain! Viva Franco!”

The parishioners erupt into applause and cheering. Shouts of ‘Viva Franco!’ and ‘Arriba Espana!’ Veronica rolls her eyes. Her mother thankfully doesn’t notice.

The church bells toll. The embarrassing failure of the insurgent forces to take Madrid has sent a shockwave of uncertainty through Franco’s Spain. There is now a general feeling that the war will not be over quickly. It will be a long, grueling struggle. And how it will turn out, no one can say.

The night before, some anonymous vandals had defaced across the wall of a Falangist party headquarters. The message had read: "Madrid will fall within the week!" proclaimed our great and glorious Caudillo Franco, precisely one week and two days ago."

Veronica had seen it on the way to church, as grim-faced Civil Guards wiped it away and hunted for the culprits. It gave her a flicker of hope.

The sermon winds on. When it is time to take communion, Veronica kneels. She accepts the host, chewing slowly. The bread dissolves in her mouth. It feels somehow wrong to take communion from a cleric who only minutes before had cried out for a merciless war of extermination.
The mass finishes and the parishioners file out into the grey morning. Hermione pulls her shawl tighter around herself.

Somewhere a loudspeaker blares the ‘Cara al Sol’. It is impossible to escape the propaganda of the glorious National Movement here in Seville. Veronica has made up her mind. Now she only has to convince her mother that she’s had a genuine change of heart.

“Mom…” she asks, with feigned worry, as they exit the big cathedral. “If…if I help you and daddy…can we go home?”

Hermione’s eyes light up with excitement.

“Of course, mija.” She promises, placing a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “It really won’t be so bad. And we can put all of this nasty business behind us.”

Veronica nods.

“Okay.”

“Oh, what?” Hermione presses, eager for a complete capitulation.

“Oh, I’ll do what you need me to do.” Veronica says, hoping her show of reluctant compliance is convincing.

Hermione nods, satisfied.

“You’re making the right choice, mija.” She assures her.

They return to the Plaza de España an hour later, and meet with General Queipo de Llano in the courtyard.

He is lately livid about the rebel army's humiliating failure to capture Madrid. In the night, he can be heard pacing his quarters mumbling about the ‘damned reds’ and the ‘Marxist swine’. But he replaces his usual mask of decency to treat with the Lodge women.

Hermione smilingly explains that her daughter has come to her senses, while Veronica stands idly by, watching the general intently. Queipo beams, and ushers the two up the stairs and into his office. Veronica shifts her weight from foot to foot. She grows more nervous by the second. Queipo rummages around behind his desk. His infamous microphone sits idle. Veronica has the urge to knock it over.

Queipo exclaims and produces a sheet of paper from his drawer. He slams it down onto the desk.

Veronica sidles up to the desk and looks it over. It’s a single order, stamped with the seal of the ‘Burgos National Government’ and the great black eagle of Franco’s new regime. She skims the paper quickly, fearful that if her eyes linger too long she will draw suspicion from the general or her mother. There’s nothing specific in the contents of the paper, a standard issue fill-in-the-blank type order. Beneath the eagle is stamped a designation; **Order 201.** She commits it to memory.

At the bottom of the paper is the little line, awaiting her signature. Queipo offers her a pen, still smiling. She takes a deep breath. She signs her name quickly. She isn’t signing away her soul, she tells herself, she’s just stalling for time.

Queipo takes it back, admiring the signature.
“Well then, Señora Lodge.” The general beams. “It looks like your tribulations are at an end. I’ll simply send this on to the National Council in Burgos, and they’ll sign off on it. Very shortly, we shall release your husband’s money to you.” He says.

Hermione smiles in relief. Veronica smiles as well.

Queipo kisses Hermione’s hand.

Veronica excuses herself before she suffers the same fate.

“What?” Cliff Blossom picks up the phone, less than eager for a conversation. His discovery of Cheryl’s treachery has left him with even less patience than usual. He’s still trying to decide how he will deal with that. How she will be punished. She still does not know he’s intercepted her little tape. He’s spent days choking down his raw fury, so that when he finally reveals that he’s uncovered her treachery, he will be able to do more than grunt in wordless rage. In any case, he is in little mood for a phone call.

“Heya, Cliff.”

He recognizes the oily, liquid voice of Xander St. Claire and groans. Rarely does the man have anything useful or interesting to say. Cliff is convinced placing him in charge of the Fraternity’s finances is one of the worst mistakes they’ve yet to make. He’s a coward even by the standards of Wall Street, and the sort of man who would sell his mother to save his own skin. But he is—for the moment at least—an ally. Particularly since his son, Nicholas, is in Spain and has been for some time, serving as a liaison between the Fraternity and General Franco’s forces.

“What is it?”

“Nothing too important. It’s just—my son is in Spain, you know—and he shared something interesting with me a few weeks back.”

Cliff sighs, sweeping aside a stack of papers from his desk. He has plenty of problems here.

“Oh? And what did he share with you?” He asks curtly.

“He tells me your son is in Spain, too,” St. Claire goes on. “On the Red side.”

Cliff stops cold. His face burns. He feels a familiar ball of rage building in his chest. Again. He’s going to have a conniption, soon enough. Of course Jason there. That slippery little Bolshevik bastard. Of course he’d run off to Spain. And in all likelihood, the Jones boy is there, too. Every day he curses the useless hired 'killer' he sent to jughead’s cell those months ago. He should have simply gone himself. You couldn't trust anybody with anything these days.

“Is he?”

“Yep. Nicky tells me he’s traveling with someone else. Some lad by the name of—“

“Jones?”

“Ay.”

“Well, you were right. That is interesting. Do me a favor, Xander?”
“Sure thing!”

“Have your son call me, personally. At his earliest possible convenience.”


“Thank you.” And Cliff hangs up.

He rubs his face. Jason’s forfeit any part in the Blossom family. He’s also forfeit any right to mercy from his father, as far as Cliff is concerned. He can’t have his son running about causing trouble in Spain, that country that is so integral to his plans. He’s got to nip this in the bid right now. Without hesitation.
As it becomes apparent that the fascist army will not take Madrid by storm, the two sides settle in for a lengthy siege instead. Along the Manzanares, the wooded Casa de Campo, and the glittering halls of University City, the rival armies clash again and again in brutal skirmishes, pepper one another with machine guns, and die by the dozens for a few feet of ground.

The insurgents seek, desperately, to punch through the Republican lines and achieve the breakthrough that eluded them at the outset of the battle.

But the Madrileños, undaunted, and bolstered by their comrades of the International Brigades, beat back blow after blow. The weeks drag on, and it becomes clear that Madrid’s fall is nowhere near imminent.

On the afternoon of the 30th of November, after nearly three weeks of ceaseless fighting, Jason Blossom and his friend Jones are relieved. A brigade officer informs them that their battalion is being switched out for convalescence. A unit of Spaniards is taking their place, for the time being.

A great cheer goes up from the dusty, starving, unwashed, ragged Republican troops. They raise their rifles over their heads and whoop in relief. Jason picks up Jughead and squeezes him in a tight, crushing hug. Jughead might hate it, but he doesn’t hate it that much.

Jason smiles in relief as the Spanish battalion moves in and they turn over their sector of the front to the new arrivals.

“Buena suerte, compañeros” Jason says to them.

The young redhead in high spirits. The letters they received from Betty and Cheryl some weeks back have lifted his deepest fears. He feels assured that his father’s plots will fail soon enough. Each day (when not busy laying down suppressing fire or directing artillery against the fascist lines) he scours the papers for news that a group of high financiers and industrialists have been arrested for conspiring to commit treason against the Republic. He’s seen nothing yet, but soon enough, he’s sure.

And while he waits, he can content himself with his part in turning back the fascist tide here in Spain. Jason feels that, in a sense, he’s repaying the world for the life of ease and privilege he’s led until now. He’ll go home soon, once Spain is rescued from the dark triumvirate of Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini. He’ll see his bastard father rot in prison, and all will be right with the world.

Jason has found his great calling. He is happy.

“Thank God,” Jughead moans. “One more day without leave and I was going to go mad.”

The boys sling their rifles over their shoulders, leave the battlefield behind, and head into Madrid.

“Hey,” Jason suggests. “Let’s go find Toni. We can have a drink, and who knows? Maybe we’ve got more letters from home.”

“A fine idea, comrade,” Jughead says.

Jason gently knocks him with his shoulder, and the boys head off down the Gran Via towards the Hotel Florida.
Toni Topaz leans over the Hotel Florida’s bar.

“All I’m saying is you ought to be a little less…hysterical, in your writings,” Nick drawls, sipping his wine.

“Excuse me?” Toni growls. “’Hysterical?’”

Nick raises a hand for silence and lifts up a copy of the previous day’s New York Times.

“Allow me to read back to you,” He says. “’The Heroic Defense of Madrid’, by Antoinette Topaz.” He notices Toni bristle at the use of her full name, and smirks in satisfaction. “Listen to yourself: ‘valiant stand’, ‘gallant soldiers of the Republic’, the ‘Spanish Thermopylae’. You aren’t exactly being subtle in your biases, sweetheart.”

“He’s right, dear,” says an Englishman here with the Daily Telegraph. “The important thing is to be objective,” he informs her in a slow, maddeningly condescending tone.

Toni scoffs. She resists the urge to toss her drink into the faces of Nick and his English friend. Their conniving bosses at the Times had thought recruiting two reporters who held opposite opinions on everything and sending them off to the same war would make for good reading. Maybe it did, but it sure as hell didn’t make her life any easier.

“To hell with your objectivity!” Toni snaps. “And you’re one to talk, anyway, Nick! God, how many times am I going to have to read your doggerel about the ‘unruly red legions’ or ‘the disciplined, hardy forces of General Franco’? I’ll tell the both of you something: I’m not going to sit here jotting down casualty numbers and troop movements some kind of goddamn automaton while fascists rampage through Spain just so I can pretend to be ‘objective’!”

Nick sucks his teeth.

“Still as…abrasive as ever, I see.”

“Just with you, asshole,” she spits.

Before he can respond, the hotel doors swing open.

Blossom and Jones stride into the building, rifles on their shoulders.

“Ah, shit,” Nick grumbles.

“Hey, Toni!” Jughead hails. She smiles and waves back.

“St. Clair,” Jason coldly acknowledges as they take seats alongside the reporter.

Nick nods.

“Hey! I’ve got something to show you,” Toni says. She hands them the paper, and points out her column.

Jughead picks it up and reads it over.

“It was thanks in no small part to the incomparably brave action of the International Brigades, who suffered casualty rates far out of proportion with their numbers, that Madrid was snatched from the jaws of the rebel army and saved for the Republic. ‘If we beat the fascists in Spain, God willing, we won’t have to beat them anywhere else’ an unnamed American volunteer said to me, hours before taking up positions in the Casa de Campo, where his battalion bloodied the nose of Franco’s
vaunted Army of Africa under withering rebel fire.

Jughead smiles crookedly.

“‘Unnamed volunteer’, huh?”

Toni smiles back sheepishly.

“Well, you don’t strike me as the glory hound type.”

“Bravo, then,” Nick says. “I guess you boys showed me, huh? The Republic lives another day. One…more…day,” He jokes, dragging out each word. “I wrote a column, too, you know.” He winks at Toni. “We’ll see which one they decide to reprint.”

Jason, hitherto silent, scowls.

Jughead scours the newspaper for Nick’s column. He reads it and scoffs heartily. Jason takes the paper from his hand and looks it over.

“The Fight for Red Madrid, by Nicholas St. Clair,” Jason reads. “‘Despite all indications, General Franco’s army did not enter Madrid the previous week, as expected by nearly all qualified observers.’” Jason’s face darkens as he reads on. “The failure of the National Army to capture Madrid owes mostly to its soldiers exhaustion following their long, victorious march northwards from the Mediterranean. It cannot be ascribed to any particularly skillful or valiant defense on the part of the government forces, whose ill-disciplined and ill-mannered militiamen resemble an armed mob more than any sort of appreciable army’.” Jason slams the paper down onto the bar. “You son of a bitch!” He growls.

St. Clair leans back, face blank.

“I’m only reporting the facts as I see them,” He says, soft and easy.

“Oh, go to hell! ‘Ill-mannered’? ‘Ill-disciplined’? You listen to me, you little fascist weasel-“

Nick stands, miffed.

“What did you say?”

Jason stands as well. His hands clench into fists. Jughead cringes. Toni stands.

“You heard what I said.”

The bartender, Ricardo, materializes. “Hey! Hey! You two boys want to kill each other, go outside and do it there! No one will mind, this city’s already full of corpses, but I’ll be goddamned if I’m dragging another dead body off of my bar!”

Slowly, tensions diffuse. Nick’s shoulders relax. He steps away.

“I’ve got work to do. Enjoy your drink, Blossom.” He seethes.

“Prick,” Toni says. Then she turns to her friends. “So how are things out in University City?”

“Comparatively quiet,” Jughead shrugs. “We’ve been stationed in the old Natural Sciences building. The fascists rake us with machine gun fire like clockwork. You learn when to stay away from the windows. Then, when they’re quiet, we stick our heads out and shoot back.”
“I think my bosses are itching for some frontline action in my dispatches. When you fellas head back to your posts, can I tag along?”

“Sure,” Jason says. "No sweat."

They drink and eat for the better part of the day, and when night falls, the two boys from New York sleep in the feathery, if coarse beds of the Hotel Florida. The machine gun fire and the artillery, present as they are, come quieter. They can wash the blood and grime from their skin. Compared with the muddy floor of a trench, it’s a night in heaven.

Two days later, the boys return to their posts at University City. Toni accompanies them, hungry for more stories from the front.

The trio arrives at the Natural Sciences building a little after noon. The Spanish milicianos and the other Internationals welcome them back with shouts and clenched fists.

“That’s right. We’ve made our glorious return.” Jughead grumbles.

The campus of University City, ruined by artillery blasts, has been transformed into a network of trenches and hastily constructed fortifications. Buildings with their faces blown away become playgrounds for snipers. Soldiers creep through ditches and past shattered walls on their hands and knees, careful not to expose so much as a foot or a hand to the foe.

A shallow trench curls around the front of the Natural Sciences building, almost brushing against the fascist lines. The three Americans creep towards it, hesitant to leave the protective cover of the building’s walls. It’s only about twenty feet to the trench, but it’s an exposed twenty feet.


They dash forward. Almost immediately, a fascist machine gunner in a bell tower across the lines notices them. The gun whirrs to life. Bullets tear up the ground in their wake.

“Shit!” Jughead shouts.

The trio leaps down into the ditch, shaken but unscathed.

The trench is filled with Spanish militiamen and Internationals, fiddling with their rifles, pacing aimlessly, or peeking over the top to fire in the general direction of the enemy.

“Welcome back!” Henry Brooke shouts. He claps Jughead on the shoulder. “You’re just in time for another great serving of boredom.” Then the Englishman returns to his post, watching the fascists in their trenches and reporting on anything less than routine.

One of the Republicans sticks his head out and shouts across the lines.

"Hijos de putas fascistas!”—“Fascist sons of bitches!”

There is a moment’s pause.

“Id al Diablo, bastardos rojos!” Comes the retort. “Go to hell, you red bastards!”

A heated exchange of insults follows. Preferable to the exchange of bullets. Toni scribbles into a notepad.
“We’ve been in a stalemate for two goddamn weeks,” Jughead moans. “Are we going to attack or are they?”

“Fuck your mothers!” Shouts a fascist soldier. The Republican militiamen let off a few rifle rounds in response.

“Not to be forward,” Toni begins. “But if you guys could attack, it would make a far more interesting story than you and the fascists shouting put-downs at each other.”

“I think if we tell them to go fuck themselves one more time they’ll surrender,” Jughead says.

“I’m bored,” one of the milicianos drawls.

They lounge about in the trench for another few hours, eventually lapsing into a lazy game of cards with a few Spaniards and Internationals. A Pole is on the verge of winning forty Spanish pesetas, when one of the Germans clenches a fist and cries out.

“You Polish bastard! I’ll teach you to cheat at cards!”

“I didn’t cheat, you damn liar! Typical Germ-“

“Hey, hey!” Jason urges in his best commanding voice. As a sergeant, he is, despite his age, the most senior man in the group. “Cut it out!”

Arno Reisman cuts in, trying to urge his fellow German to refrain from violence.

It all has little effect.

“Show me your hand!” The German demands.

“Morale seems to be at an all time high,” Toni quips.

“Come on, fellas. Save it for the fascists,” Jughead tries to no avail.

“Enough!” Arno barks at the German. “You’re here to kill fascists, not each other!”

The Pole grabs the German by the collar.

Arno reaches forward and grabs the German by the arm to yank him away.

Before things can escalate into an all out ethnic conflict, Henry Brooke, monitoring the enemy lines, calls out.

“Hey! Hey! Lads! I think there’s something happening!”

The card game turned brawl freezes.

“What? What’s going on?” Jason demands.

Henry gestures to a low, squat office building across the lines, just behind the fascist trench network.

“That office building right across the way there. It’s been crawling with fascist troops all morning. But I ain’t seen anything move in the windows for near two hours now. They ain’t shouted any insults in a while, either.”
Jughead creeps up to the edge of the trench, peering out over the top.

“What are they up to?”

“What’s happening?” Toni demands, excited.

“We don’t know.”

Jughead squints. The positions just across the lines do seem suspiciously quiet.

In the distance, Jughead hears a familiar growl. His heart sinks as he recognizes it as the engine of a German tank.

“They’re clearing the way for their tanks,” He says in dismay.

The growl grows closer. The Republicans prime their weapons.

The first tank rounds the corner of the office building, machine guns whirling around. It trundles towards the Republican lines, rubble crunching beneath its treads. The second tank appears on the other side of the building and the pair advances in a sort of pincer movement on their positions, firing their machine guns intermittently, keeping the Republicans pinned down in their trenches. A third tank appears on the far right wing of the fascist advance, and finally, the infantry materializes, moving forward slowly behind the great machines.

A Republican miliciano leaps up over the side of the trench, and fires his rifle uselessly at one of the tanks. The bullets bounce harmlessly off of the panzer’s silver hide. The heavy machine gun opens up. The miliciano collapses back into the trench, dead.

Jughead flinches.

“Hey!” Jason cries. “Somebody get on the line with Brigade! Tell them we’re pinned down by three fascist tanks outside the Hall of Natural Sciences! You! Go!” He shouts, singling out a random Spaniard for the task. The man salutes and disappears down the line.

Toni tries to clamber out of the trench. Jughead reaches out and yanks her back down.

“Stop! You won’t get ten feet.” He hisses.

Jughead looks out over the top of the trench again. He can make out the intricate patterns in the caterpillar treads of the tanks and see the flaking paint on the sleek steel armor. He jerks his head back down just as a fusillade of gunfire rips through the spot his head had been a moment before.

They press themselves up against the walls of the trench, no one daring to expose himself long enough to fire back at the attackers. Not that it would do any good. Their rifles and machine guns are helpless against the tanks.

Jughead can deduce the fascist plan. The tanks will advance ahead of the infantry right up to the Republican positions, at which point the foot soldiers will surge ahead of the armor, clear out the trenches, and prepare the way for a general breakthrough of the Loyalist lines.

The Spaniard who Jason had dispatched to contact Brigade re-appears.

“Did you get in touch?” Jason demands.

“Sí,” the young Spaniard gasps. “They said they can’t d—“ He stands up a bit too tall, exposing himself against the blue sky, and falls down dead as a fascist bullet rips through his skull. Jason
screams. Toni reels back.

“Damm!”

“What are you going to do?” Toni demands.

“What the hell are we supposed to do?” Jughead asks. “We stick our heads out and get them blown off. We don’t have any anti-tank weaponry. We just—”

There’s a loud whistling, then a fascist shell slams down into the trench fifty yards away. Four Republican soldiers are blown into the air like ragdolls. The blast sends a wave of dust and ash hurtling across the field, bowling the milicianos over in its wake.

"A lot of help Brigade is!” Jason shouts over the din.

“‘The hell with it!’” Jughead coughs, fighting through the cloud of dust. “We’ve got grenades don’t we? That’s more than we had at Carabanchel! Let’s take the damn tanks out!” he cries, shocked at his own courage.

Jason nods. He dives forward into a pile of munitions and yanks free a box of grenades.

“Okay. So the tanks are about thirty yards out?” Jughead says. “Two guys to a tank. One lugs the grenades. The other covers him with a rifle. We get as close as we can, then toss them underneath their treads.”

Jason nods and laughs. “We’re gonna die.”

“Nah, it’ll be a breeze.”

“You’re not serious?” Toni asks.

“Hey!” Jason cries out to their comrades. “Who wants to be a hero?”

The milicianos’ courage, as always inversely proportional to their non-existent training and equipment, comes to the fore. Two Spaniards, a Pole, and Henry Brooke.

“Alright. Jason and I will take the tank in the middle.” Jughead says. “You two” he gestures to the two Spaniards. “The one on the left.” He turns to the Italian and the Frenchman. “You two, the one on the right.”

“Got it,” Henry breathes. He swears under his breath, and sings a few jumbled words of The Red Flag to cheer himself.

The tanks roll closer. The fascist troops shout and sing in anticipation.

“Ready?” Jason asks.

The men nod.

“Let’s go!” Jughead cries.

The six leap out of the trench. They dash towards their targets, heads low. The fascist soldiers fix their fire on these fighters foolish enough to leave the safety of their entrenchments. Jughead fires over Jason’s head, and a fascist legionary falls down dead. Jason plucks the pins free from the grenade. The tank looms closer. It’s big gun tracks towards them.
To their left, the two Spaniards charge towards the other tank. The Spaniard with the rifle is cut down by a hail of fascist fire. His comrade pulls the pins on his grenades. He hurls them beneath the tank’s treads, just as the tank’s gun rips him apart.

Jason comes within ten feet of the tank. He slings the grenades under the panzer’s belly.

The tank to their left goes up in flames as the dead Spaniard’s grenades do their job. Jason and Jughead retreat, just in time for their explosives to do the same and knock out the fascist panzer.

But on the right, the Pole and Henry Brooke have failed. Both are cut down before they can reach their objective. Henry lies in a twisted heap, the grenades clutched in his dead hands. The third tank continues its advance unimpeded. The two boys watch in dismay, then disbelief as Toni leaps out of the trench and sprints forty feet to the fallen Henry. She snatches up his two grenades, pulls the pins, and clears the last three meters to the advancing tank. She delivers the explosives, and then wheels around and scrambles back into trench. The two Riverdalers follow suit.

The last fascist tank is consumed in flames.

“Their tanks are gone!” Someone cries. “¡Vamonos!”

With a cry of “¡Libertad!” The Republican troops leap up out of the trench to confront their enemy, now without his armor. Bullets fly, and fascist soldiers are scythed down with ease. The insurgents’ courage falters. The hail of rifle fire drives the fascists back towards their lines. A great cheer explodes from the heartened milicianos.

In minutes, the fascist advance has been blunted, and Franco’s men forced back into their own trenches.

Back in the safety of the trench, Jughead pulls Toni into a tight, delirious embrace. “Are you sure you’re a reporter? That was insane!”

“Call it proactive journalism,” she responds, with a ragged, tired smile.

Jughead is suddenly yanked away and pulled into a hug of his own by a jubilant Jason Blossom.

“You’re phenomenal!” The redhead cries. He presses a kiss to Jughead’s forehead. “That was the bravest thing I’ve ever seen!”

The entire trench echoes with cheers for the Republic and the Internationals.

“Me?” Jughead asks. “You’re the one that went hand to hand with a fascist tank.”

Toni shakes her head, shaking with adrenaline.

“My editors are going to love this one.”

One of the milicianos taps Jason on the shoulder.

“Oye. Como te llamos otra vez?”—“What’s your name again?”

“Uh. Jason. Jason Blossom.”

“Blo-zum?”

“It’s like…quiere decir como…Flores.”
The *miliciano* turns to Jughead.

“You, *Torombolo*?”

Jughead smiles.

“Sure.”

Then the *miliciano* turns to face his comrades, and clenches his fist.

“¡Viva Torombolo! ¡Viva el Comandante Flores!”

But then they raise their heads, look out at their tattered comrades left in no-man’s land, and the moment of glorious triumph is tempered by the gritty reality of the little victory.

The Republicans bury their dead in solemn graves a few hundred meters back from the lines.

Jughead takes hold of Henry Brooke’s feet. Jason grabs his shoulders. They lay him into a shallow, ragged grave some four feet deep. The fascist bullets have ripped up his chest and belly, staining his drab olive uniform dark red-black. His face is untouched. Plain and peaceful, he looks much as he did in life.

The other three slain are set down gently into their own narrow tombs.

The XII International Brigade watches, grim and firm.

The first shovelful of dust hits Henry Brooke’s chest.

Arno Reisman steps forward. He raises his fist and sings in a soft, selpulchral tone.

“Ich hatte’ einen Kameraden…einen bessern findst du nicht…”—“I once had a comrade…you could not find a better one…die Kugel kam geflogen.Gilt sie mir? Gilt sie dir? Ihn hat es weggerissen, er liegt zu meinen Füßen—a bullet came flying, was it meant for him or me? He was torn away from me, and he lies now at my feet.”

Shortly, the dead are buried deep. Simple headstones are scratched out from repurposed bricks or flagstones. Jughead inscribes the shallow epitaphs that will remain until wind and storm wipe them away.

Jughead puts a hand on Jason’s arm. Toni watches quietly from the side. She stuffs her hands into her pockets. She has proven herself, in the eyes of the militiamen, a good comrade by her action today. A young *miliciano*, no more than fifteen, offers her a pack of cigarettes, which she heartily accepts.

“Thank you,” she tells the young man. “I won’t smoke them all.”

“Why not?”

“Mementos. Keepsakes.” She resists the urge to pinch the boy’s cheeks.

“You Americans are good sorts,” he says.

It has only been a few weeks. It is not as if they have known these fighters all their lives. But to risk everything and bleed alongside someone binds them to you as if you had been by their sides for decades.
Jason sings a few lines from the old anthem of British labor as the last bit of dirt settles over the grave of Henry Brooke, dockworker from Liverpool. “The peoples’ flag is deepest red; it shrouded o’er our martyrs dead. And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold, their hearts’ blood dyed its every fold! With heads uncovered swear we all to bear it onward til’ we fall! Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer, we'll keep the red flag flying here!”

A Spaniard steps forward.

“¡La lucha continua! ¡No pasarán!”

That evening, the three Americans return to the Hotel Florida and bury for a moment the shock and grief of battle’s aftermath. Instead, they allow themselves to enjoy the roaring standing ovation, and to be toasted as the heroes of the Republic. News of the action in University City has already spread through the embattled city and turned the three—as well as the four fallen who died in the act—responsible into celebrities.

Ricardo the Bartender spreads his meaty arms wide.

“¡Por los heroes de la causa!” —“To the heroes of the cause!” He cries. The patrons in the lounge raise another toast.

Jughead takes a cold beer and retreats into a corner of the hotel lounge, listening to the gentle rumbling of the artillery less than three miles away.

Toni retires to her room upstairs to write an article detailing the day’s heroics.

As the night winds on, Jason ambles over to his comrade, a little drunk.

“Feel good to be a hero?” Jason asks.

“Almost makes you forget everything that’s at stake,” Jughead murmurs into his drink. “Almost makes you forget those guys today.”

“You’re right,” Jason says, his face souring. “I guess we shouldn’t make a game of it. But I just wanted to say…you’re a good man, Jones. You’re braver than even you know.”

Jughead allows himself a smile.

“You’re not a slouch in the gallantry department yourself.”

Jason gestures to the carousing revelers filling the hotel lobby.

“You know, these people like you. The fact that we’re here—helping them—it lets them know they’re not alone. We’re doing something good. People will see that one day.” He leans his head against Jughead’s shoulder. “I’m glad I got to know you.”

Jughead smiles wider. He puts an arm around the tall redhead’s shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re my friend.”

The bonding moment is interrupted by the sudden and unannounced arrival of Tom Wintringham, who makes his way across the lounge towards the two boys, a glass of wine in his hand.
“There they are! The toasts of Madrid! I hear you lads are building up something of a reputation for heroics.”

Jughead raises his beer.

“Just doing our part in the glorious anti-fascist struggle,” he says.

“Right. Anyhow, I’ve got business to discuss with you two noble warriors of the people.”

Wintringham pulls up a seat.

“What sort of business?” Jason drawls. “Do you ever not have business to discuss with us?”

Wintringham ignores what a less permissive CO might have taken as insubordination.

“The Comintern is putting together another International Brigade. Number XV. And there are enough volunteers from the States that they’ve decided to form an American battalion. I’ve been asked to offer you two positions of command in the battalion when it’s finally assembled.”

“Come again?” Jughead mumbles.

“Well you’re among the few Americans already here. I’m sure those American lads would like to be greeted by fellow Yanks when they show up in Spain. And you boys have got more than a bit of experience by now.”

“We get another promotion?” Jason asks, eyes half closed.

“Should I ask again when he’s not in his drink?” Wintringham inquires.

“I’d say yes, but I’m absolutely certain that his answer would be ‘yes’ no matter what,” Jughead replies.

“And what’s your answer?”

Jughead is silent for a moment. Perhaps it’s the drink, or the exhilaration of the day, or simply the strength of his growing convictions that make him answer as he does.

“My answer’s his answer.”

Wintringham beams.

“Well then. Come a few weeks time, and you boys can consider yourselves officers in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.”
Veronica's signature dries on her father's order. It is the death warrant of American democracy. Unless she can help it.

She is quiet as can be for the rest of the day. Fortunately, her mother is too elated at having finally accomplished her and her husband’s mission to notice much.

Veronica’s plan, shaky as it is, comes together in her head.

That night, as everyone departs for bed, she remains awake. She watches the massive grandfather clock on the wall of her guest room. When it finally signals one hour past midnight, she leaps out of bed. Creeping out into the hall, she looks both ways before hurrying in the direction of Queipo de Llano’s office.

She reaches the big oaken doors in a few minutes. Taking a deep breath, she knocks to make certain it’s empty, and suffers a moment of panic as she realizes she hasn’t thought of a half-decent excuse to offer if it is occupied. Luckily, there’s no response. Veronica knocks again, just to be sure.

When she still receives no response, she gently turns the knob and pushes the doors open, thanking God Queipo doesn’t usually bother to lock his offices. Veronica steps aside, feet slapping gently against the stone floors. She creeps across the room and slips behind the general’s desk. His phone sits right there, next to his awful, infamous radio. He must have a directory somewhere. Veronica pulls Queipo’s desk open. It’s stacked full of papers, and she takes a deep breath. It’ll be a challenge to rifle through without leaving any trace she was here. She moves aside a heavy stack of paper. All of the sheets are stamped with a list of names, and at the bottom is Queipo’s signature. She almost drops them when she realizes they’re death warrants. Her stomach turns and a bolt of fear shoots through her. But it passes, and the disgust galvanizes her into action.

Beneath a few wrinkled maps, she finds a leather ledger. Flipping it open, Veronica finds what she’s looking for: a phone number directory. She flips through it feverishly. Searching for the address she needs.

Come on. Come on. There it is!

Salamanca. The seat of Franco’s government.

She spins the dial on the old phone and presses it to her ear.

What was the number on the order? She asks herself. Shit! 200? The phone rings. She begins to panic. She racks her brain for the memory. It was only a few hours ago. Come on! The phone rings again. Twice more. 201! That was it! Order 201!

There’s a click, and then a soft, easy male voice comes over the line.

“General Queipo. This had better be important,” the voice growls. Veronica flinches. She had expected a secretary or an assistant of some sort, not someone who outranked the general himself. Who was this?

“H—hello,” She stammers.
“You—this isn't Queipo,” the voice charges.

“No! Apologies. This is his secretary…uh…Dolores.” She says.

“Did he hire a new—it doesn’t matter. What is it?”

“He has a question about a certain order, and he couldn’t make the call himself—“

“A question about an order? That’s why he rings me at one hour past midnight?” the voice snarls. “Doesn’t he realize the fix I’m in? My Army of Africa is stalled at the gates of the Madrid, and the world is watching. Should we fail to conquer the reds soon, it will all be lost! I’m juggling the responsibilities of the head of the Spanish State and overall military commander of the National Army, and General Queipo de Llano can’t even hold down Seville?”

A wave of terror washes over Veronica as she realizes whom she’s speaking to.

“I’m very sorry, Excellency…to bother you,” she stammers.

There’s a moment’s pause. “It isn’t your fault,” Franco sighs. “What damned order?”

“It’s…order 201, I believe? Forgive me; it has to do with a certain amount of money entrusted to us by a certain American businessman? A Mr. Lodge?”

“Ah, yes, yes. Mr. Lodge. Well, what exactly is Queipo’s question? He was supposed to take care of this, not me. As long as he’s got all of the requisite paperwork done, the trucks should be ready to leave Salamanca any week now. Does he have a ship ready to take the shipment off at Cadiz?”

Well, there are two pieces of vital information right there. The money is being held in her father’s beloved Salamanca, and being shipped back to America by way of Cadiz. Now all she needs to know is the route between the two points.

“Yes, yes of course. It’s just…he’s worried the transport won’t be sufficiently protected?” She ventures, hoping that the question isn’t somehow ludicrous enough to give her away.

Franco scoffs.

“The shipment is going to travel with a military column as far south as Madrid, and that’s the only time it’ll come anywhere near the red lines. I don’t see what could possibly go wrong. But I’m certain the general could find a way to bungle this as well if he tries.”

So the shipment is going to be moved as part of a military convoy, and it’s going to pass perilously close to the frontlines at Madrid. Veronica suppresses the urge to cheer. She’s got it. Now all she needs is a date.

“What’s the date? That the shipment leaves Salamanca, I mean?” She asks.

“It—damn it, I don’t have time for this! Look-“

Then there’s the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Panicked, Veronica instinctively hangs up the phone.

“Is there someone in the general’s office?” She hears a voice that she recognizes as Santiago’s outside the door.

“I—there isn’t supposed to be,” comes another voice.
“Is he working late?”

“I thought I saw him head to bed earlier?”

A knock on the door.

“Hey! Who’s in there?” Santiago barks.

Veronica’s heart thunders in her chest. She’s caught now. Her head spins. What she does next she hardly expects to work; it’s just that she has no other options.

She coughs several times. Then she affects a voice as deep and masculine and angry as she can muster.

“It’s me, you idiots!” She roars. “Your general!”

“…General?”

“Yes! And I’m quite busy! Go find some duty to perform you…imbecile.” She says, doing her very best impression of Queipo de Llano.

“Is…is that the general?” Santiago asks his comrade in a hushed tone.

“I don’t know…it—”

“I heard that!” Veronica snaps. “Who the hell do you think it is?” There’s a moment of silence. Then she sees the doorknob begin to turn. “The first one through that door goes up in front of a firing squad!” she shrieks. The knob stops moving. There’s a shuffling of feet right outside the door. More murmuring. Then the footsteps disappear down the hall.

She breathes a deep, heaving sigh of relief, then plants her face into Queipo de Llano’s desk. Then she remembers that she terminated the phone call before getting a date for the shipment. Without which the rest of the information is worthless. Veronica swears.

Hell with it. She’ll just have to hope she gets lucky. She quietly slips out of Queipo’s office, looking both ways down the hall. Luckily there’s no trace of Santiago and the other Falangist. She rushes down the hallway and down a flight of stairs. On the next floor down, she rounds two corners until she finds herself outside of the little radio communications center that Santiago had shown her a few weeks before.

Again, she knocks gently. Twice. When there’s no answer, she slips inside. The wall is lined with radio sets and telegraph receivers. It’s overwhelming. She doesn’t know too much about radio, and will just have to hope, again, for luck. She creeps forward and takes a seat before one of the radios. Veronica brings her mouth close to the microphone, takes a deep breath, and says a brief prayer. She turns the radio to a low frequency. Then she speaks.

“This is a message to all forces and individuals loyal to the government of the Spanish Republic. There is a shipment of cash leaving Salamanca with a fascist military convoy sometime within the next several weeks. It’s heading to Cadiz to be shipped out of the country. It is of incalculable worth to the fascist cause. Its destruction is of paramount importance. At some point, it’s going to pass near the Madrid front. This is all I know. Sorry. Viva la República.”

Veronica switches it off, and leans back, burying her face in her hands. She’s spent. She rises to her shaky feet and stumbles back off down the hall. Climbing back into her bed, she nearly faints straight away. The moment her head hits the pillow she’s asleep.
“I’m entirely convinced Marx wrote while Engels leafed furiously through an encyclopedia at his side, in a mad dash to create the lengthiest, most inscrutable sentences ever conceived by a mortal mind.” Cheryl snaps the book shut with a thump and drops it onto the table. Betty flinches. It’s a heavy tome.

“Cheryl—where did you get that?”

“My absconded brother’s personal library.”

“Your father hasn’t gotten rid of Jason’s things, yet?” Betty asks.

Cheryl shrugs.

“I don’t think he can bring himself to touch it. He’s probably afraid of contacting Bolshevism.”

“Which book is that?”

“Capital. Volume I of III. With some luck, I should be nearing the halfway point by the turn of the century.”

Betty cocks her head and smiles a little.

“You know you don’t have to become a communist as some show of loyalty.”

“I’m not becoming a communist,” Cheryl sniffs. “I’m only seeking a window into my brother’s Lenin-addled head.”

Betty shrugs.

“If you say so,” she says, teasingly.

Cheryl rolls her eyes and purses her lips. The lights outside get dark. Pop’s is dim and quiet in the rolling night.

“Do you think they’ve received our package out yet?”

“It’s been weeks,” Betty says. “They ought to have.”

“Then why haven’t we heard anything yet?”

“Just give it a little more time. If the Times—“

“Time, dear, is something no one has much of just about now. The pun is entirely intended.” Cheryl stands up from the booth. “Now, much as I enjoy our fireside chats, I’ve to be going. Before my father gets ornery.”

“Bye, Cheryl,”

She nods and stalks out of the diner.

Cheryl comes home that evening, still none the wiser to their father's thwarting of their plans.

Her mind is filled with jumbled thoughts of fascism, communism, Spain, revolution, and most of all, Jason. She has half a mind to buy a ticket to Spain and drag him home by the ear. Maybe even
give General Franco a kick in the ass while she’s there.

She steps into Thornhill, and immediately hears her father’s voice cry her name.

“Cheryl!”

She shivers.

“Daddy?”

“Come here, please!”

Cheryl begins to make her way up the stairs and towards his study. Her gut turns. Something feels wrong. She steps inside to find him seated in the big armchair next to his bookshelf, eyeing her intently. She swallows.

“What is it?” She asks. “Is something wrong?”

“Sit down,” he commands.

She complies.

“What is it?” She asks again, spiraling towards panic.

“I want to talk to you about something,” he intones.

“What?”

“Your brother.”

She stiffens.

“What about him?”

“Do you know why he left us?”

_He didn’t, you kicked him out._ She swallows those words.

“Why do you think?” Cheryl says, unable to keep the dripping acid from her voice.

“Because he was weak,” Clifford says.

“Weak?”

“I thought I’d raised you and him to understand the importance of family. Of loyalty,” he says. “So maybe this is my fault. I don’t know how I ended up with a damned Bolshevik under my roof, but I did. I’d hoped that you were made of sterner stuff. Or at least that you weren’t as ungrateful and entitled as he.” Cheryl says nothing, enduring the insults against her brother’s character silently.

“And?” She asks, voice icy.

Cliff reaches into one of his pockets. He produces something small and black. Cheryl doesn’t process it for a moment. Then her throat closes up and she lets out a helpless squeak. Terror paralyzes her limbs. Her father’s palpable anger hits her like a wave.

The tape.
“Well?” He hisses.

Cheryl stands, her legs shaking. Her knees are weak. She clutches her chair’s back to prevent from collapsing.

“What are you going to do?” She asks, voice trembling.

“First, I’m going to deal with the goddamn Cooper girl and her friends. Then I’ll decide what to do with you, you ungrateful little bitch.”

Cliff stands as well, towering over her. She takes a step back. He steps forward. Cheryl opens her mouth to say something. Cliff hits her. Hard. Her head snaps back. A warm trickle of blood drips down from her nose. The fear in her gut is suddenly joined by a deep, howling rage. She brings her head up and spits squarely in her father’s face. Cliff blinks in shock. Then she kicks him sharply in the knee. He stumbles. Cheryl darts forward and snatches the tape out of his hand. Before he has a chance to recover, she turns on her heel and flees. She flies down the stairwell, through Thornhill’s parlor, and out into a chilly December night.

“Cheryl!” Her father roars after her.

She keeps running. She turns left and heads into the forest flanking Sweetwater River, her fingers digging into the tape. She has no idea where she’s going or what she’s going to do when she gets there. Her stomach sinks. She has nowhere to go. Jason’s gone. She’s made an enemy of her father. She’s alone.

Cheryl leans back against a pine tree and catches her breath. Her mind spins. How had her father gotten hold of the tape? How had he found out about it?

She is confused. Furious. Upset. Lonely. But tonight she’s seized by an altogether different emotion as well. Purpose. For once, she doesn’t feel as if she is an island, who the affairs of the world do not concern.

Cheryl is going to make absolutely sure her father and his friends burn. The son of a bitch has tyrannized her and her family for 18 years. She’s not going to let him extend his power any further, much less bring an entire country under his sway.

She hasn’t made an enemy of him, he’s made an enemy of her.
Clifford hurries after his daughter as she flees the grounds of Thornhill, that goddamned little tape in hand. But she vanishes out through the front door and into the night. He’s never going to find her in the woods she’s played in since she was a toddler. Not tonight.

He swears and clenches a fist. He wishes that neither of his children had ever been born.

His mind reels. Everything is in jeopardy. Again. And so close to completion, too! He has to nip this whole thing in the bud, now. No more half-measures. The Fraternity’s plans are not going to be frustrated a gang of teenagers, much less by his own daughter. He storms into the garden, where three of the silvershirts posted at Thornhill half-doze in the shadow of a hedgerow.

“Hey! You bastards! Wake up!” He roars. The militiamen snap to attention, standing straight and throwing fascist salutes. “I need you to do something. Now.”


“Listen to me closely. What are you willing to do to ensure the success of our cause?”

“Anything,” The silvershirts assure him.

“Good. Listen. I’m going to give you an address. A few, actually. You’re going to go there, now, and you’re going to kill everyone you find inside. Understand? I don’t know if they’ve got a goddamned dog or a cat, but if they do, you kill that, too. Am I clear?” A flash of doubt crosses the faces of the men. “Am I clear?” He repeats.

“Yes, sir. But what about the police an—“

“The police in Riverdale are mine!” Cliff declares.

The silvershirts nod again. They pat the pistols strapped to their hips.

“Yes, sir. Orders are clear.”

Clifford sighs.

He pulls a slip of paper out of his pocket and a pen. He scribbles two addresses down. Two houses right next to one another.

The Cooper family isn’t going to plague him anymore, and for good measure, he’s going to take care of the Andrews clan as well. The boy had been responsible for the failure of his hit on FP Jones, after all.

He’ll take care of Cheryl when she inevitably turns up.

Yes, he is going to deal with this problem once and for all.

The silvershirts salute once more and speed off to accomplish their bloody work.

Clifford hobbles back up to his study and pours himself a glass of brandy. His entire body shakes with rage and exhaustion. It’ll be fine, still, he tells himself. Any day now Franco will send their money over from Spain. Then they can buy all the weaponry they need for their soldiers and militia. They can buy loyalty, too. They’ll march on Washington by March at the very latest. He
can hardly wait. Once he and his friends of the Fraternity take the reins it’ll be smooth sailing for the rest of his days. The Blossom Empire will grow endlessly. There won’t be any goddamned trade unions, socialists, or that blasted ‘New Deal’ to stand in the way of his business anymore. Of course, he’ll have to find a new heir, but that was just a detail.

Yes, everything will work out in the end.

Cheryl wanders through the forests on the edge of Riverdale, her fingers digging into the tape. She struggles to collect her thoughts and formulate some sort of plan. What is she going to do? How is she going to do whatever she is going to do?

Then she remembers her father’s parting words. He was going to ‘take care’ of Betty Cooper. And then she knows what she’s going to do. Cheryl races out of the woods, weaving through the little footpaths and hollows she and Jason had played in as children and committed to memory. In a few minutes, she bursts out of the forest into the dim ambience of Riverdale after midnight.

Main Street. Twenty minutes to Elm Street. She leans her head into the wind, clutches the tape ever tighter, and charges off.

She arrives at the Cooper house five minutes ahead of schedule, heaving. She bends over to catch her breath. The house is dark and quiet. She sneaks around the corner to the room she knows is Betty’s. Cheryl grabs a handful of pebbles and tosses them at the window. She waits a moment. Nothing. She repeats the action. Still nothing. She swears and instead scales the trellis up to the window. She raps on the glass, and then practically pounds on it. Finally, she hears a stirring inside.

“Betty!” She hisses. “It’s me!”

The curtains are flung open. Betty Cooper appears, hair a wild mess, eyes bleary. She whimpers with confusion and not a little concern.

“Cheryl? Wh—“

“Open the window!”

Betty complies and Cheryl crawls inside.

“Cheryl, what’s going on? Why are you in my house? What time is it? Wh—“

“Shut up! Where are your parents?”

“My parents? They’re out of town. There’s a—“

“Come on. We have to get you out of here.”

“Get me out of here? Why? What’s going—“

A vehicle screeches to a stop outside the house. Peeking out through the curtains, the girls watch a lorry pull up alongside the curb. Three men emerge. The silvershirts from Thornhill. They pluck revolvers from their belts.

“Oh goddamn,” Cheryl breathes.

“Who are they?” Betty asks, voice trembling.
One of the silvershirts storms up to the front door and slams his fists into it. He knocks harder, pounding the grip of his pistol against the door.

“We have to get out of here!” Cheryl hisses again.

Betty rushes out into the hall and onto the second floor landing. The front door to the Cooper house explodes inwards and the three fascists spill inside, weapons drawn. One of them fires a wild shot into the darkness.

Betty screams from the landing. Cheryl pulls her backwards. The silvershirt captain whirls around at the noise. He draws a bead and fires his gun again just as the girls disappear behind a corner. The bullet buries itself in the wall.

“Shit! After them!” He yells. The men storm into the house.

All along Elm Street, the gunshots rouse Riverdale’s peaceful residents from their slumber. Including, of course, the family next door.


Betty doesn’t respond. Frozen. Cheryl grabs her by the wrist and yanks her towards the open window. Very slowly, the blond climbs out onto the trellis, blue eyes wide and wet. Cheryl urges her to move, following close behind. They shimmy down the trellis as quietly as possible, while the silvershirts tear up the house behind them.

They’ve almost reached the ground when, across the street, Archie Andrews’ window flies open. The young pokes his head out, squinting into the darkness. When he catches sight of the two girls on the trellis, his face wrinkles with transfusion.

Cheryl cranes her head around and presses a finger to her lips, urging quiet. Archie, entirely oblivious, calls out: “Hey—wh—what are you guys doing?”

“Goddammit Archie!” Cheryl shouts. “You absolute, perfect imbecile!”

The silvershirts in the house freeze and then follow the shout into Betty’s bedroom. The open window gives them away instantly.

In a moment, a silvershirt is leaning out of the window above them with his revolver. He fires down. Cheryl lets go of the trellis, tumbling the last five feet to the ground. Betty falls after her.

“Shit!” Archie cries, and disappears back into his room.

The two girls spring to their feet, ready to run. The silvershirt fires again. Then Archie reappears holding a rifle. He shoulders the weapon and fires a shot at the man in the window opposite his. It misses by a foot and the silvershirt ducks back into Betty’s room.

The silvershirts explode out through Betty’s front door again, looking to outflank the girls. Archie motions towards himself. They catch the hint and dash across the way, quickly scaling the lattice up to Archie’s room. They scramble inside. The silvershirts reassemble below and fire another barrage of bullets after them. All three hit the ground and the rounds sail through the window and over their heads, slamming into Archie’s roof. Flakes of paint rain down around their heads.

“What the hell is going on?” He demands. “What is—"

Before either Betty or Cheryl can answer, Archie’s bedroom door flings open. A terrified, half-
asleep, furious Fred Andrews stands there.

“What the hell is going on?” A perfect echo of his son’s complaint.

“Dad, get down!” Archie shouts.

His father ducks just as another round of bullets tears into the room.

“What in God—“

Fred springs to his feet.

“Archie, give me that rifle.”

“B—“

Fred snatches the weapon out of his son’s hands.

“Teach these bastards what I learned in France!”

He leans out of the window and fires a shot down at the attackers. It strikes one of the men in the shoulder. Blood spurts into the air. He howls in agony and drops his pistol. The men are all-too happy to terrorize and murder, but they’ve got no stomach for a real fight, even with the numbers in their favor. They sprint back into their lorry, gun the engine, and speed away down the street.

“I…I…” Betty whimpers. She sobs, soft and horrified.

Cheryl puts her hand on her shoulder.

In a surprisingly tender voice she says: “Hey. I know. But you’re not safe yet, okay? We have to go.”

“Who—“

“My father.” Cheryl says grimly. “He—he found out what we did. I don’t know how. I’m sorry.”

“What is going on?” Fred repeats, cradling the rifle, utterly confused.

“I regret deeply my theatrical exit, Mr. Andrews,” Cheryl says. She pulls Betty to her feet. “We have to get you out of here, come on.”

“And go where?” Betty asks.

“I don’t know. Somewhere. That bridge has yet to be crossed.”

“I’m calling Sheriff Keller!” Fred says.

“No!” All three kids shout at once.

“I don’t—“

Cheryl yanks Betty to her feet and drags her towards the door.

“Where are you two going?” Fred shouts.

“Away from here.”
“Wait, I’m coming with you!” Archie calls after them.

“You are not!” Fred bellows.

Cheryl ushers Betty out through the Andrews’ back door, Archie following close behind, and Fred behind him.

The girls break into a sprint. Archie follows suit.

“I’ll be back, dad!” Archie calls over his shoulder.

“Archie! Archie! Get back here!”

Fred loses them after a few blocks.

The trio only stops running once they’ve reached the edges of Riverdale again, and slink into the woods.

Only then does Cheryl slow down long enough to explain what has happened.

“I still have the tape.” Cheryl assures them. “For all it’s worth now.”

“I—we have to do something.” Archie stammers.

“What?” There’s a moment of silence. Cheryl shakes her head. “I have to get to a phone.”
Dialogue with Death

Three mornings after her daring adventure, Veronica receives a rude awakening.

The door to the bedroom bursts open. Santiago and two other falangists charge in, swearing and shouting. She springs upright and finds herself staring down the barrels of two pistols.

“Get up! Get up! Out of bed! Come on!”

“Wh—“

“Up!”

Veronica stumbles out of bed, still half-asleep. She almost tumbles to the floor, but one of the men grabs her by the wrist and roughly yanks her upright.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing, bu—“

One of the falangists jabs the barrel of his pistol into her ribs. She squeals involuntarily.

“Shut it! Move!”

They march her out through the door and into the hall. Light, airy Andalusian sunlight streams in through the windows, and she can hear birds whistling in the patio, adding an air of levity to the proceedings. Her guts twist up into a painful knot. Her mouth goes dry, and she has to force herself to put one foot in front of the other. She has the sudden, primal urge to call out for her mother. For a moment her instinct is to sprint away. But even if she managed to get three feet without a bullet in her spine, where would she go? There’s nowhere to run.

Veronica moves reluctantly down the hall, every so often reminded to keep walking by the pistol at her back. Her fear intensifies ten-fold when she realizes where they’ve brought her. Because she was here the other night. Queipo de Llano’s offices. Santiago throws the door open and brusquely forces her inside.

The general sits there behind his desk, eyes lidded, mouth twisted into an angry little scowl. He taps his fingers calmly on a ledger before him. The one she consulted for her phone call that night. A chair sits before him, awaiting an occupant. Santiago shoves her down into the seat and she cries out. He responds by striking her forcefully with the grip of his pistol. She winces but bites her tongue and refrains from giving them the satisfaction of another scream.

Queipo jerks his head towards the door and clicks his tongue, ordering his henchmen to leave. They throw snappy fascist salutes and then exit the room.

Veronica sits up straight. Her head throbs. The tall, lanky general watches her intently with his dark eyes. He breathes in deeply. She steels herself.

“Well, Señorita Lodge,” he says. “Good morning.”

She glowers. He sneers.

“I’d wish you a good morning but I don’t want to pollute the conversation with lies,” she snaps. It’s not a particularly good put down, but considering her paralyzing terror it’s the best she can come up with.
“Hmm.” He shakes his head, looking genuinely distressed. He allows a full minute of silence to pass before he continues. “I must ask, Señorita. Do you realize the gravity of what you’ve done? Or did you think we would not discover your tampering with our radios? Or that I would not notice that someone had been at my desk? Even if that…idiot Santiago didn’t?”

“Where’s my mother?” She demands.

“That’s not important now. I will ask again: do you understand the gravity of what you’ve done? You, as a guest of National Spain, have attempted to aid the reds and in doing so committed a crime worthy of death. I’ve had men shot for much, much less.”

“So shoot me,” she retorts, astonished her own courage.

Queipo slams his fist down onto the desk.

“This is not a joke!” He roars. “I should have you shot!” He leans back into his seat, and a strange, gloating smile creeps over his cadaverous features. “And I would were it not that you, señorita, are a less than exemplary radio operator. Your little broadcast will never reach the reds.” Veronica’s heart sinks. “So, thanks be to God and your incompetence, your treachery has done no real harm to our cause.” He sniffs. “And because your mother and father have been such a great help to our efforts, and because you are only a young lady, I am inclined—just barely—to show clemency.”

“If?” She says.

“You…made a phone call to Salamanca, and you inquired as to the route over which your father’s money is to be shipped to him. And to the date of that shipment. I want to know why it is you wanted this information, and what you intended to do with it. Have you been in contact with red agents? Answer every question we ask of you and sign a written statement repudiating your actions, and we will consider this matter settled.” He smiles.

Veronica simmers with fury. She isn’t sure if it’s personal pride or righteous disgust at this man and his ‘cause’ that drives her to answer as she does. She remembers the slaughter in the bullring. The general’s repulsive radio broadcasts play themselves over again and again in her head. Veronica stands. She leans forward. Queipo leans back instinctively.

“Go to hell,” She says.

“What?” He furrows his brow, legitimately shocked.

“I said you, your ‘movement’, and your cause can all go to hell. You make me sick. You parade around in that uniform like it means something and pretend you’re some kind of gentleman. You’re not a soldier. You’re nothing but a disgusting murderer and a bully.”

Queipo’s face purples with rage. The veins in his broad forehead bulge against the skin. His lips twitch and his nose flares. He digs his fingernails into the surface of his desk.

“How dare you speak to me that way? I am th—“

“You’re a bastard! You and General Franco and all of the rest of you fascist bastards! I hope you all hang!”

He slams his palm down onto the desk.

“Santiago!”
The young falangist bursts back into the room, pistol at the ready.

“Sí, mi general?”

“Take this treacherous little brat away. If she wants to throw her lot in with the reds, fine. Toss her into a cell. Under sentence of death.”

Santiago strides forward, grins wickedly, and roughly grabs her around the bicep.

“As you command, general.”

“You can’t do this! Veronica isn’t even a Spaniard! You have no right!” Hermione rages at the general, hands shaking, eyes shimmering. She stands upon the very brink of collapse, as she smothers under the scaffolding of contradictions that has become her life.

Queipo curls his lip. Hermione Lodge stares him down, eyes blazing. The general crosses his arms.

“I have every right to deal with red subversives any way I see fit.”

“Red subver—she’s a child!”

“An enemy is an enemy.”

“Release my daughter, general, or I’ll—“

“What, Señora Lodge? You ought to be as angry with the girl yourself! She tried to betray your husband’s money—your money—to the reds! The reason for your being here, and she was prepared to spoil all of it!”

“I’ll go to the American consul if I have to.” Hermione threatens. She takes a step forward.

Queipo’s sneer widens.

“Really? Will you? What will you tell them? Will you tell them the purposes of your visit to Spain? Or have you forgotten that you’re here to secure funds for the overthrow of your own government? I’m sure the consul would like very much to hear that, wouldn’t he?”

Some of the fire goes out of Hermione’s eyes. She swallows. Her lip quavers.

“I want to see her.”

Veronica paces back and forth in her cell, swearing in English and Spanish. She curses her mother. Curses her father. Curses Cliff Blossom and Queipo de Llano and General Franco.

She curses herself. What had she thought would happen? She had no idea how to operate a radio. Of course her broadcast wouldn’t have gotten through. And had she really thought Queipo wouldn’t notice that someone had been at his desk? God, she was stupid.

But what other choice did she have? Time was growing short. Her father and his friends had their money now, thanks to her. They would be ready to make their grab for power soon enough. She leans back against the cold stones of the cell wall. She buries her face in her hands.

If she’s to die and the world is to spiral further into darkness, at least Veronica Lodge can go to her
death saying she did everything she could to stop it. Even if ‘everything’ was as good as nothing.

The cell wasn’t empty when Queipo’s men brought her here in the morning. There was a Republican militiawoman here, with a bloodied face, black eye, torn overalls, and a busted jaw. Veronica didn’t ask, and even if she had, the poor woman, with her ruined mouth, couldn’t answer. But the militiawoman did not show so much as a glimmer of fear. She smiled through her shattered jaw and offered Veronica a cigarette, which the girl politely declined. She was even so kind as to give her a hug when she broke down and cried.

The woman scratched a little message for Veronica into a brick in the wall.

*Valor, compañera.*

Courage, comrade.

Veronica smiled.

An hour or two later, the fascists returned to take her cellmate away. The woman smiled once more, offered a clenched fist salute, and disappeared down the hall, flanked by two Civil Guards.

And that was the end for her.

Now, the door swings open again.

Three Civil Guards enter, hauling a spitting, kicking, and clawing young man in a leather jacket and natty soldier’s cap.

*“Jodedos hijos de putas fascistas me cago en tu–“* One of the guards punches the boy in the gut. He is silenced for a moment. Then he regains his breath and lets off a fresh string of insults.

They hurl him to the ground at Veronica’s feet, slam the cell door shut, and vanish.

He leaps to his feet and attacks the door. He pounds his fists against the steel and screams a litany of impressively colorful obscenities into the hall.

*“Are you done?”* Veronica asks after a minute or two.

He turns around, as if he had not noticed her presence.

*“Oh. Hello.”*

*“Hi.”*

He extends his hand.

*“Nicolás. Soldier of the Republic,”* He chirps cheerfully.

*“Veronica Lodge,”* She replies.

Nicolás slides down, sits against the far wall.

*“You have a cigarette, comrade?”*

*“Sorry.”* She shrugs, sitting down on the little cot provided them.

*“Ah, whatever. They might have the courtesy to give me one before they shoot me.”*
“How do you know they’ll shoot you?” Veronica asks, though she knows just as well as he that they will.

He smiles, without a hint of fear in his eyes.

“Of course they’ll shoot me. Shoot you too. Don’t think they won’t, just because you’re a girl. These bastards have got no scruples at all.”

Veronica’s gut chills. She battles the creeping, horrible fear of death that threatens to eat her up.

“Yeah. Probably.”

“So what did you do, anyway?”

“Made an enemy of General Queipo de Llano.” She spits, disgusted.

“Bastard,” The boy says. Then his eyes light up. “So you’re for the cause, then?”

She’s silent for a moment. Then she smiles, and laughs.

“Yeah, I suppose I am. Not like I have much of a choice at this point.”

The miliciano nods.

“Well, we can die knowing they can’t kill us all, right?” He says, in what might be the darkest attempt at reassurance Veronica’s ever heard. She smiles politely anyway. “So, Veronica, where are you from?” He asks.

She stares at him, unable to reconcile his nonchalance with his—with their—impending fates.

“I—New York, actually.”

He cocks his head.

“So you’re not a Spaniard?”

“I—well, my father is. But me, no.”

He stands up.

“Well then you’ve got a chance. They might be scared to shoot you, if you’re a foreigner. Maybe not, but more of a chance than I’ve got.”

She nods, unwilling to get her hopes up.

“Maybe.”

“If you do—if you get out of here, I mean, you have to tell them what’s happening here in Spain. Tell the world what they’re doing to us.”

“Right. Of course. I will,” she promises. And she means it. "On my name. It's all I've got left, anyways."

Nicolás sits back down, satisfied.

They lapse back into a grim silence. The sun climbs up into the Andalusian sky, and then sinks back down again. In the hall outside, prisoners shout, weep, and curse.
A few hours past nightfall, Nicolás begins to sing.

“Los cuatro generales, los cuatro generales, querida mia, que se han alzado, que se han alzado! The four insurgent generals, the four insurgent generals, my love, they tried to betray us, tried to betray us.”

Veronica recognizes the tune. It’s a Spanish folk song her mother would sometimes sing to her as a girl, Los Cuatro Muleiros. Adapted to the circumstances of course.

In the hall, a few more prisoners take up the defiant melody.

“Franco, Varela, y Mola. Franco, Varela, y Mola, querida mia, Queipo de Llano, Queipo de Llano. Franco, Varela, and Mola, my love, and Queipo de Llano, Queipo de Llano.”

Veronica catches onto the lyrics and joins in.

A door swings open outside. Boots clack along the stone floor outside.

“Shut up!” A guard shouts.

The singing grows louder instead.

“Para la noche Buena, para la noche Buena, querida mia, seran ahorcados, seran ahorcados! By Christmas Holy Evening, my love, they’ll all be hanging, they’ll all be hanging!”

“Shut up!” The guard cries, louder.

“¡Viva la República!” A prisoner cries out.

“Really got those fascist bastards riled up, eh?” Nicolás sneers.

Veronica smiles.
Clifford is livid with his henchmen’s failure, a pattern that seems to be asserting itself with some regularity. He stands in his study, behind his desk, fists planted firmly on its lacquered surface, staring down his cowering trio of would-be assassins.

“Well…there were two of them there. We very nearly got them,” The silvershirt captain explains sheepishly.

“Very nearly? Very nearly? What in God’s name is ‘very nearly’ worth? Nothing!”

One of the silvershirts shrugs and looks down at his boots.

“They shot back at us.” He mumbles.

“Jesus—of course they shot back at you, you imbecile! You were there to kill them! If this is the sort of conduct we can expect when we march on Washington, then we are doomed.” Clifford rubs his forehead.

“We can try to find them again.” One of them protests meekly. Clifford raises a hand for silence.

“Forget it. I’ll have Keller put out an alert. When they’re locked up in jail cells, then you can deal with them. Assuming you don’t find a way to botch that as well.” The silvershirts shuffle their feet.

They rapidly comply.

“Yessir.”

He dials Keller’s number. Three rings, then the beleaguered Sherrif picks up.


What a damned mess.

Keller obediently issues an alert stating that Betty Cooper and Cheryl Blossom have gone missing and anyone with information regarding their whereabouts ought to bring it to the attention of the authorities as quickly as possible.

“What are we going to do?” Betty moans.

“I don’t know, okay? If I had the slightest idea—and I can’t believe I’m saying this—you’d be the first to know.” Cheryl snaps.

The girls are hidden away in an old tree house deep in the woods alongside Sweetwater River. Archie has courteously shown them the place, an old project of his and Jughead’s from years gone by, and given them use of the little fort for as long as they needed it. And considering Clifford Blossom is doing everything within his considerable power to find them, they’ll likely need it for
some time.

“IT’s all over, isn’t it?” Betty moans into her hands.

“The hell it is! I still need to get to a phone.”

“For what?”

“I need to call Jason.”

“What’s he going to do?”

“I don’t know. Something. Your incessant questions sure as hell aren’t going to do anything!”

Betty sits back against the rotting tree house planks. She expects the whole thing to crumble any second now.

“When you…listened in on your father’s meeting, did they say exactly when they’re going to make their move?”

Cheryl shrugs.

“‘Early next year’ was as specific as it got. However long it takes Franco to send them their money from Spain, I suppose.” She pauses for a moment. “This is ridiculous! I haven’t had a shower in almost a week! I can’t live in the woods like a damn anim—“

Someone rapping on the tree house interrupts her complaining. The special knock identifies their visitor as Archie. Betty reaches out and flings the trap door open. A red head pops up through the door, wearing a weak smile. He clambers up into the tree house.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” comes the dry reply.

“So—don’t panic, I brought someone.”

“You brought someone?” Cheryl immediately panics. “Didn’t we specifically tell you not to tell anyone where we were? Jesus, it didn’t take you long to absolutely bungle this o-“

A second figure materializes behind Archie.

Kevin Keller follows into the little room.

“Kevin!” Betty exclaims. She lunges forward and throws her arms around the boy. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Yeah.” He mutters. “Look. Archie told me everything and…this is bad, but I think I can help out.”

“How?” Cheryl crosses her arms.

“I can give you guys a place to hide out, at least.”

“Where?” Betty inquires.

“Look, just come with us.” Archie coaxes. “Come on. You really shouldn’t stay in one place too long, anyway.”
Reluctantly, the four climb back down from the tree house. Betty wobbles, having grown unused to solid earth beneath her feet. They wordlessly begin their trek through the woods, Kevin and Archie leading the way, Cheryl muttering in discontent all the while. They remain close to the river, but not so close they’d be visible from a boat on the water. By the current, Betty notes that they’re traveling south.

Cheryl leans in towards Betty.

“You don’t think they’re turning us in, do you?” She hisses.

“What? No. They’d never do that!”

“This has been a year of hairpin turns.”

After an hour of walking, they turn sharply to the west, emerging from the forest and into the light of civilization. From the dilapidated buildings, Betty immediately deduces that they’re in the Southside. They move surreptitiously, creeping around abandoned shops, shuttered up houses, and old warehouses. It’s about high noon, and the sun is riding overhead. Probably the most dangerous hour to be moving about like this.

They move through a quiet, dark alley and emerge into an abandoned lot decorated by the rusted husk of an old car and a thousand discarded bottles. On one of the walls someone’s scrawled: Down with the means test!

There’s movement behind the old car. The fugitives and their abettors jump. Someone emerges from the shadows. The first things to strike Betty’s eye are the dark, slicked back hair and the leather jacket. Joaquin DeSantos. He strides forward, a smile on his face.

“So,” he says, clearly enjoying himself. “I heard you ladies got on Cliff Blossom’s bad side, too?”

“Great,” Cheryl says.

Joaquin hangs back.

“Hey, you know, I don’t have to help you,” he says.

“What ‘help’ could you possibly offer us anyway?” Cheryl snaps.

The young serpent crosses his arms.

“He offered to let you guys lay low in the Southside for as long as you needed to.” Kevin cuts in. “Under Serpent protection.”

“‘Serpent protection?’” Cheryl sneers. “Seriously?”

“Hey,” Joaquin says. “How the hell do you think I’ve stayed alive this long after that mess at your daddy’s factory, huh? Anyway, it doesn’t look to me like you girls are in any position to be picky, what with Keller’s guys sniffing around for you and all.”

Betty sighs.

“Where would they stay?” Archie asks.

“They could move around.” Joaquin suggests. “Place to place. Probably spend most of the time at the Whyte Wyrm. Safest there. I p—”
Cheryl snorts. “Is that a joke? I’m not going to live in proletarian squalor like—”

Joaquin takes a step forward.

Kevin sticks an arm between them.

“You want help or not?” Joaquin snaps.

Archie shifts his weight from foot to foot. “I gotta say, there isn’t really a whole wealth of other options here. Until this whole thing blows over, at least.”

“This isn’t going to blow over.” Betty says. “Not unless we can–god, I don’t know.”

“Hey.” Joaquin asks. “Let me see that tape.”

"How do you know about the tape?” Betty asks.

"They told me," Joaquin gestures to Kevin and Archie.

Cheryl glowers.

"I've got half a mind to make chamois from your skins you gibbering idiots."

They slink back.

"Let me see it," Joaquin says again.

“In your dreams.”

He backs off.

“Fine. Alright. Whatever you say, sweetheart.” He turns away. “So, you girls coming or not?”

Betty and Cheryl share one more forlorn look.

Then, wordlessly, they turn to follow the young man in his leather jacket.

Archie and Kevin offer sad little waves goodbye.

Joaquin leads them silently further into the wretched depths of the Southside, and further from Clifford’s bloody grasp.

Chapter End Notes

I actually had the idea of Joaquin returning after a long absence to lend a hand long before the actual show did. Once again Riverdale rips off me ripping off Riverdale.
Hermione Lodge rarely smokes. Indeed, she’s surprised to find herself doing it tonight. It’s a nasty habit, she’s always thought. Still, she needs something to slacken her nerves.

She puffs on the cigarette, exhaling a little cloud of vapor into the crisp Andalusian night.

Her hands shake violently.

She vacillates wildly between fury at her daughter, fury at herself, fury at the general and all of their compatriots, and raw terror. Hermione feels like her mind is splintering. She has no doubt Queipo de Llano will gladly have Veronica shot for her act of ‘sabotage’—and more than that, for her stubborn refusal to beg clemency.

She moans and takes another drag on the cigarette. Her arms draped over the marble balcony, Hermione looks out at the city of Seville beneath her, swirling in midnight fog and draped in its red-gold banners. How could Veronica—her sharp-witted, quick-minded daughter, be so stupid?

She winces. But then, perhaps it was not stupidity. Perhaps Veronica just clung to the shreds of human decency she and Hiram had long since discarded.

What is she doing here? She remembers the spectacle in the bullring. The blood hissing in the heat and the intolerable stench of putrefying corpses under a hot summer sun.

Is that what she wants to do her part to spread over the world?

Queipo is mistrustful, now. Despite her and Hiram’s long-standing connections with anti-Republican conspirators in Spain, the general now nurses suspicions she is party to her daughter’s treachery.

The door into the room behind her opens. The young Falangist, Santiago, steps out onto the balcony. He fingers the grip of his pistol.

“Señora, are you well?” he asks in a sort of quiet, veiled way.

“I’m fine,” she replies. He nods.

“The general wishes to speak with you.”

Hermione sighs. She flicks her cigarette over the balcony into the street below. The little burning point of light arcs through the air and vanishes into the phantom glow of the dim streetlamps. She turns around and follows.

Queipo awaits her in his study, as alert-eyed and lupine-faced as ever.

“Señora,” he purrs.

“General,” she responds.

He drags his fingers across the lacquered surface of the desk.

“Your husband’s gold deposits are set to depart from Salamanca by truck on the 10th of February,” he informs her. “From there, they’ll travel south along with a military convoy reinforcing our troops on the Madrid front. That should be the most dangerous leg of the journey. Your…daughter
attempted to warn the reds of the shipment by radio, but I assure you, it did not get through. Once the van reaches Madrid, your trucks will break off and travel south to Malaga. From there, the gold will go by ship back to America, where I assume your husband’s associates will be waiting to receive it. Is all of this satisfactory?”

“Yes, general,” she says in a hollow, tinny voice.

Queipo nods.

“Good, good.” He watches her carefully through those dark, serpentine eyes.

“But there is one thing.”

“Oh?”

“I want to see my daughter.”

Queipo sighs.

“Your daughter has proven herself as much our enemy as any armed red.”

“Well, I wish to see her regardless.”

He watches her for a while, fingers drumming methodically on the desk. Santiago stands at the door, pistol readied. For a moment, Hermione fears the general will leap up and have her arrested.

“Fine,” he says, instead. Hermione breathes in relief. “I’ll have Santiago take you down to the prison,” the general huffs.

She stands, curt and polite.

“Thank you, general.”

He nods.

A half hour later finds her and Santiago in a requisitioned military staff car, easing their way through the dark Sevillan streets.

The prison is an old convent, repurposed to hold the masses of political ‘detainees’ swept up in the fascist dragnet since last July. Rarely does anyone stay longer than a few weeks at most. It’s a way station between liberty and the firing squad.

The inside of the convent is dark and musty. Old icons of Christ and flaking statues of saints peek out from little alcoves in the walls. A Civil Guard chomping on a cigarette steps forward to appraise the visitors. He looks them over, drooping mustache twitching.

“And?” he sneers.

“I’m here to see my daughter.” Hermione says, firm and crisp.

“Orders of the general,” Santiago adds, stepping up.

“Well, who’s your daughter? We’ve more than one girl here, you know.”

“Veronica Lodge.”
The guard turns around and rummages through a desk, poring carelessly over a mess of files. He mumbles, runs his finger down a shit of paper, and puffs his cigar. A cloud of smoke surrounding his face, he turns around to face them again.

“Mm. Carlos!” He calls.

A younger fellow in the same Civil Guard uniform comes running. He offers a snappy salute and clicks his heels.

“Si, comandante?”

“Take this woman to Cell 42, third floor.”

“Si, comandante.”

The young man motions for them to follow. He guides them up two flights of stairs, past grim dungeons and under flickering light bulbs hanging bare from the ancient stone ceilings. Hermione’s breath hitches. She can hear shuffling and muttering from within the cells. Some of the bolder souls sing. She hears the strains of the *Internationale* and the *Himno de Riego* from more than one cell.

“Shut up!” Carlos barks as they pass by.

They round one more corner, pass four more cells, and then stop. Carlos snatches a ring of keys from around his belt. He jams one into the nearest cell door. It opens with a haunting, agonized groan. Metal screeches against stone and the ponderous steel door gives way.

“You’ve got fifteen minutes,” Carlos says.

Hermione steps gingerly into the cell, eyes fluttering in the dim light. Santiago remains in the doorway, watching intently.

Two shapes stir in the darkness. One stands. It’s too tall. A man. The other slides off of the cot and rises to its feet as well. A shorter figure. Feminine. Her daughter. She rushes forward to embrace her.

“Get away from me!” Veronica hisses, pulling away.

Her cell mate, a young man with a busted up face in a leather jacket, grins silently.

“Veroni—“

“Just stop! You treacherous, bloody—just, leave me alone.”

The young man crosses his arms, smile widening.

“Who’s this?” Hermione asks.

“My cellmate, Nicolás.” Veronica snaps. “And I much prefer his company to yours.”

Hermione grips her daughter by the shoulders. Tears well up in her eyes. Veronica fixes her with a hateful, defiant stare, impressively devoid of fear.

“Mija, I’m so, so sorry th—“

“Oh, you’re sorry? What is it you’re sorry for, exactly? Are you sorry for rubbing elbows with
“Are you sorry for helping engineer a fascist coup back home? Are you sorry for turning me over to a firing squad to do it? You know what? Frankly, I don’t care what you’re sorry for. Keep your damn apologies.” She finishes by dramatically turning her back to her mother.

Hermione sighs. She looks over her shoulder at Santiago, still watching from the doorway. She’s calculated correctly; his English is poor, and he likely understands nothing they’re saying, but he won’t suffer the humiliation of demanding they speak Spanish for his benefit. So he keeps his mouth shut, even if it means he’ll be unable to answer when the general inevitably asks him what Mrs. Lodge discussed with her daughter.

“Mija, listen to me,” Hermione implores.

“What?”

Hermione lowers her voice.

“Your father’s…assets leave Salamanca on February 10th.”

Veronica knits her brow. Suspicious.

“What the hell good does that do me now?”

Hermione looks over her shoulder again at the dark, surly shape of Santiago. Then she briskly kisses her daughter on the forehead.

“I love you, mija.”

Then she turns and leaves.

“That was your mother?” Nicolás asks.

“Not as far as I’m concerned,” Veronica huffs.

“What did she want?”

Veronica shakes her head.

“Nothing. Excuses. As usual.”
Christmas, 1936

Jughead tries to regulate his breathing. He clutches his rifle close to his chest. There are five men besides him huddling in the shadows of the corridor. Their bayonets glisten in the streams of moonlight cutting in through the shattered windows.

This was the Hall of Philosophy and Letters, of Madrid’s great university. Hefty tomes of Schiller and Cervantes strew the ground; the pages scorched black or riddled with gunfire.

Jughead cranes his head up towards the ceiling. One floor above, the unmistakable sound of raucous carousing carries down. Laughter and singing in Spanish and Berber. It’s Christmas Eve, after all.

Jason creeps out to the head of the six-man team, and motions his comrades forward. Jughead follows, crouching low.

They move through the hallway as silently as they possibly can. Their boots scuff linoleum and their belts rattle and with each slight noise they freeze in terror.

They turn a corner. A stairwell faces them. Light streams down from the landing. Shadows play on the wall. Up through that room is the enemy.

Jason sits still, staring up to the landing.

“Are we going?” Jughead hisses.

“Wait,” Jason mutters.

“Vamonos!” One of their comrades snaps.

“Wait,” Arno echoes. “If we charge straight through there, it’s suicide. They’ll shoot us all down. We don’t even know how many there are.”

“Well, we’ve come this far,” Jughead growls.

There’s another moment of silence.

Jason mutters to himself. The men on the floor above still don’t hear them.

“I have an idea!” Jughead whispers.

“What?” Jason asks.

“Follow me.”

Jughead turns and leads his five comrades back down the hall. They turn another corner.

“What’s your idea?” Jason asks again.

Jughead points. Set in the wall is an old dumbwaiter up to the third floor.

“See?”

He asks.
“Yes,” Hisses a Hungarian International in his thick accent. “It’s an elevator. What of it?”

“Give me all of your grenades,” Jughead asks. His idea dawns on his comrades. They smile. Dutifully, they hand over their grenades.

Jughead stuffs the explosives into the dumbwaiter. He pulls the pin on one, then hits a few buttons and sends the little elevator up to the next floor. It rises, stops, and opens.

One floor above, the fascists mutter in confusion. Their boots scuffle. Then there is a collective cry of horror as they realize, too late, the enemy ploy.

A great blast shakes the building and knocks loose plaster and stone from the bullet-scarred walls. Dust rains down from the ceiling. The crouching milicianos listen. The floor above falls silent.

“Go! Go! Go!” Jason shouts.

They hurriedly retrace their steps, charge up to the third floor, and rush forward to confront their enemies. The grenades have done their work. The fascist soldiers, some fifteen total, are slain. The force of the blast in the little room, has struck them dead with sheer concussive force. Most are not even bloodied.

The milicianos occupy the third floor without a single man lost.

Jason pulls Jughead into a crushing hug.

“Ow.”

“You’re a genius!” Jason exults.

The other soldiers congratulate him and slap him on the back.

“Well…” Jughead mumbles sheepishly. “I actually had that idea for a story of mine a while back. Who knew it would work in real life, huh?”

The fascists have daubed the walls of the room in their faction’s slogans; “Arriba España!” “Viva Franco!”

A messy swastika has also been scrawled over a wall map.

Jason smears red paint over the symbol, and shortly replaces it with a hammer and sickle, and the words; “Vivan los obreros!”

“Hey, someone radio Brigade,” Jason orders. “Tell them; ‘position taken’.”

Everyone cheers again.

“You guys know what day it is?” Jughead asks, slumping down into a chair left intact by his grenades.


“It’s Christmas Eve. Come on. You guys forgot?”

Everyone laughs.

“Well,” Jason sighs, busily erasing the fascist graffiti from the walls. “Merry Christmas,
There’s a little house in the depths of the Southside, just off of the railroad tracks. It’s one story built from cheap cast-off wood. It creaks and groans with the winter wind. The windows long ago buckled inwards, and shards of glass litter the floor beneath the sills. The electricity was cut off long ago, and the water runs only intermittently. It’s here that Joaquin DeSantos has been hiding out ever since the debacle at the Blossom factory all those months ago, under the fierce protection his fellow Serpents. And it’s here that Betty Cooper and Cheryl Blossom find their refuge as well.

Tonight, Joaquin brings home a meager meal of three hamburgers from Pop’s and a single large bottle of water. Betty and Cheryl, famished, dig in. Much to everyone’s amazement, not even Cheryl complains about the food’s quality.

“So,” Joaquin mumbles as he eats. “Things are getting bad out there.”

Betty stops, her hamburger halfway to her mouth.

“‘Bad’ how?”

“I hear Mr. Blossom’s going a little crazy that he can’t find you. Keller’s deputized a few more guys and the whole town is in a tizzy.”

“A preview of coming attractions.” Cheryl mutters.

“Hey,” Betty says, stuffing the last bit of hamburger into her mouth.

“Yeah?” Joaquin asks, leaning back.

“I just wanted to say thanks, again. For helping us out, like this.”

Joaquin shrugs.

“Sure. Anything to thumb my nose at Cliff Blossom. And, you know, save democracy or whatever the hell you’re on about.”

There’s a smattering of laughter.

“Jason hasn’t written back, has he?” Cheryl asks, hopeful.

Joaquin shakes his head apologetically.

“Sorry. It might be a little while.”

“We don’t have a little while,” She snaps.

“Hey, what the hell do you want me to do about it? Transatlantic mail isn’t the speediest thing on earth. Especially not when you’re corresponding with someone in a warzone.”

Cheryl looks down at the floor in silent understanding.

“Right,” She sighs.

There’s another long silence. They finish their scanty meal. The little shack shudders in the winter wind.
“You guys know what day it is?” Joaquin asks.

The girls side-eye him, as if preparing for some sort of prank.

“No…” Betty says, slowly.

Joaquin smiles.

“It’s Christmas Eve, come on.”

Cheryl cocks her head, uncomprehending. Betty looks very sad.

“Really?” Cheryl asks.

“Yeah. Really.” Joaquin says.

Cheryl cranes her head around and stares out through a shattered window. The pines on Sweetwater River shake in the breeze. There’s no snow yet.

“Some Christmas,” she growls.

“Well,” Betty says, in the cheeriest voice that she can possibly muster given the situation. “Merry Christmas, fellas.”

Cheryl snorts. Joaquin chuckles.

“Well,” Cheryl says after a little while. “Merry Christmas, Betty Cooper.”

“How’d they catch you?” Veronica asks, on impulse.

Nicolás stands up, staring out through the cell’s little window. The moonlight glimmers in his dark eyes.

“We were fighting outside Córdoba. I was cut off from my column by Moorish cavalry. We fought as well as we could. It wasn’t enough. I was lucky they didn’t shoot me there and then.”

“Bum deal,” Veronica says, hoping she isn’t making light of all of this.

Nicolás chuckles.

“They gave me a ‘trial’. It lasted about five minutes. You know what the ‘judge’—that soft-handed old landlord—you know what he said to me? Before he sentenced me to be shot? He said: ‘I wish we could send this miserable little red in a cage to Geneva, so that the simpering liberals at the League of Nations could see what wretched creatures are these supposed defenders of ‘justice and democracy’.”

Veronica flinches. She could imagine those words coming out of her father’s mouth.

“And what did you say to that?”

He grins.

“I spit in his face and told him we were going to ram a bayonet up the ass of every fascist in Spain. So they beat me with their rifles and then they sent me here until they decide to shoot me down.” Nicolás spreads his hands. “Así es la guerra,” he shrugs.
“I’d give my entire family fortune in a heartbeat to skewer Queipo de Llano on a bayonet.”

“How big is that fortune?” he asks.

“A few million?”

His bronzed face and curious eyes flash with the interest of one who can hardly conceive of that much money. He runs a horny, calloused hand through his hair.

“If I worked in the fields every day, sun-up to sun-down, for the rest of my life, if I lived to a hundred, I would never see even a piece of that.”

“Well, you’re in luck, then. My dad didn’t have to work a single day in a field for that money.” Nicolás laughs.

“Is your father Juan March?”

She shakes her head.

“Hiram Lodge. If you’ve heard of him—we’re cousins of Primo de Rivera. Every now and again El Debate will run an article on us. I don’t know if you read that. I can hardly stomach it myself.” Nicolás shakes his head.

“I can’t read.”

“Oh…that’s too bad,” she says, unsure of what she really should say.

“I wanted to learn. Really, I did. When the People’s Front won the elections our mayor said the Republic would build a school in our village. He said they would build schools, give us land, jobs, all of those big, fancy promises that politicians make. I was eager for that.” He looks down at his feet and picks at the threads of his tattered trousers. “When we mustered for the militia, our commander called us all together and asked us why we were here. Every other man and woman gave these grand answers: ‘for liberty! For the republic! For the workers!’ Then it comes to be my turn and I shout: ‘I want to read the goddamned papers!’ It wasn’t a joke, but everyone laughed.”

He shrugs again. “I suppose it was a little funny. Anyway, the fascists shot our mayor when they took the town in August. There won’t be any school there any time soon.” He drags his finger across his throat and laughs.

Veronica can’t bring herself to lift up her face and look at him. She feels unclean and ashamed. These simple little things. To learn to read. A living wage. A square meal. She’s never given them any more thought than the air or the sky.

And yet here is someone who took up a rifle and went out to fight so he could learn to read and maybe win a fair day’s pay.

At last, unable to think on it anymore, she says: “I think it’s Christmas Eve.”

Nicolás doesn’t look up at her either. He keeps pulling away at the threads of his trousers.

“Merry Christmas, Veronica,” he says.

Hiram Lodge sits quiet in his cell. The calendar on the wall informs him that it’s Christmas Eve. He leans his head back and takes a deep breath.
The freezing waters of the San Francisco Bay churn and boil outside his window. Nowhere is it
colder than out here on the main. Alcatraz sits, a drab little rock speckled with lights, set firmly in
the midst of the bay. It is a symbol of finality. A fortress that holds its condemned forever. But he
does not despair like the other men here, for he will not be here long.

He will be free soon.

And anyways, Christmas is no time for despair.

On Christmases past, his wife and daughter had come to visit him. They’d brought him a cake and
well wishes and hope that he’d be out soon. He knew he would be, of course.

He also knows they won't be here this year. That fact disappoints him, but only a little. They won’t
be here because they are busy securing the success of his plans abroad.

They are in Spain, commiserating with General Franco for the release of the all-important gold he’s
left in their keeping.

Sometimes he regrets doing that. He’d made the deposit almost four years ago, now. That had been
in 1933, immediately after Gil Robles rightist 'CEDA' coalition had come to power in Spain. Hiram
had helped fund their campaigning and vote manipulation in no small way, and he’d been certain
that they wouldn’t dare touch his money. Of course, he hadn’t foreseen the election of the Frente
Popular in 1936.

1933 was also the year the Fraternity was supposed to make its move. Then that bastard Butler had
rolled over on them and thrown everything into disarray. Hiram had volunteered to take the fall and
give his friends time to recuperate and prepare a second coup d’état. His imprisonment was only
temporary, of course. As soon as they’d seized control the first order of business would be his
release. But he’d been in here more than a year, and he was getting restless.

He didn’t like trusting other people with his business. Especially not when they were men like
Cliff Blossom or that buffoon St. Clair. But one had to do what he had to do. If all went according
to plan (and it would!) they would have their money by the end of February, and be ready to strike
by March.

Hiram stands. He saunters over to his cell door, and raps gently on the heavy metal. There are
footsteps in the hall. The guard, a young, fresh-faced officer rarely up to the task, appears at the
little porthole.

“What’s the issue?” He asks.

Hiram smiles at him.

“It’s Christmas Eve, young man. Shouldn’t you be home with your family?”

“Not when I’ve got a job to do, sir,” The guard replies.

Hiram nods.

“Hmm. I understand. I respect a man who honors his duties.”

“Thank you, sir,” says the straight-faced guard.

“You’ve done a fine job, in my time, here;” Hiram goes on.
“With all due respect, sir,” the guard replies, taking a step back. “I don’t think your time here is up, yet.”

Hiram grins, wide and bright.

“No, not just yet.” Then he turns around and disappears back into the shadows of his cell. “Merry Christmas, young man.”
Rock Bottom

Cheryl wakes up from an intense nightmare. The soldiers disappear. The rifles aimed at her chest vanish. The grotesque future dissolves. For the moment. Her heart thrums brutally. She whirls around in the darkness, unsure where she is. It takes a moment for everything to come back to her.

Then she remembers where she is. Rock bottom.

The little shack shakes in the breeze. She stares through the broken windows and the slats in the rotting walls.

Cheryl rolls over. There’s no bed. She’s curled up on the floor with a ratty blanket. She pulls it tighter around herself, though the holes are too big for it to be any sort of real comfort.

*So this is how the other half lives* she thinks. And she’s suddenly struck by a wave of guilt. This must be what her brother saw. The misery that they were so fortunate to escape, and that so many weren’t. This must be why he’s gone off the deep end. Except, maybe he hasn’t gone off the deep end. She shakes her head. The cold trickles in through the broken windows.

Next to her, Betty Cooper sleeps with remarkable ease, her golden hair fallen over her face, one arm over her chest. Cheryl sighs. She pulls her legs to her chest, and realizes how intensely lonely she feels. She grasps for her purse, pulls it to her, and verifies that the tape recording is still there. That’s become sort of a ritual for her. As long as she still has it, there’s a chance everything will be alright. She just needs to get in touch with Jason. He’ll know what to do. Won’t he? He has to. *Somebody* has to. Betty begins to snore. Cheryl rolls her eyes. She hates to admit it, but she kind of likes the girl. She’s nice, even if a little overbearing and maybe a bit sanctimonious at times. Betty’s heart in the right place.

Is Cheryl’s?

She wants to be a good person. She’s never wanted to be a *bad* person, at least. Because she’s pretty sure her father’s a bad person, and there’s no one she wants to be like less than her father.

Suddenly, the dilapidated door creaks open. Joaquin DeSantos creeps back into the house. He’s holding a cigarette in his hand, and the smoke curls ghostly into the frosty air and out through the shattered windows.

“Oh. Sorry for waking you up,” he says in a voice that doesn’t have a whole lot of real apology to it.

“I was already awake.” Cheryl grumbles.

“Mmm.” Joaquin slumps into a sagging chair. He offers his cigarette to her. She takes a deep drag, and then hands it back.

“Where were you, anyway?” She asks.

“None of your business.” He exhales a cloud of smoke. “Just with Kevin,” he says.

Cheryl nods.

“This is—how do you *live* like this?” She asks.
He smirks. His face looks dark and wily in the moonlight.

“Welcome to America, sweetheart. The real America.”

She bows her head.

“This…isn’t okay.” She says at last.

“Do I hear you or your brother talking?” He smiles.

Cheryl rolls her eyes.

“Don’t bring Jason up.”

“Hey, he’s a good guy.” Joaquin says. “Even if he’s a little…over-zealous and misguided at times. He just needs to lay off of the Marx a little bit.”

Cheryl smiles.

“Yeah. He does.”

Joaquin finishes his cigarette. He takes one last long drag, flicks it to the floor, and grinds it out with his heel.

“Where is he, anyways? After all that stuff at the factory. What happened to him and Jones?”

Cheryl doesn’t like to think about it. She squeezes her eyes shut.

“They’re in Spain.”

“Spain? Doin–“

“Fighting.” She says through clenched teeth. ”Because they have a burning death wish.”

“Damn. I wish they’d taken me with them,” he laments. “They can’t beat Franco all on their lonesome.” There’s another long silence. “Hey, let me ask you something.”

“Fine. What?”

“All that stuff you and your buddies told me. Is that really true? All of it?”

She nods.

“Yeah. It’s really, really true.”

He shakes his head and sucks his teeth.

“Your father’s a son of a bitch.”

There’s a moment of silence. Then Cheryl laughs. Then he laughs. Soon they’re both laughing.

Something stirs. Betty sits up, eyes bleary, hair tousled.

“Mhhmm…hey…guys…wh–“

“Go back to sleep, doll,” Cheryl says.
“What are you guys doing?” Betty asks.

Joaquin answers by lighting up another cigarette.

“Why don’t we just kill him?”

“What?”


“Okay, first of all, you can’t just talk about killing my father!” Cheryl snaps. “Second of all, how dare you? Only I can do that. Thi—“

“It wouldn’t matter,” Betty cuts in. “Unless you kill him, Hiram Lodge, and every other man party to their plot.”

“Joaquin—“ Cheryl says.

“What?”

“Can you do us a favor?”

“Depends.”

“If I write a letter, can you see that it gets to the post office?”

He snorts.

“I’m not exactly welcome in town, either.” Cheryl groans in dismay. “But…maybe I can get Kevin to…you know…I’ll see what I can do, yeah?”

“Thank,” Cheryl sighs.

Joaquin nods. Then he stands and steps outside to finish his cigarette.

“Hey.” Betty says, putting a hand on Cheryl’s shoulder. “Have you slept at all, tonight? Are you okay?”


“I know it’s a stupid question. But I had to ask anyway. It’s…” Suddenly, she turns and hugs Cheryl tight. “Things will be okay, alright? They will be. You’ll see.”

“How do you know?”

“We’ll make sure they turn out ok. We won’t rely on anyone else. It’s in our hands.”

Cheryl feels a few stray tears roll down her cheeks. She quickly wipes them away, hoping they aren’t visible in the darkness. Betty smiles.

The next morning, Cheryl scribbles a feverish, hasty letter to her brother, made out to the last address he contacted her from: the XII International Brigade.

Jason,

Things have gone bad. I’ll try to keep it short. Dad found out about my recording. It’s about as bad
as it sounds. I know we don’t have a lot of time. Please tell me you have some sort of idea.

Love, Cheryl.

Quickly, in postscript, she adds the number of the Whyte Wyrm, which possesses an ancient telephone, just in case.

Joaquin dutifully takes the letter, and says he’ll do his level best to get it delivered. She thanks him, and hopes to God she won’t have to endure these pauper’s conditions much longer.

But then again, she remembers, there are so many who will never know anything but this pauper’s life.

“Son, I’ll ask you one more time.” Keller says, exasperated. Archie Andrews sits across from him in his office. The boy fidgets endlessly. His dark eyes dart around the room, panicked. “Are you sure you have no idea where Betty Cooper or Cheryl Blossom might be?”

“No, sir,” Archie replies. “None at all.”

Keller has to keep from rolling his eyes. The boy is an abysmal liar. He has no idea what Blossom wants with Betty Cooper, or what he had to do with the thugs that attacked the Cooper house and only a few nights ago (though clearly something). He deduces it’s somehow tied up with the factory vandalism, the disappearance of Jason and Jughead Jones, the arrest of FP Jones, and all of this other madness, but he has no idea how. All Keller knows is he wants some semblance of normal restored to his damn town. Things are spiraling towards anarchy. He cannot have men and women dying left and right. This isn’t the big city. This is Riverdale. He has to restore order. And if he has to fight Cliff’s battles to do that, then he will.


“Thank you, sir.”

Archie springs to his feet and darts out of the station without another word.

Keller adjusts his belt and strolls into the lobby. His one deputy sits there, thumbing through a newspaper. He looks up and acknowledges his superior with a grunt.

“I know we’re short on manpower.” Keller says. “But how about you make yourself useful and keep an eye on the Andrews kid instead of sitting on your ass, yeah? He knows something, obviously.”

The deputy salutes lazily.

“Let me ask again: Fred, where in the good name of the Lord is my daughter?” Alice Cooper leans in, hands curled into fearsome claws.

Fred inhales and then exhales.

When he saw Alice coming up the drive, he very nearly bolted the door, shutter the windows, hunker down, and pretend he was asleep. He’d decided against it.

Now she’s pacing his living room, swearing uncharacteristically, and pausing only to shake a trembling finger at him.
“Alice—I don’t know, and if I did, I’d tell you!”

“She and Cheryl Blossom vanish into thin air a few months after Jughead Jones and Jason Blossom do. My house and your house are shot up by some unidentified thugs the night they disappear, and you really expect me to believe that you—or more likely, your son—don’t know anything? Fred, honestly!”

Fred stands and motions for silence.

“Alice; keep your voice down. Please.” But he can see she is frightened. And how could she not be? He is, and his child is not the one being hunted by Cliff Blossom’s goons. As far as he knows. Alice’s pupils are dilated. She clenches and unclenches her fists.

“Fred, my daughter—”

“I know. I know.” He drops his voice. “Listen…Cliff Blossom is looking for her, okay?”

“Cliff Blossom! That reactionary—“

Fred starts. It’s been a long, long time since he’s heard Alice Cooper call anyone a ‘reactionary’.

He very nearly says ‘calm down, Alice’ before he realizes what a ridiculous request that would be.

“He…I don’t know what he wants, but we’re talking about Clifford Blossom. It can’t be anything rosy, alright? Christ—he sent FP Jones to prison and tried to kill Jughead. If he’s looking for Betty, maybe it’s for the best he can’t find her, okay?”

Alice opens her mouth as if to shout, but instead she nods. She sinks into a seat.

“Fred…what’s going on?”

Before he can answer, the door to the Andrews house swings open. Archie steps inside.

Alice and Fred spring to their feet. Archie looks like he’s contemplating turning around and running the other way. He doesn’t.

“Archie—“ Fred starts.

“Do you know where Betty is?” Alice demands.

“I—“

It’s too late. He’s sat down and grilled mercilessly. At last, he breaks. Partially.

“Look…Betty and Cheryl…and Veronica and…they found out that Mr. Blossom was planning something bad. Something really bad. They…they wanted to expose him. In the Times. But he found out. So they’re…hiding from him.”

“I’m sorry, bad?” Alice demands. She leans in threateningly towards the boy. “All the Blossoms ever do is ‘bad’. What exactly was so bad tha—“

“I…I can’t say,” Archie groans. “It could put you all in danger.”

“Archie, you will tell Mrs. Cooper where Betty is!”

“The truth is, I don’t know, anymore! We—they’re hiding, and even I don’t know where they are.
I’m sorry. But it’s for the best. When this is all over…”

Alice practically trembles with rage.

She grits her teeth, seething. “This is all Jughead’s fault! And the Blossom boy! Ever since that strike and the nonsense with the factory—“

“You should be proud of her, Mrs. Cooper,” Archie says. “She’s doing the right thing. Like she always does.”
The Abraham Lincoln Battalion

"We came to sunny Spain

to make the people smile again"

~ 'Sunny Spain'

Two days after the New Year, 1937, Tom Wintringham drives up to the University City positions of the XII International Brigade in a black staff car. He steps out, tugs the tips of his whiskers, and adjusts the hem of his coat.

Dug into a machine gunner’s pit in front of the Hall of Mathematics sit sargentos Jason Blossom and Forsythe ‘Jughead’ Jones, fiddling with a troublesome M1919 Browning.

Wintringham stands over the pit, staring down at the boys. He waits patiently to be acknowledged.

Blossom, who Wintringham has long ago determined to be the more energetic of the two, turns around and sees the officer standing over them.

“Captain! Get down!” The redhead gasps.

A few bullets from the fascist lines fly by, going wide by yards.

“Oh, I’m fine, son,” Wintringham says with a smile. He plants his hands on his hips and turns to stick his chin out towards the rebel positions.

Jughead smacks the useless machine gun in anger.

“Is there a problem?” the sullen faced, dark-haired young man asks.

“No, actually. The opposite,” Wintringham assures.

Both boys sit up, abandoning the gun. They’re eager for some good news.

“Oh?” Jason prods.

Wintringham fiddles with his mustache again.

“The first volunteers for the Lincoln Battalion are mustering in Albacete. I say it’s time you boys get down there and give them a warm welcome.”

Jason gets to his feet, grinning. Jughead stands up, too, grinning a little less. Wintringham figures they’ve probably gotten attached to the XII Brigade by now. Still, they’re among the few officer candidates available for the new American Battalion.

“Really?” Jason asks. “When?”

“Well, tonight,” Wintringham says. “If we get you lads on a train tonight you can likely be there by tomorrow evening.”
A fascist sharpshooter fires. The bullet tears past Wintringham’s head, missing him by a hair, but leaves him unscathed. He doesn’t flinch. The leathery British officer leaps down into the machine gun pit alongside the two Americans.

“Goddamn!” Jughead gasps.

“Oh, don’t worry; bullets don’t care for me.”

“All we need is a few hours to prepare. Right, Jones?” Jason asks.

“Yeah, right,” Jughead agrees.

Wintringham nods, pleased.

“Oh, and lest I forget; in your new capacities, you boys are both receiving battlefield commissions. Promotions, that is.”

“God, more promotions?” Jughead asks.

Jason’s face lights up.

“That’s right. So, Captain Blossom, Battalion Commissar Jones, let me know when you’re ready to go.”

They say a hurried goodbye to their comrades of the XII Brigade, in English as well as fractured Spanish, German, and French. There are stiff salutes and stiffer hugs.

“Auf wiedersehen!” cries a Silesian volunteer.

Arno Reisman embraces them both. He kisses them on the cheeks.

“We won’t forget you, comrades. I won’t. Gods speed, and no pasarán!”

They wave farewell.

“The start of a new adventure,” Jason says.

“You really should consider a career in motivational speaking when this is all over,” Jughead suggests.

They drop by the Hotel Florida to bid farewell to Toni. Instead, they find Nicholas St. Clair. The young man sits at the bar, sipping a brandy. Somewhere, the hotel’s found fresh stocks of liquor. Or else he’s brought his own.

“Oh. Look who dropped in,” he ooze.

“We’re looking for Toni,” Jughead says flatly.

“Right.” He stands. “Listen, boys. I think we got off on the wrong foot, don’t you? We may not agree on everything, but we don’t have to be at each other’s throats about it, do we?” He strides over.

The two New Yorkers take cautious steps back.

“I…suppose not?” Jughead mumbles.
Nick extends a hand.

Jughead tentatively takes and shakes it. Jason does the same, after another moment’s hesitation.

“So, where are you fellas off to? I get the sense you’re in a rush.”

“Military business,” Jason says, sharply.

Nick nods.

“Ah. Re-deployment?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, Toni’s not here. She’s at the Telefonica trying to get one of her dispatches through the censors. Again.”

“Thanks,” Jughead offers.

“Sure thing,” Nick beams, as the two boys turn to leave. “Oh, and be safe!” He calls after them.

They take a cab to the Telefonica, and find Toni on the sixth floor, arguing heatedly with Arturo Barea.

“I’m telling you, it’s out of my hands!” the exasperated Spaniard declares.

“What do you mean ‘out of your hands’? You’re the chief censor!” Toni fires back.

“Yes, bu—” he cuts himself short as the two soldiers step into the room.

“Oh. Hey, fellas,” Toni says.

“Hey.” Jughead waves.

“What’s happening?”

“Actually, we’re on our way out of town,” Jason says.

“Oh! Where are you going?” she asks, a little disappointed.


She nods.

“That’s too bad.”

“We’ll be back relatively soon,” Jughead says. “They just want us to help train some new guys. We just wanted to say thank you for…all of the help.”

She walks over and hugs them both briefly.

“Well, thank you for saving Madrid.”

They laugh.

“We try,” Jughead says.
"Anyway, it's not like you didn't help," Jason adds.

She pats them on the shoulders.

"Where are you being transferred? In case any new letters come in for you, or I need to get in touch for...some reason or another."

Jason leans in, keeping his voice low.

"17th American Battalion Abraham Lincoln, XV International Brigade."

"Bit of a mouthful." She produces a slip of paper and jots it down hurriedly. "Thanks." Two more quick hugs. "See you boys soon."

They take their leave.

Later that chilly January morning, Nicholas St. Clair finds himself again in the Guatemalan embassy, waiting on a patchy transatlantic phone line. His father got in touch with him and insisted that Clifford Blossom wanted to speak with him for some reason or another.

Whatever. His father and his friends never cue him into anything big. It isn’t like he hasn’t proven himself trustworthy again and again. But maybe the winds are changing, now. If he can help solve this problem, the Fraternity should learn to trust him without reservation.

The call goes through.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Blossom."

"Ah, Nicholas."

"Yessir."

"Listen, your father spoke with me a few days ago. He told me-"

"About your son?" As soon as he says it, Nick regrets cutting the man off. Cliff Blossom isn’t the sort of guy who appreciates being interrupted.

"...Yes, about Jason. He’s there? In Madrid?"

"Well, he was in Madrid. Funny you call now. Just a few days ago he skipped town."

"Skipped town? Where?"

"Not sure. The government re-assigned him?"

"Re-assigned him?"

"International Brigades."

There is a brief silence, and Nick can swear he hears Cliff’s furious breathing across the line.

"Nicholas, listen to me; you have contacts there in Spain, don’t you? Men embedded with the
“Well, sure, Mr. Blossom. If I get what you’re driving at… I know a colonel in the Republican People’s Army. He’s got the reds convinced he’s on their side, but he’s with ours.”

“Good. Good. Listen to me; we’re at a very crucial stage in the advancement of our cause. I can’t have Jason or the Jones boy running around Spain throwing spanners into the works. Why don’t you talk to your red colonel and see what you can do about this?”

Nick smiles.

“Will do, Mr. Blossom.”

Wintringham meets Jughead and Jason at the train station that night.

“Well, don’t you two boys look dashing?”

“We took our first showers in a week. We ought to,” Jughead snarks.

Wintringham nods.

“When you get to Albacete, you’ll be greeted by Louis Fischer. He’s the Quartermaster of the International Brigades, and the only other Yank on the staff, as far as I know.”

Jason nods, committing that to memory. “Okay.”

“Yes and uh… the overall commanding officer is a Frenchman by the name of André Marty. He’s… just try to say on his good side, for both your sakes. Or better yet, just avoid him best you can. I’m serious.”

“Right, right. Meet Louis Fischer, avoid André Marty,” Jason mumbles.

Wintringham pats their cheeks.

“Good luck to you two. Death to fascism and all of that.”

Then they’re on their way.

The train steams southeast.

Albacete is a city in south-central Spain, safely ensconced behind the lines. Before the war it boasted a population of only a few thousand, but with the onset of hostilities, that number has ballooned several times over thanks to the influx of troops heading for the front and refugees fleeing fascist territory.

Lately, it is also the supreme headquarters of the International Brigades.

“What do you think they’ll be like?” Jason asks, halfway between Madrid and their final destination.

Jughead stares out of the window, suffering flashbacks to their ride to Toledo.

“The recruits? A lot like us, I assume. Stupid Americans with no idea of what they’re doing.”
Jason nods.

The train is filled with militiamen, and nary a civilian is to be seen. A few of the cars sport machine gun emplacements, as preemptive measures against fascist bombers, known to target Republican rail lines.

With a bit of luck, the trip is completed without even sighting a rebel plane.

The train pulls into Albacete a few hours less than a day after departing from Madrid.

Filing off of the train onto the little platform, they are immediately greeted by a tall, broad-shouldered man in khaki. He peers at them through shrunken eyes, strings of loose brown hair hanging over his face.

“Blossom? Jones?”

“None other,” Jughead answers.

The man nods. He quickly shakes both their hands.

“Pleasure. Louis Fischer. Quartermaster. International Brigades.” He looks over the two boys, in assorted bits of clothing nowhere near standard. “First order of business has got to be getting you boys some proper uniforms. Come on,” he bids them follow.

They trail slowly after him, when a military lorry pulls up alongside the train platform and a dark blur explodes from the passenger seat, huffing and cursing. The blur rushes closer and becomes a massive, burly man with a big, drooping black moustache and an even bigger, drooping beret. He adjusts said beret and stumbles over to greet the new arrival.

The boys, taken aback by his theatrical entrance, take involuntary steps back, momentarily struck dumb.

The man in the beret turns to Fischer and asks, in a thick French accent: “are these the American officers?”

“Yes, Comrade Marty,” Fischer answers. He sounds exasperated.

“Ah, shit,” Jughead mumbles under his breath. Marty whirls around to face him down.

“How old are you?” The Frenchman barks. “Twelve?”

“We’re…twenty,” Jason lies. “Both of us.”

Marty snorts.

“Get in the lorry. You’re late already.”

The boys, along with Fischer, climb into the back of the truck. Marty hoists himself back into the passenger’s seat and orders the driver to get going. They tear off down the streets of Albacete. Just like Madrid, the walls and doors are everywhere scrawled with revolutionary slogans. But unlike Madrid, the sense of urgency here is not so powerful. There are not so many patrols of militiamen. The tension and fear that rules the capital, with the enemy at the gates, is absent here. There’s a semblance of peace, even if it’s fragile.

The driver ignores stop signs and all driving protocol in a mad dash to get them to their destination as quickly as possible.
They pull up in front of the old Civil Guard barracks, abandoned at the start of the war, and repurposed to house the volunteers of the XV International Brigade. Jason and Jughead stumble out of the lorry, heads spinning from the ride.

Fischer hurries them away from Marty and into the barracks. He steers the boys into a storage room stacked top to bottom with a mess of jackets, pants, and russet shoes.

“It’s a bit of a mess,” Fischer says apologetically. “But uh…the government’s doing it’s best to standardize uniforms.” He turns to Jason. “What did they say you were? A captain?”

“Right,” Jason replies, looking a little proud and a little embarrassed.

Fischer nods. “A little young, huh?”

“Absolutely.”

Fischer digs into the unruly mass of uniform pieces and emerges carrying a jacket. He stuffs it into Jason’s arm. The boy looks it over like it might bite him. After a moment, he slips it on. On the right sleeve, a red star stitched above a single red bar bordered in gold identifies him as a Captain in the Republican People’s Army. He mutters something to himself.

“And you?” he turns to Jughead, who looks dazed and entirely out of his depth.

“I…Battalion Commissar? I think he said? I think?”

“Right, right.”

Fischer quickly produces a uniform with a commissar’s insignia. Jughead sighs and dutifully pulls it on, thinking to himself that he will die before he consents to being identified as ‘Commissar Jones’.

“So where are all of the recruits?” Jason asks.

“They should be in by morning, if not sooner. They ran into some issues with the French border guards and with the American Consulate in Barcelona. They’re on their way.”

Jason smiles.

“Well, we’re ready.”

They don’t sleep that night, while they wait for their American trainees to arrive. Wandering around the barracks, they commiserate with their comrades, of the newly formed British Battalion. A cheerful, spritely Scot with a penchant for song by the name of Alex McDade bids them sit for a game of dice.

“So,” McDade says halfway through the game. “We’re going to have a whole battalion of Yanks, tomorrow?”

“Looks like,” Jughead responds.

McDade whistles.

“God help us all.”

Everyone laughs.
“Oh. You limeys are just scared we’ll upstage you,” Jason smiles.

McDade hisses and chuckles.

“So why ‘Lincoln Battalion’?” Asks a soldier by the name of Cunningham

Jughead shrugs.

“I didn’t name the damn thing.”

“Well, President Lincoln led our republic to victory over our bunch of traitors. I suppose it makes sense, right?” Jason ventures.

“So we hear tell that you lads have already fought the fascists,” Says another Briton.

“You hear tell correctly. We thrashed the fascists good at Toledo.”

Jughead’s jaw drops.

“We did not ‘thrash the fascists’, Jason. We got thrashed! Have you forgotten running full tilt through the streets of Toledo while they raked us with machine gun fire?”

The Englishmen laugh.

“Fine!” Jason says. “We thrashed them at Madrid, then.”

“Barely.”

“Do you want us to win?” Cunningham asks.

“I have to deal with this every day!” Jason exclaims.

“I’m a cynic. Can’t help it,” Jughead drawls, and rolls his dice.

The night winds on.

Cunningham, who is beginning to feel the sting of poor fortunes as he lays down his third poor hand in a row, tries to distract the opposition.

"So, do you have a girlfriend, back home?” he asks.

"Yes," Jughead answers. And it's only with that answer that he realizes he really misses Betty. He wants a hug, or a kiss, or a walk by the shore of Sweetwater River at low tide, with the gentle sand and the mossy pebbles beneath their bare feet. He wants to sit with her before the fireplace in the Cooper house and scribble in his journal while she dozes on his shoulder, or listen to her read a book while she dozes on his.

"What's her name?"

"Elizabeth," he answers.

"She's pretty?"

"And brave. And clever. And resilient. You'll never meet anyone with a stronger sense of justice."

Now he's got Cunningham distracted, instead of vice versa.
"The boy's in love," someone chuckles.

"Ey!" The card game and Jughead's reminisces are rudely interrupted as André Marty storms into the room. His big hands hang at his side, the right twitching uncomfortably close to a pistol at his hip.

"Ah, damn," Jughead mumbles.

"You two! Americans! With me!"

The two dutifully stand.

"Good luck." McDade mouths.

They follow Marty into his office, sparsely decorated with a picture of Stalin and brilliantly colored propaganda posters. He plops down behind his desk and retrieves a few paper forms.

"Names?" He demands.

"Jason Alexander Blossom."

"Ju—Forsythe Pendleton Jones III."

Marty gives him a look but doesn’t say anything. He jots the information down.

"Place of residence?"

"Riverdale Township, New York State, USA," Jason answers for both of them.

It’s written down.

"Political affiliation?" Marty asks this question in a smoother, easier voice, and Jughead gets the feeling it’s some kind of trap.

"Communist," Jason answers without a moment’s hesitation.

Marty writes it down and then swings his dark, furious gaze to Jughead, who feels the blood drain out of his face. He’s terrified. This is almost as scary as the battlefield. He has no idea what to say, but he feels like ‘apolitical’ won’t go over well with this man.

"A-antifascist," He says at last.

"And why are you here?"

"To defend democracy and the working people of Spain and contain the spread of fascism," Jason answers, as if he’s rehearsed.

Marty’s gaze swings to Jughead.

Jughead’s eyes track towards the poster on the wall behind the big Frenchman. It depicts a grinning militiaman with his rifle, above the words: *Onwards to crush fascism!*

"To...to crush fascism?" Jughead mutters tentatively.

Marty stares at him. For a moment Jughead’s heart freezes. Then the commander writes it down.

“Get out of here,” he orders.
The boys are too happy to comply.

At the first hour of daybreak, the Americans arrive. Straight from the train station, they roll up in four beat up army lorries.

Jughead and Jason step out into the barracks courtyard to greet the new arrivals. The British Battalion watches from the sidelines.

The volunteers are ‘processed’ by Marty, in an even worse mood than usual due to not having had his coffee. Once that’s done, they’re marched out onto the parade ground to meet their new commanding officers. A few of them snort when they see the youthful faces of the men who are supposed to lead them into battle. Jason doesn’t think it bodes well. But he does his best to stand tall, square his shoulders, and project an aura of command.

He steps forward, Jughead trailing behind him. Jason’s heart thunders. He would be lying if he said he wasn’t a little excited. Him. A captain! Fighting the good fight against tyranny! Just like his great ancestor.

He looks over the volunteers. Most of them aren’t particularly old, either. They look to be mostly in their early twenties or even late teens. They’re all still in civilian clothes. They number about eighty so far, total.

“Gentleman,” Jason says, cool and clear. “Welcome to Spain. I trust you all had a nice trip.” A smattering of laughter. Good. “I’m Captain Jason Blossom.” He gestures to Jones, who steps forward and nods. “This is Battalion Commissar Jones.” Jughead’s lips twist into a small smile.

“I’m here to shoot you if you don’t toe the party line,” Jughead says. A few of the volunteers squint or double take. Jason flinches. “That…that was a joke,” Jughead quickly saves. He actually does have the authority to shoot insubordinate soldiers on the field, but Jason can’t imagine he would ever in a thousand years use it.

“Well, I’m sure you’re all tired and hungry, but I’ve got a few perfunctory questions to ask you before I can allow you to get anything to eat,” Jason goes on. “First off: how many of you have ever seen combat of any kind?” A handful of hands go up. Less than he’d hoped. That was okay. He and Jones had learned. These guys could, too. “Okay. How many of you have ever fired a rifle?” A few more hands go up. Still far less than half the volunteers. Not good. Jason sucks his teeth. “Well, I suppose that’s the first order of business, then.” He leans over to whisper to Jones. “Jones, go find Fischer. Ask him about rifles for training.”

Jughead wanders off to find the quartermaster. Jason turns back to the new arrivals. One man, a tall broad-shouldered fellow in a leather jacket, steps forward.

“So when do we head for the front?”

Jason smiles. He steps forward.

“What’s your name?”

“Sweet Pea.” The big man says.

Jason balks at that. Then again, he is here with Jughead Jones.
“Well uh…Sweet Pea. I don’t think it’s a good idea to head for the front until you at least learn to fire a gun, yeah?”

Just then, Jughead rushes back. He takes Jason by the arm and pulls him away.

“Hey uh…bad news. We don’t have any rifles.”

Jason shakes his head. Surely that was a misstatement.

“What do you mean we ‘don’t have any rifles’? Are you putting me on?”

“No. Fischer says they couldn’t spare anything from the front. No rifles.”

“No rifles? No rifles at all? They don’t even have to be functional. Really?”

“No rifles,” Jughead says one more time.

“Son of a—unbelievable!” Jason snaps, loud enough for the volunteers to hear. “How the hell am I supposed to train soldiers without any goddamn rifles?” Jughead shrugs apologetically.

“Don’t know.”

“What a goddamn—” He turns to face the recruits. “Alright, you boys go get something to eat.” The new arrivals file out towards the mess hall. Jason turns back to Jughead, fuming. “Come on, Jones. We’ve got to go figure this out.”

The two storm back into the barracks, in search of an explanation or a substitute for the sorely needed rifles.

“No. No rifles at all. Sorry.” Fischer informs them, when they confront him together.

“You don’t even have any broken down old black powders or anything?” Jughead demands, desperate. “Hell, pop guns are better than nothing.”

Fischer shakes his head.

“Well, unless you want all of our guys to get cut to pieces the minute they step onto the field, they’re going to need to learn how to operate a rifle.”

“Should we ask Marty?” Jason asks, dread to even mention the ornery Frenchman’s name.

“I wouldn’t,” Fischer says.

“Well then what the hell do we do?” Jason demands.

Fischer shrugs and sighs.

“You boys’ll just have to figure something out.”

There’s a long silence.


After a quick meal, the volunteers line up on the parade ground again. Jughead shoulders his way out of the barracks, carrying a heavy box in his arms. Jason follows, as do two British volunteers they’ve pressed into service. They slam the boxes down into the dust.
“Alright, everybody grab a broom!” Jason shouts. There are a few snickers. “No, it isn’t a joke, so don’t ask!”

The boys dutifully assemble and snatch up their brooms

“Now!” Jughead says. “A rifle has a bolt on it. A broom does not. So you’ll just have to pretend.”

Painstakingly, they try to walk the men through the motions of loading, reloading, and firing a rifle using brooms. Jason gets the sense this would be difficult even if they did have rifles. Like this, it’s practically impossible.

His eyes fall on one man, who rushes through the motions with a fluid, practiced manner that tells Jason he knows just what he’s doing. He walks over to the guy, who’s not very tall, wears thick wire-framed glasses, and overall does not present as a soldier.

“What’s your name?” Jason asks.

“Doiley. Dilton Doiley.”

“You look like you know what you’re doing.”

“Hell yes, I do. I haven’t done drills this basic in years, though.”

Jason smiles.

“So I’ll assume you’re one of the guys that raised their hands when I asked if you’d ever fired a rifle.”

“Right.”

“Well considering you seem to be one of the only guys with such experience, I’m promoting you to sergeant. Effective immediately.”

Doiley beams.

“Thanks, captain! Not just rifles, either. Pistols, shotguns, knives, explosives, you name it, I can use it and I can kill fascists with it.”

Jason nods.

“Good to know.” He points across the grounds, where Sweet Pea, his friend Fangs, and another tall, heavily muscled man whose name Jason doesn’t know, are struggling with their broom-rifles. “Well, Sergeant Doiley, why don’t you go over there and rescue them?”

Doiley stands, snatches up his broom, and salutes.

“Yessir.”

“And drop the ‘sirs’, huh?”

“Sure thing.” Doiley rushes off to aid his new comrades.

Jughead comes up alongside Jason. They look out over their new battalion with cautious eyes. The courtyard is filled with men playing soldiers with broomsticks. It looks more like a schoolyard game than anything else.
Jughead smirks. “So begins the glorious story of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.”
“Ready?”

Jughead presses his belly to the ground. Sand drifts up into his nostrils. He coughs. The stock of his rifle digs into his chest. There’s no cover. The arid Spanish hills stretch for miles around. A spotless blue sky spreads out over their heads. Jason lies in the dust next to him, red hair matted with dirt. On his left lies Chuck Clayton, a big, muscle-bound longshoreman from California. Clayton squints and peeks out over their ridge towards the enemy positions. Behind them crouch Sweet Pea and Fangs Fogarty, manning an imaginary machine gun. Next to them sit a New Yorker named Seacord, an Italian from Manhattan named Barale, and a few other men.

Jughead takes a deep breath. “Ready,” he replies.

“Come on, Lincoln!” Jason shouts.

The men jump up and leap out over the ridge.

Across a low Spanish gulley, the men of the British Battalion play the role of the entrenched enemy.

Jughead charges forward, holding his rifle like a spear, bayonet shining bright. Behind them follow Clayton, Seacord, Barale, and Fogarty.

“Spread out! Spread out! Goddammit!” Jason shouts.

The British mime machine gun and rifle fire from their positions. The hot Spanish sun beats down. Jughead stumbles. He spills forward and his bayonet sticks into the ground. He plucks it free and continues the advance.

The Lincolns just have to imagine the bullets whizzing past them or slamming into their ranks. They’ve managed to scrape together a few rifles in the past couple of weeks, but certainly no blanks for training exercises. Still, Jughead can see, from the unruly line of advance his comrades have formed, that if this were real combat, the guys would be falling by the score. They scramble through the gulley and up the slopes towards the British.

The Lincolns reach the ‘enemy’ positions in about fifteen minutes. Jason stands, disappointed. He commiserates with Cunningham, from the British Battalion.

“What do you think?” Jason asks.

Cunningham looks over the tired trainees.

“I’d say if this had been a real battle, your boys would have taken…60% casualties?” Cunningham estimates.

Jason huffs.

“Right.”

Robert Merriman, the Lincoln Battalion’s adjutant commander, walks up.
“I really don’t think these exercises are worth much until we can at least get some blanks to work with,” he sighs.

Jason moans.

“Well, God knows when that’s going to be.”

“So we go again, then?” Merriman asks.

Jason thinks for a moment.

Cunningham nods.

“Yeah, again,” Jason says in resignation.

“Hey!” Jughead calls to the Lincoln volunteers, assembled together to hear the latest assessment of their performance. “What did we say about bunching together like that? You advance in little groups and you make perfect targets for artillery or machine guns. Trust me, I’ve seen it.”

There’s some grumbling.

“Hey, knock it off!” Jason snaps. He leans over and Cunningham mumbles something in his ear.

“Alright!” Jason calls to the Lincolns. “Alright, we’re doing this again!” Groans of discontentment.

“We’ve done this ten times in the past three hours!” Sweet Pea yells.

“Yeah, and we’re gonna do it ten times more, until you can take these positions without getting over half of us killed!”

More mumbling.

Jughead slams the butt of his rifle against the hard-packed earth. “Alright, everybody back to starting positions.”

The next charge is a little better. Only 50% casualties estimated, this time. Still far too high.

After three more tries, everyone is about ready to drop from exhaustion. The training ground, a dry, lifeless field a few minutes out of Albacete, sports not a single tree or even a bush. It’s January, so the occasional northerly wind prevents everyone from falling dead of heatstroke, but only just.

“This is hopeless,” Jason mutters to Jughead, wiping sweat from his pale brow.

“Well, we learned, didn’t we?” Jughead asks. "If barely."

“Yeah. By first-hand experience.”

“Maybe they need a trial by fire.”

Jason sighs.

They give the faux-assault one more go, and when it ends with an estimated 70% casualties, throw in the towel for the day.

Jason and Cunningham gather the men together and organize them into a straight marching line for the return to base.
The Lincoln Battalion marches back to barracks singing ‘John Brown’s Body’.

“John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave!

John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave!

John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave!

But his soul is marching on!”

As they stomp through the streets of Albacete, the locals line the streets to gawk at their foreign guests. The townspeople at first treated the Anglo-American volunteers with suspicion but with some time have grown to like these strangers come across the sea to help fight their war.

A few cries of: “viva el Batallon Lincoln!” and “No pasaran!” ring through the streets. The Americans smile and wave.

At the barracks’ gate, Jughead is confronted by an ornery Sweet Pea (he has a birth name, somewhere, but no one can be bothered to remember it).

“Hey! Commissar!” Sweet Pea calls. Jughead flinches. He isn’t fond of being addressed by his proper rank. Mostly because it makes him feel like he ought to be executing guys left and right for lack of ideological rigor. “When are we actually going to learn to fire our rifles?” Sweet Pea demands.

“When they see fit to spare us some ammunition, comrade,” Jughead answers.

“We came here to shoot fascists, not drill with broomsticks,” Fangs adds.

“You’re a long way from shooting any fascists considering we can’t even wargame the capture of a single little gulley without getting half the battalion killed,” Jughead deadpans.

The two volunteers glower but back off.

Jason sidles up.

“Those two have got a serious problem with following orders.”

“Says the industrial saboteur.”

“Huh. Decent point.”

They sit down to a meal of thin pea soup in the requisitioned mess hall. When the rising had broken out in July of ’36, the Civil Guard had attempted to seize the barracks for the fascists. After a lengthy gun battle with loyalist soldiers and militia, the complex was secured for the Republic. The walls, inside and out, are still scarred by bullets.

Jughead looks over the Lincoln Battalion from his seat. They’re mostly New Yorkers, like themselves. Mostly city boys, too, who’ve never held a gun in their lives. There are a few country-dwellers with experience, like Doiley, and these find themselves immediately promoted to positions of confidence. The Lincolns are mostly radicals, too, of one stripe or another: communists, socialists, or anarchists. But there are enough liberals, trade unionists, and apolitical adventurers to deflect accusations that they are a legion of howling reds.

Everyone sits down to eat a meager meal. Jughead shovels down soup like a starving man. Sweat cakes his hair to his forehead and his shirt to his back.
Sergeant Doiley sits in the corner, assembling and disassembling a Mauser pistol (probably the most modern weapon in the barracks) methodically. Sweet Pea has managed to corner Jason and drag him into an argument about something or the other. Jughead figures that he and ‘Captain Blossom’ (those words still make him giggle every time) are the most permissive commanding officers on the planet.

Clayton is talking with a kid named Chapoff from New York.

A few guys are singing a song they made up while crossing over the Pyrenees to fight in Spain. The American consul in Paris had attempted to stop them, and instead secured for himself an eternal place of mockery in the memories of the volunteers.

“The border’s closed, you can’t get through, were the words of the US Consul! But we just laughed, ‘cause we all knew, he was just stretchin’ his tonsils!”

Jughead sighs. He dearly hopes he (and the world at large) survive the next few years, because this is going to make one hell of a story.

“Hey, Commissar,” Seacord, Chapoff, and Clayton sidle up to him. Clayton slaps a big hand on his shoulder.

“For the last time, it’s not commissar.”

“Okay, Jones, then.”

“Better.”

“Anyway, if this isn’t…” Clayton’s voice trails off. “What do you call it? Insubordinate, the guys and me were just wondering how old you are. Well, you and the Captain.” He side-eyes Blossom, across the room.

“Twenty,” Jughead lies. “Both of us.” Their authority over the recruits, some of who are over thirty, is already tenuous. They don’t need to admit they’re just out of high school.

“Huh…” Seacord says, in a sort of voice that leaves it ambiguous whether or not he believes him. “Well, us too. More or less.” They chuckle.

“You do not understand!” Jason explains to an exasperated Sweet Pea. “It’s not like I’m keeping bullets from you! There are no bullets for us! Zero! You don’t get to fire your rifle because no one does!”

Sweet Pea seems to accept that, for the moment.

Just as an unsteady calm settles over the mess hall, the doors blow open before the human storm of Andre Marty.

“Blossom! Cunningham! McDade! Get your men out onto the parade ground!” He orders, adjusting his beret. “Now!”

“They’ve just started eat—“ Jason tries.

“I don’t care! Now!”

The bereaved volunteers, rudely snatched away from their meal, rise to their weary feet and dutifully march out into the courtyard. Marty paces back and forth. Fischer stands at his side,
fidgeting.

Once the men assemble, Marty steps forward.

“Listen! The fascists have taken Malaga!” There’s a ripple of mumbling. Malaga is a port city in the south of Spain, like all port cities, invaluable to the war effort. As of a day ago, the fascists have seized it with the help of Mussolini’s Blackshirts and soldiers sent over from Italy. It’s a telling blow to the Republic and the morale of her defenders. “The situation is critical. Within a few weeks, you will be on your way to the front! It’s time to do what you came here to do!” The volunteers cheer. Jughead’s gut chills. The Lincolns are eager for action, but he knows well they aren’t anywhere near ready. They’ll need plenty more training before they’re ready to operate under fire.

Jason steps up to Marty and speaks, quietly: “with all due respect, sir, these men need a lot more time before they’re fit for combat.”

“Well, I’m holding you responsible for that, Blossom,” he says curtly.

And having said so, the blustering Frenchman disappears.

“Look, here’s what’s going to happen;” Sweet Pea boasts that night. “Put a rifle in my hands-a rifle with bullets—and those fascist bastards are going to wish they’d never been born.”

A dozen of the Lincolns crowd around an impromptu card game in the barrack. But they seem far more interested in boasting of their coming exploits than in actually playing the game.

“Have you ever been shot at?” asks Jughead, from his cot.

“No,” Sweet Pea admits.

“You freeze up, the first time. Trust me, the less you expect of yourself, the better you’ll do when it comes down to it.”

“Well, tell us all about it, Jones,” Fangs prods.

Jughead sighs and sets his book down.

The guys abandon their cards entirely and fix their attention on him. He suddenly feels a storyteller, and it sends a thrill through his bones.

“It’s scary. Artillery is the loudest sound you’ll ever hear. But after a while, you sort of get used to it. You’re still scared, but you sort of resign yourself. If you die, you die, but for the moment, you do what you have to do.”

“Brave words,” intones Sergeant Doiley from across the room. He looks up from his freshly sharpened Bowie knife. Jughead suddenly feels challenged.

“It’s not that I’m brave. Just cynical,” Jughead says.

There’s a little round of laughter.

“I have to say,” begins Clayton. “You’ve got to be the least enthusiastic guy in this battalion. So, I’m curious, why are you here?”

A few murmurs of agreement.
“I could answer that. I could also order you all to turn out the lights and go to bed.” Everyone groans. “Oh, relax. It was a joke. But really, it’s a long story, and not a particularly interesting one.” That’s a lie, but he’s not eager to relate for what must be the hundredth time. “But tell me,” he turns the tables. “Why are you boys here?”

The Lincolns’ eyes grow deep and thoughtful.

“This is the place to be, right?” Sweet Pea mutters. “I got sick of hearing people whining about democracy and fascism and doing nothing but whining, and I figured someone ought to actually do something about it.” He shrugs. “So, here I am.”

“Also, we were bored,” Fangs adds.

“Right, that too.”

Chuck Clayton pulls up his shirt to reveal a long, ugly purple scar running down the length of his muscular torso.

“Longshoreman’s strike, Frisco Bay, 1934. I know what side I’m on.”

Jughead smiles.

Dilton Doiley looks up. He drags his knife along the barracks floor, and then brushes off splinters on his trouser leg.

“If I can shoot rabbits, I can shoot fascists,” he says.

Everyone laughs.

“Hey, where’s Blossom?” Seacord asks.

“He’s…I think he’s taking Marty to task for something,” Jughead replies.

“God help him,” someone says.

“You two have known each other for a while, haven’t you?” Doiley asks, in that weird, piercing way of his.

“Who, me and Jaso—Blossom?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, for a while, I guess.”

He leaves the guys to their card game and sets off, burdened with a sudden compulsion to find Jason Blossom, who he’s known for a while.

Jughead finds him, not with Marty, but sitting alone on an empty crate on the parade ground.

“Hey, Jones.”

“Hey. What are you doing out here?”

“Thinking.”
“You can do that?”

“Funny.”

Jughead sits down next to him.

“Okay, okay. What’s eating you?”

“I don’t know. I miss home, I suppose.”

“Right, me too.”

“And I’m a bit worried. We haven’t heard anything from Cheryl in a long time. Or Betty.”

“Right. But the last they sent us was good news, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, but that was a while ago.”

Jughead thinks.

“I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but do you want a hug?”

“No,” Jason replies, unconvincingly.

“…Yes, you do. I can tell.”

Jason’s face twitches.


Jughead leans over and embraces him.

“This feels like a bizarre role reversal, but everything will be fine, Jason.”

Jason smiles, weakly, more for his friend’s benefit than his own.

“Thanks, Jones.”

Hardly could I have known it then, but we were all in the thick of our fights. While Jason and I prepared to face once more the fascists on the battlefields of Spain, Betty and Cheryl desperately avoided the long and onerous reach of Clifford Blossom, and Veronica languished under sentence of death in a fascist prison.

It was our darkest hour.

And it was to grow even darker.

Chapter End Notes
Turning Jughead into a medium-ranking military commander seemed silly while I was writing it, but it seems a lot less silly in light of this recent serpent king nonsense.

Anyway, putting a couple of kids in charge of a battalion sized combat unit would probably rank among the least stupid military decisions made by the Spanish Republic during the war.
Veronica awakens in the dead of night. She isn’t sure why. The old convent is dead silent. No prisoner sings or mutters or weeps in his cell. In the sky outside, a pale moon is bundled up in sheets of thick grey clouds.

Nicolás sleeps soundly next to her, on the little cot they’re forced to share. The young man looks even younger at rest. Cold rays of moonlight pass over his scarred, boyish face.

Then all at once the prison comes alive. A door swings open in the hall. Steel clatters. Boots clack against the stones.

“Levantad! Levantad!” a guard shouts.

Nicolás springs awake and scrambles to his feet.

A squad of guards fills the halls. They throw open cell doors and dragging the occupants out into the dim light. Veronica closes her eyes. Nicolás squeezes her arm.

“This is it,” he hisses.

She sucks in a deep breath.

The door to their cell creaks and opens. Three Civil Guards storm inside.

“Get up.” One of them barks. “It’s time to go.”

“Oh? Go where?” Nicolás asks with feigned innocence.

“You,” the guard repeats.

Veronica trembles. Her heart thuds madly in her chest. Everything narrows into a dense little pinprick of light. Terror courses through her limbs and grips her bones. A guard steps forward and brusquely grabs her by the arm. They’re dragged unceremoniously into the hall.

One of their captors produces a length of cord and binds her right arm to Nicolás’ left. All down the hall, prisoners are led from their cells and similarly bound together. Then the shackled pairs are tied to one another, until there is a single column of condemned, each secured to the one before and behind him.

“March!” a guard commands.

“Courage, man!” Nicolás whispers firmly into her ear. For what it’s worth, the boy’s words do infuse her with a flash of sudden conviction. If she’s going to die, then there’s nothing she can do about it. She might as well go to her death with her head high and her heart light.
The line of prisoners is marched down the two sets of stairs and out into the convent courtyard. A line of lorries waits, most already holding masses of wide-eyed men and women in their beds, wrists and ankles bound. The guards jab at their charges with bayonets, urging them forward on shuffling, unsteady feet.

In one of the trucks sits a priest, old and sullen, threading a rosary through his crooked fingers. Bile rises in Veronica’s throat. She, along with all of the fellow prisoners from her cellblock is herded into the waiting bed of an empty truck. There is a strange sense of complacency among these condemned. She can’t hear anyone crying or begging, but neither do many give outward signs of defiance to their soon-to-be executioners. Everyone is by and large silent and peaceful. Men and women lean back in the truck beds, picking at loose threads in their shirts or drumming their fingers impatiently on their thighs. A few whistle innocuous little tunes. Their eyes stare forward, empty and careless. It’s as if they are in a trance.

Veronica wonders if she looks as undaunted as the rest.

“Fascist bastards…fascist bastards…rat bastards,” Nicolás hisses.

One of the Civil Guards shouts. The bed to their truck is shut up. The convoy of lorries purrs to life. They file out of the prison courtyard and into the streets of Seville. The fascists’ curfew has cleared the city by now, and only patrols of falangists or Civil Guards stir in the shadows and dim light of streetlamps.

The convoy snakes through the ancient, cramped city thoroughfares and alleyways. Doors and windows shut as they pass by.

Veronica squeezes her eyes shut and tries to focus on the moment. The very moment. Someone sniffs.

“Los cuatro generales, los cuatro generales…” she tries singing. No one joins in.

“Are you scared?” Nicolás asks.

The question lances through her thin veneer of fortitude. Her lip twitches.

“Yes,” she squeaks.

Nicolás nods.

“Me too. But don’t let the fuckers see that. Don’t give them the satisfaction,” he whispers. There are a few murmurs of agreement. He clenches his fist, tendons straining against the cord around his wrist.

“Right,” Veronica determines. Don’t give them the satisfaction. She wills a few tears out of existence. She wants to go home, but she doesn’t even know where that is anymore. It used to be her mother and father. Even if she could break her bonds and flee here and now, where would she go?

The van climbs a little hill. The moon glares at them over the crest of the rise. Nicolás faces forward, dark eyes shining.

Their destination looms in the distance. Veronica traces out the ugly, crooked shapes of ancient markers and mausoleums. The craggy pattern of an ancient gate winds its way around the grounds. The heavy midnight mists swathe the stony tombs of centuries past.
The cemetery’s front gate yawns open to welcome them. The convoy slips inside. One more turn, and the trucks pull up in a line alongside a long, low half-shattered brick wall. It doesn’t appear to be connected to anything in particular, and Veronica suspects it was part of the original cemetery walls, before it was demolished to enlarge the grounds.

In the flood of the trucks’ headlights, she can see the dull grey brick splattered with drying splotches of red and black. Neat little pockmark bullet holes scar the wall from parapet to base. More dark red stains spill over the ground beneath the wall. Clumps of grass or grains of dirt freeze together in knots of hard, dried blood.

Veronica feels the blood rush from her face and limbs. She can’t feel her fingers or toes or lips. Little pinpricks of light explode at the periphery of her vision. A Civil Guard yanks open the truck bed.

“Salid! Salid!” he roars. The prisoners dutifully stand and descend onto the hard-packed earth. Veronica is tugged along by the wrist as Nicolás steps out.

“Courage,” Nicolás hisses one more time, for her and for himself.

“Against the wall!” the guardsmen command. The loads of prisoners in the other trucks watch silently as the first unlucky batch is led to death.

They walk in their tired, simple line, towards the bloodstained wall. Five Civil Guards step back, coalescing into a firing squad. They prime their rifles.

The priest climbs down from the truck.

"Who wishes to receive extreme unction?" he asks.

Three of the doomed, two women and a man, accept the offer. He pulls them aside to absolve their souls before they die, while the unrepentant press their backs up to the wall. The muzzles of their executioners' rifles glimmer.

Then a black car roars through the cemetery gates. It skids to a stop before the row of trucks and the mass of condemned. A lone, willowy figure steps out, shielding his eyes from the glow of the headlights. He saunters closer. It’s a singular falangist officer, blue shirt resplendent in the moonlight.

“Halt!” he calls. The Civil Guards snap to attention. The impromptu firing squad lowers its rifles.

“I’m here for a particular prisoner,” he explains.

The Civil Guard captain steps forward to confront him.

“These reds are all condemned to die.”

“And yet, I am here for one of them,” the falangist officer repeats. He turns to face the assembled prisoners. “Which one of you is Veronica Lodge?”

Much to Veronica’s surprise, he is not deluged by a number of condemned claiming to be her. Instead, there is a dreadful silence. She says nothing, and she is not sure why. Perhaps her throat is simply frozen. Perhaps it is some twisted sense of solidarity with her fellow death sentences.

Then Nicolás steps forward.

“She is!” he calls out, loud and clear. Then, to Veronica, low and quiet; “Remember what you
promised me. Tell the world what they’ve done to us. Tell them.”

The falangist officer whirls around. He looks her over, squinting.

“Is that so?” he demands.

“Yes,” Veronica manages to squeak.

The officer produces a knife from his belt. He cuts the rope binding her to Nicolás. The boy watches with a mix of sadness and relief as she is snatched away from the threshold of death. He then cuts the rope that holds her fast to the prisoner behind her. The falangist grabs Veronica by the shoulder and leads her away towards his car. The other prisoners watch her go in silent awe and misery.

The Civil Guards return to the business of carrying out their victims’ sentences. The prisoners watch in forlorn resignation as Veronica is marched away. The men and women from her truck are forced up against the wall. She turns away and dares not look back. The falangist ushers her into the passenger’s seat.

“Apuntad!” the Civil Guard captain cries, taking his place at the head of the firing squad.

As the falangist’s engine turns over and the car creeps away, Veronica hears a voice that might be Nicolás’ cry out: “Madrid resiste! Viva la libertad!”

“Fuego!”

The sharp, almost lazy crack of rifles shreds the night air. She flinches. Almost screams. The car wheels around and speeds out of the cemetery.

She doesn’t hear the corpses strike the ground.

____________________________________

“What are you?”

Veronica finally finds the courage to ask the question of the falangist who’d saved her life, as they head back through Seville, retracing the route she’d taken to the cemetery only an hour before.

“Does it matter?” the falangist asks.

“Yes. Why are you helping me? Where are you taking me?”

He smirks.

“In truth? Because I was paid a hefty sum to do.”

“Paid a—by who?”

He doesn’t answer for a moment. He jerks the car to the left and takes them into a lonely alleyway.

“Your mother.”

The car skids to a halt.

“My mother…”

She reels. What to say? What has been done? What does she do?
“Get out here,” the falangist commands. “And I’d suggest you get out of Seville as soon as humanly possible.”

Still trembling, she spills out of the car into the dank alleyway. Before she can say anything else, the car starts up again and disappears around the corner. Veronica blinks blankly. Her first instinct is to find her mother. To thank her? Or God knows what. The emotion of the past weeks crashes down on her at once. She sinks to her knees in the filthy alley, weeping with abandon.

It is only a half hour later, face soaked by tears, hair wet and matted, that she regains her composure. The man was right. She has to get out of Seville, and as quickly as she can. Before Queipo realizes she’s cheated his firing squad.

But then what? Where does she go then? What does she do, then?

Her mother’s words return to her. When she’d come to the cell.

*Your father’s…assets leave Salamanca on February 10th.*

And she knows what she must do.

She steps out of the alley back into the streets with her head low. It would be dangerous enough in daylight, but now, after curfew, a civilian, any civilian at all, out on the streets alone is in danger.

Somehow, she has got to get to the Republican lines.

Veronica walks with a light, steady step through the quiet streets of Seville. She creeps along the walls and the gutters, ducking into alleys or doorways at the approach of falangist patrols or pairs of Civil Guards.

She stops before a café. It is closed, of course, but in the window, a map of Spain has been pinned up.

*The Territorial Gains So Far Made By Our Great Leader Franco’s National Army* booms the lettering.

Veronica studies the map. The fascists hold all of western Spain, stretching in a wide arc from the Pyrenees at Irún to the port of Malaga in the south, with Madrid at the apex of the arc. To the north of Seville, the city of Cordoba lies just within the fascist line. If she can only get to Cordoba, it will be a short hop into Republican territory.

Creeping, skulking, and hiding, she makes her agonizing journey out of Seville. More than once she comes within a hair’s breadth of a roving gang of falangists. More than once she has to flee pell-mell as fast as her feet can go, a band of shouting fascists at her heels.

When the sun rises and the curfew lifts, she is able to move with more freedom. Civilians come out of their houses. She mingles with the small, trickling little crowds of laborers and pedestrians that drift through the streets in the early morning light.

Some five hours after the start of her flight, she finds herself on a little hill just outside the city of Seville. She looks down from the high ground onto the jewel of Andalusia, held in the cruel grip of Queipo de Llano.

Veronica drifts northward along the lonely country roads. She prays she is headed in the right direction. There are no road signs and only a few ancient stone markers in the rural wastes of Southern Spain. She calculates that she’s traveled about two dozen miles in the first day. Her feet
throb in agony and her lips crack and bleed. She needs to drink and eat and rest. But there is no
time for any of that.

In the afternoon of the second day, half-dead from thirst and exhaustion, she crests a hill and finds
herself looking down onto the hazy homes and shops of yet another little country hamlet. She licks
her chapped lips. The last she’s had to drink was a few sips of water thanks to a generous group of
day laborers a few hours back.

Veronica descends the hill, stumbling towards the town. Just as she reaches the outskirts of the
village, a group of figures steps out into the road. Brandishing rifles they rush forward to meet her.

“I’m not a fascist!” Veronica manages to choke out. “Please, shoot me if you must, but get me a
drink of water, first.”

“Who are you?” one of the milicianos demands.

She weakly puts her hands up.

The little patrol surrounds her. They push their bayonets uncomfortably close to her face. She’s too
tired to protest.

“Who are you?” one of the milicianos demands.

She almost laughs at the sight of them. They’re probably about her age, boys and girls with round,
smooth faces and big innocent eyes, trying their best to look tough. The rifles and the red
handkerchiefs around their necks are the only indicators they are anything more than students.

“Look at that dress,” a young militawoman snarls. She reaches out and tugs at the sleve of
Veronica’s dress. She’d forgotten she was wearing it. She’s been wearing it for more than two
weeks, after all. Ever since Queipo arrested her. It’s a fine dress, though torn and filthy now. “Look
at this dress,” repeats the young woman. “She’s a fascist. Let’s shoot her!”

“Look!” she manages to shout. Her throat cracks and she winces in pain. “Who’s in charge, here?”

The lad with the revolver, a boy with sandy hair and bright brown eyes steps up and pounds his
chest.’

“I am the elected leader of our militia section,” he boasts.

There’s a moment’s pause.

“Are not!” snaps the girl who’d asked to shoot her.

“Am too!” insists the boy.

“Are not!”

On cue, the entire patrol dissolves into petty bickering and insults. Someone shoves someone else.
A punch is thrown.

“We voted!”

“It didn’t count! Half of us weren’t there!”

“You can’t be our leader! You don’t even know how to use a gun!”

“Neither do you!”

“Yes I do!”

“Enough!” Veronica shouts. “Please! Get me a drink of water!”

The patrol, evidently embarrassed by their sudden conduct, straightens up.

“Let’s shoot her!” the girl urges again.

“We can’t just shoot her,” another girl says.

“Let’s take her into the barracks,” says the boy with the sandy hair and the revolver.

“Yes. Fine. Take me into the barracks. Whatever. Just please get me out of this damned sun and get me a glass of water.”

They form two lines on either side of her, keeping their bayonets perilously close to her face. Thus, they march her into town. Men, women, and children come out into the street to watch her pass by. Assuming her to be a fascist prisoner of some sort, they scowl and hiss. She lowers her head. The sun tickles her scalp and sends waves of exhausting heat through her tired flesh. The militia leads her into what was probably until lately the mayoral palace of the little town.

The insides are stripped bare. There are patches of light paint on the walls where until recently portraits and icons hung. Fine carpeting had been torn away and metal of all sorts has been carted off for the war effort. The fine oak paneling of the walls is scratched and scrawled with various revolutionary slogans. A hammer and sickle daubed in bright red paint overlooks what was once the mayor’s desk.

Behind that desk sits a young woman perhaps ten years older than her and her teenage captors. She looks up and scratches her chin, fixing light eyes on the new arrival.

“What’s all this?” she demands.

“A prisoner!” exclaims the girl who wanted to shoot her.

“She’s not a prisoner,” another boy says.

“I’ve just escaped from a fascist prison. In Seville,” Veronica growls. “And I’d appreciate not being treated as if I were a fascist.”

“Put away your goddamned bayonets,” the woman commands. The militiamen and women (or rather, militia boys and girls) lower their guns and sigh. “You look like you could use a drink,” the woman goes on.

“Please,” Veronica groans. The woman disappears into a back room and returns a minute later with a clear glass of water. Veronica downs it as if she’s never had water in her life. Having done so, and restored a thin sanity and cohesion to her rapidly splintering mind, she remembers her mission.
and is repossessed by clarity of purpose. “Who are you? Where am I? What is this?”

“You’re in the village of Morata,” the woman says. “I’m Concepcion Orad, elected leader of our people’s militia.”

“Well, pleasure to meet you,” Veronica sighs, relishing the fresh feeling of water on her tongue and teeth.

“Indeed. And who are you?” Orad inquires, eyeing the young girl before her with some suspicion.

“I’d really appreciate it if you could get these kids and their rifles off my back for a little moment,” Veronica says.

Orad waves a hand and the militia steps back, still gripping their guns tight and watching intently.

“As I was asking…”

“My name’s Veronica Lodge, I just escaped one of…General Queipo de Llano’s firing squads in Seville,” she spits. Even saying the general’s name feels hateful. “What day is it?”

“3rd of February,” Orad informs her.

“Hijo de…look, who do you answer to? What’s the chain of command here?”

Orad stands.

“With all due respect, comrade, you are a person of interest in our sector. We ought to be asking most of the questions.”

“I don’t have time for this!” Veronica wails. “I need to find two people; two men in the Republican Army.”

“You’ve found two, right here,” two of the militiamen snicker. She shoots them a glare.

“Two soldiers in the People’s Army. I hope you’ve got names,” Orad smiles.

“Ju—Forsythe Jones and Jason Blossom,”

Orad cocks her head.

“Englishmen?”

“Americans. International Brigades.”

Orad nods.

“Well, I before I can go patching you through to the International Brigade, I think there are a few things we ought to establish about you, first.”

“Fine.”

Veronica sighs. The milicianos escort her to a sagging chair facing the desk. Orad demands her story, and she tells most of it. She leaves out some crucial parts of it, like her parents’ ties to the fascists and her father’s plots back home. But what she gives seems to satisfy. Orad nods and occasionally smirks or frowns or curses the fascists.
“Well, I’m sure you understand, but when a young woman appears in our sector, wandering without apparent aim through the countryside, not far from the fascist lines, we have our reasons for suspicion. So…I’m afraid, while I’ll do what I can to help you, we cannot allow you to leave just now.”

“So I’m a prisoner again?”

Hermione Lodge waits for them to come.

She sits on the balcony, sipping a glass of wine.

Finally, she hears the thud of boots in the hall. The general bursts out onto the balcony, flanked by four falangists. Queipo's little snake eyes flash and burn. His fingers curl into claws.

Hermione is not afraid. Indeed, she feels heartened and happy. For the first time in too long, her conscience is unstained.

"Señora Lodge...your daughter missed her appointment with the firing squad."

Hermione sips her wine.

Queipo's men grab her by the arms and haul her forwards. The glass tumbles from her fingers and shatters at her feet. A little puddle of wine trickles around the falangists' boots.

"Yes. She has. And you'll never get your hands on her again."

"So you are a red, too, señora?" Queipo sneers.

"No. But I am done abiding men like you."

Chapter End Notes

Nicolás actually is a historical character, in the loosest sense of the term. Veronica's whole ordeal in the fascist prison is based loosely on Arthur Koestler's book 'The Spanish Testament'. While a prisoner in Insurgent Spain, Koestler shared a cell with a young Republican militiaman named Nicolás who desired to learn to read, and was executed within a few days of meeting Koestler.
“What the hell is going on?”

Jason Blossom has become all-too accustomed to asking that question.

The Lincoln Battalion is hopeless. Every day (every other day, if he’s lucky) there’s some ridiculous bout of drama he’s forced to attend to. Last week Fogarty had taken exception to one of Comrade Marty’s orders which led to Marty labeling him a ‘Trotskyite’ and demanding he be shot. Jason had just barely been able to talk the apoplectic Frenchman down, which was very well, because he really didn’t want to lose one of his guys to the firing squad before they got anywhere near a battlefield.

Then there’s Sweet Pea, who sees every order as a suggestion at best and a personal insult at worst. The other day he and Clayton had gotten into it over some obscure point of detail regarding trade union politics back home. Then Sweet Pea had tried to organize a strike against the quality of the fare they were fed. The food is, of course, entirely out of Jason’s hands, and neither he, Jones, Merriman, nor even Marty or Fischer, eat any better.

Jason storms through the doors into the mess hall and repeats himself.

“What the hell is going on?”

Merriman is the first to whirl around. He salutes with the clenched fist and shrugs lamely.

A good twenty-five Lincolns are huddled around...something in the corner, arguing viciously. He had heard the bickering from the other side of the barracks.

Jughead Jones paces around the perimeter of the little huddle.

“One of the village families baked the battalion a cake as thanks for our coming to fight for the Republic, and now the guys can’t decide who gets it,” Merriman says, adjusting his glasses.

Jason feels his eyelid twitch.

“You had best be putting me on.”

“Afraid not,” Merriman says apologetically.

“Oh. You’re here,” Jughead drawls. “Let’s see if you can defuse this. Because I sure as hell couldn’t.”

“She handed it to me,” Jason hears Chapoff exclaim.

“Oh? I don’t see your name on it!” Clayton retorts.

“I say we give it to the skinniest guy here,” suggests a lanky Kentuckian.

“We’ll settle it with a game of five finger fillet,” offers Sergeant Doiley.

“Everybody shut up!” Jason shouts. The mess hall falls (mostly) silent. Jason takes a few deep
breathe and waits until his shaking subsides. Then he pushes through the little crowd to get a peek at the cause of all this turmoil.

The cake is a modest, simple little peasant concoction. Not particularly large or ornate. Just a loaf of sweetened bread, really.

The men watch him; arms crossed, eyes haughty, waiting for him to announce the solution to the problem.

“Well?” Someone asks.

“Why can’t you just... share the cake?” Jason asks, feeling very much like a schoolteacher.

“Are you kidding?” Clayton scoffs. “Look at that thing. It’s tiny.”

“Maybe if Brigade fed us better we wouldn’t be fighting over this damn thing,” Sweet Pea says, stepping forward. Jason steps up to him, so that they're nearly chest-to-chest.

“You’ve been treading dangerously for a long time, comrade,” Jason growls.

“Oh, yeah?” Sweet Pea challenges.

“Yeah.”

“Look, why don’t we just draw lots?” Jughead tries.

A moment of terse, hopeful chatter passes. It seems an agreeable solution to most.

“Merriman, can you get some slips of paper together?” Jason asks.

“Yeah. Sure thing,” Merriman replies.

A few minutes later, the raffle has been organized. Jughead makes the rounds, getting each man in the battalion (even those who had hitherto heard nothing of the cake) to write their names on a little slip of paper. Sweet Pea does so with much reluctance, brooding silently in the corner after turning in his name. Jason adds his own and Jughead’s names in the interest of completeness.

The battalion assembles in the courtyard to settle the matter of the cake once and for all. The tension is palpable.

Jason strides up in front of the guys. He takes the jar stuffed full of names from the hands of a smirking Jughead.

“All right,” Jason begins. The anticipation is overpowering. This is ridiculous. He shakes his head. “The winner of the... cake is...” he pulls a name at random. Captain Jason Blossom the slip says. “Shit.” He tries to shove the slip back into the jar and retrieve a new one before anyone notices, but it's too late.

“Hey, wait a minute!” cries a kid from Long Island. “Whose was that first name?”

“It was... no one,” Jason tries lamely.

“It was me, wasn’t it?” Sweet Pea thunders.

“It wasn’t you!” Jason snaps. “Get over yourself!”
“Then why did you put it back?” Seacord demands.

Jason groans. His head begins throbbing.

“It was me, alright?”

A hush grips the Lincolns for a moment.

Then Fogarty shouts: “we don’t believe you!”

“It was him!” Jughead cries, stepping forwards. “I saw it!”

“Is this rigged?” someone bellows.

“You know what?” Jason yells back. “I wash my hands of this nonsense! I—“

Just then, as he does, Andre Marty materializes into the courtyard, all bluster and fury.

“What in God’s name is going on here?”

Jason sucks in another deep breath and slowly counts to five.

“I’m…trying to solve…an internal dispute…in my battalion,” he forces out.

“Jughead begins.

“A cake? A cake?”

“Ye—“

“Your men are expected to go into action within three weeks at most, and you’re arguing over cake?”

“Well, I—“

“The entire XV Brigade is going on a march the length of Albacete! Now!” Marty shrieks.

Great cries of despair go up from the Lincolns. To no avail. The entire XV International Brigade; all four battalions, are all soon engaged in a noisome march through the streets of Albacete.

In the commotion, the cake is stolen and quickly consumed by a Finn from Minnesota named Iivari.

When they return from the exhausting exercise, Jason finds that someone (Sweet Pea) has scrawled ‘Captain Blossom is a son of a bitch on the wall in the courtyard. With Jason unable to prove his guilt and unwilling to risk a mistake and appearing a despot, no one is punished for the infraction.

All in all, it’s a fairly peaceful week by the standards of the Lincoln Battalion.

The next day, as the Lincolns prepare to head out onto the field for another round of training, Jason musters the battalion together for a hasty speech. He’d consulted with Jughead a bit the night before on what to say and he hopes it comes across well.

“Look, comrades,” he starts. “I know some of you don’t like me very much,” his eyes fall on Sweet Pea, who crosses his arms. “And I suppose that’s fine. You don’t have to. But we’re all here for the same reason, right? We all hate fascism, and we want to nip it in the bud before it can spread
any further. We want to stop them here in Spain before they can make Spain’s problem the world’s problem. That’s why we’re all here, and I don’t think we ought to let personal feelings get in the way of that, right, comrades?” He looks out hopefully over the assembled battalion, whose faces betray little. “Anyway, that’s all. Come on, let’s try to do a good job of this.”

Perhaps it’s the painful earnestness of the speech, despite its less than shining rhetoric, but the battalion seems to soften, if just a little.

Today, the Yugoslav Dimitrov Battalion plays the role of the defenders, with the Lincoln and British Battalions on the offensive. Jason, Jughead, and Merriman deploy the Lincolns in a rough half-moon shape facing the Dimitrovs, dug in at the crest of a ridge of olive trees.

“Alright, I don’t think we ought to do a frontal assault, again,” Jughead says. “Unless you fancy 60% casualties again.”

“I don’t,” Jason mumbles.

“So let’s see…we split the battalion into two, try for a pincer movement?” Jughead suggests.

“I’ll lead left wing,” Merriman offers.

“Good, good. Jones, you lead right,” Jason says.

“We’ll advance up the center to ‘draw fire’,” McDade says of the British Battalion.

“There’s no cover, though, on the flanks or the center,” Jughead says.

“There’s that thicket of olive groves.” McDade points to the trees at the right of the Dimitrovs’ position.

“Right, but they’ll expect us to come through there because it is the only cover on the damn field,” Jughead replies.

Jason rubs his face.

“I’ve got an idea,” he says at last. “Okay, we cut a couple branches from the olive trees, and send ten or fifteen guys through the olive grove. Have them wave the branches around and conduct the noisiest ‘ambush’ ever. The guys on the hill will think we’re bringing everyone through the grove and focus everything there. Then the rest of us can swing around the left and take them by surprise.”

Jughead smiles.

“What, like Macbeth?”

“Right, just like Macbeth.”

Doiley quietly cuts seventeen olive branches from the trees, and passes them out to as many Lincolns. On cue, the men go through the olive grove, stomping about and ‘whispering’ as loud as humanly possible. The Dimitrovs take the bait and rush left to ‘capture’ the ‘enemy’.

“Come on!” Jughead hisses.

“Come on!” Jason echoes.

“Sweet Pea, you take twenty guys up that slope,” Jason says, gesturing to the craggy rise leading to
the Dimitrovs’ position. Sweet Pea opens his mouth. “Say anything but ‘yes’ and I swear I will shoot you here and now.” Sweet Pea thinks better of it, collects his twenty guys, and leads them up the slope.

Jason and Jughead take another fifty of the Battalion and lead them halfway around the hill. While the Dimitrovs concentrate on the faux ambush in the olive grove, the real bulk of the Lincoln and British Battalions storm up the undefended left flank of the hill. They creep up slowly at first, sometimes dropping to their bellies or crawling along on all fours. The Dimitrovs have defended this section of their flank lightly, taken as they are by the diversion among the olive trees. It is their undoing.

When the Lincolns get close enough, Jason leaps to his feet, cries out, and charges up at the head of the men, waving his bayonet, kicking up great clouds of red Spanish dust in his wake. The Lincolns pour over the hill’s crest, shouting and demanding surrender. The Dimitrovs, realizing they’ve been tricked, whirl around. They shout and cry in protest. But it’s too late. They’re surrounded on all sides by the jubilant Anglo-Americans.

The Yugoslavs swear and grumble. Jason can’t help a mischievous grin. Jughead stumbles up behind him, waving his pistol and smiling as well.

Jason takes the ‘surrender’ of the Dimitrovs’ commander, who grumbles and fumes.

“Well, how many casualties do you reckon that was?” Jughead asks of Cunningham.

Cunningham shrugs.

“Let’s say…15%? At most.”

The Lincolns cheer, stabbing their rifles into the air.

“Whoo!” someone shouts.

It’s by far the best casualty rating they’ve yet gotten.

They chant: “Lin-coln! Linc-oln! Linc-oln!”

Jason’s smile widens.

“Hey!” cries one of the guys. “Hurrah for Captain Blossom!”

And he gets a few hearty ‘hurrahs!’

A little blush creeps into his pale cheeks. He smiles even wider.

Jughead claps him on the shoulder.

“I think this is the ‘earn the respect of your men’ moment,” he intones.

“I sure hope so, Jones. I sure hope so.”

“Can we go back to barracks and get something to eat? Preferably before Marty finds some new labor to force upon us?”

“Damn! Best we’ve done so far!” Clayton exults, high on the victory. The guys file buy, clapping Jason or Jughead on the shoulders as they go. Sweet Pea does not partake, but at the very least his perennial scowl looks a mite softer.
Jason returns to barracks having earned, if not the love of the battalion, at least their liking.

They tramp back through town, singing all the way, a song taught to them by their Spanish comrades through their weeks here.

“Viva la Quince Brigada!

Que se ha cubierto de gloria, ay Manuela, ay Manuela!

Long live the XV Brigade!

For she has covered herself with glory, oh Manuela, oh Manuela!”

Of course, the XV Brigade has yet to cover itself in glory, as it has yet to see a battle. But once it does, they’ll have their song ready.

Chapter End Notes

The raffle incident is based very loosely on a real incident that occurred during the Lincoln Battalion's early training.
Toni Topaz receives a letter in the last week of January. It’s postmarked to the XII International Brigade, but like every other piece of mail coming into Republican Spain (through legal channels, at least), it has to pass through the hands of the censors, first. Which means passing through the Telefónica Building.

Arturo Barea brings her the letter while she’s busy putting through her latest dispatch back to HQ in New York.

“I think this one’s for you, Miss Topaz,” the surly Spaniard says as he hands it over. Toni takes the letter from his hands. She turns it over. It’s dated almost two months ago, out of Riverdale, NY. So she knows why he’s brought it to her. It’s for one of her two new friends in the Brigades.

“Thanks, Arturo,” she says.

“For your friends?” he asks.

Toni nods.

“For my friends.”

“Well, the censors have already read it, as you can see. I dearly hope it’s not a love letter.” With that, he walks off.

She runs her finger along the edge of the envelope. Indeed, it’s already been slit open.

Toni finishes sending her report home. It’s not very colorful. It’s just a brief overview of life in the besieged city, ever since the failure of Franco’s offensive.

*Life in Madrid has settled back into an uneasy but regular rhythm. Even with insurgent troops dug into their trenches a mile from the city center and the murderous air raids carried out daily by Hitler’s warplanes, men and women still work and children still play in the streets. The unyielding resistance offered by the defenders of Madrid has shown Franco, as well as his abettors in Rome and Berlin, that ruling Spain will not be the simple affair first assumed. Everyone is sure that within months if not weeks, the rebels will make another effort to capture the capital. But everyone is just as sure that, as they did last November, the soldiers of the Republic will rise to meet the challenge. In October, the insurgent General Mola promised his supporters he would be enjoying a coffee on the Gran Via within the week. It is now nearly February of 1937, and General Mola’s coffee has long since gone cold.*

She’s also got to counteract everything sent out by Nick and his fellow Franco-sympathizers in the press corps. The Republic has (mistakenly, in her opinion) issued credentials to a number of reporters whose sympathies are by and large with the fascists, in the interest of appearing impartial in the eyes of the world. It's also a propaganda coup against Franco, whose press agents are notorious for threatening to shoot any journalist that casts the slightest of aspersions on the insurgent cause.

As if on cue, Nick swaggers in through the doors, a few sheets of paper in his hands.

Toni sighs.

“Toni,” he greets.
“Nick,” she says, sharp and terse.

He slides into a seat next to her. She finishes putting her telegram through, and eager to be out of his presence, stands.

He smiles.

“What’s that you’ve got, there?” he asks, gesturing to the letter she holds.

“None of your concern,” she answers.

“No. I guess not.” Nick squints and stares closer. He reads the postmark. “Is it for Blossom and his pal in the Brigade?”

She doesn’t answer, which he of course, takes as a ‘yes’.

“See you around, St. Claire.”

“Bet you’re feeling pretty good about that bet, huh?” he says, jovially, in a poor attempt to cover up his genuine annoyance.

“Which one?” Toni smiles. “That Madrid would fall in a few weeks? Yeah…well…here we are,” Toni says, very satisfied.

Nick sneers.

“Right. Congratulations, sweetheart.” Then he turns and goes.

Toni stands up, to send the letter off to the XV Brigade, where Jason and Jughead are serving now.

In the first week of February 1937, General Franco launches his last great attempt to capture Madrid. A mass of fascist troops swings up from the south of the city, spearheaded by the crack Spanish Legion and the feared Moorish *regulares*.

Their goal: to cut off the vital Corunna Road that connects Madrid to Valencia on the coast, her lifeline to the outside world and the crucial vein that keeps the embattled capital supplied with food and munitions. If the fascist troops can accomplish this, they can encircle Madrid and starve her out, conquer the city without another shot fired. From over the sea, Mussolini furnishes the Spanish insurgents with thousands worth of regular troops and Blackshirt militia, eager to win glory and renown for their *Duce*. Meanwhile, Hitler continues to pour warplanes, tanks, and technicians into fascist Spain by the dozens and then the hundreds. So bolstered, Franco and his generals hope for, if not an easy victory, at least a decisive one.

But their opponents are preparing, too. In the months since the miraculous deliverance of the capital in November, the Republican government has set about reorganizing her disparate, unruly militias into a new, fire-tempered People’s Army. The Soviet Union provides the Republicans with tanks, artillery, and advisors, enough to transform the militiamen that saved Madrid into a formidable military force capable not only of beating back the foe, but of taking the fight to him.

It is this army, bolstered by her comrades of the International Brigades, which will meet the fascist juggernaut on the plains and valleys south of Madrid.

“Mail call!”
It’s the Lincoln Battalion’s first mail call since the unit’s official formation a few weeks ago. The battalion, now nearly 300 strong, files towards the little quartermaster’s depot chattering in excitement.

Fischer’s tried to sort out the letters to the best of his ability. There aren’t too many. A good number of the volunteers are drifters and itinerant laborers. Even if they do have close friends or family, rarely do they have a permanent address to give.

Jason and Jughead line up.

“Anything for me?” Jughead asks, trying not to sound as expectant as he is.

Fischer raises a finger.

“Yes, actually.” He turns to look at Jason. “And uh…for him too, matter of fact.”

Fischer produces, duly, two letters. He hands them over.

The boys mumble thanks. They back off and amble towards the barrack. Jason reads the envelope. It’s postmarked to Riverdale, of course. The address is scrawled, hasty and quick, in a hand that isn’t Cheryl’s. It’s addressed to their last posting, with the XII International Brigade in Madrid. Jason figures Toni Topaz, god bless her soul, must have forwarded it here.

He hopes it’s good news, and so hoping, rips it open.

The breath is torn out of his lungs.


“Shit!”

They retreat into the barracks, swearing and muttering and fretting.

“What the hell is this?” Jughead demands, shaking. “Is this a joke?”

“No it’s not a joke!” Jason snaps. “She wouldn’t joke about this!”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes I’m sure!”
Jason’s mind splinters. Everything cannot fall apart now. Not after all of this. His first instinct is that they had to get back to Riverdale, and damn their fugitive statuses. He isn’t sure what they’ll do once there, but they have to do something. His heart beats against his ribcage. He feels Jughead’s presence beside him, discomfited as his own. An icy terror grips him. Was Cheryl safe? How could she be? When their father knew she’d tried to undermine his plans? He has to do something. Something.

“Well?” Jughead asks.

“Well, what?”

“Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“No!” Jason almost yells. He has no ideas, short of going back home and shooting his father in the head. Maybe he can do just that. It seems about the only recourse he has left. He’s about to open his mouth and then—

“Hey! You two!”

Sweet Pea leans his head in through the door.

“What, corporal?” Jason snaps.

“We’re very busy!” Jughead adds.

Sweet Pea rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, well, Marty’s busier, and he wants everyone out on the parade ground now.”

“Son of a bitch!”

“Why don’t we just tell Marty th—” Jughead starts.

“No,” Jason says sternly. “We can’t tell anyone about any of this. Hell, we probably shouldn’t have even told Toni. Frankly, I don’t even trust Marty.”

“Look, we—”

“Hey,” Sweet Pea continues from the doorway. “I really don’t know what you two are talking about and I don’t much care, but if you’re not on the field in five Marty’s gonna crucify us all an —”

“Alright!”

They rush out onto the parade ground, and form up at the head of the Battalion. Most of the men are already there. Marty strides up into his place before the assembled Internationals.

“Men of the XV International Brigade! The fascists have launched another offensive to the south of Madrid!” he pronounces. A smattering of dismayed mumbling. “Their goal is as it was in November; to capture the city and strike at the heart of the Republic. We are to stop them! On the fields of Spain there are no Victoria Crosses, no stipends for the widows of heroes. There is only the chance to do what you came to do: to fight fascism hand-to-hand and bullet for bullet. Are you
Great, roaring cheers explode from the Lincolns. Jason’s stomach turns. He’s on the verge of fainting.

“No pasarán! No pasarán!” they chorus in their weak Spanish.

“Good, we move out in two days!” Marty barks.

The crowd disperses. Jason immediately steps up to the Frenchman.

“Sir, I-

“I don’t want to hear anything, Captain Blossom. Anything. Prepare your men to embark by Wednesday. Do you understand?”

“I…yes, Comrade Commander.”

And he backs off, dejected, terrified, and completely out of ideas.

The battalion spends its last evening in barracks before heading off. The Lincolns spend a feverish, excited night trading fanciful stories of the victories they will win and the grievous defeats they will inflict when they at last come face to face with Franco’s armies.

Chuck Clayton loads and reloads a rusty Mauser rifle, saying “five fascists, five bullets.”

“Now we’re gonna lick those fascist bastards!” Sweet Pea cheers.

Dilton Doiley runs the tip of his knife along the barracks floor, carving shallow little loops and swirls into the wood.

“Hey! What’s up with you two?” Fangs demands of the captain and the commissar.

Jughead lifts his head.

“We’re just not quite as eager to get back into the bloodshed as you fellows.”

Jason grunts his assent.

“Aw, cheer up,” Fangs Fogarty teases.

“Yeah, we’re eager to see what you fellas are really made of,” Sweet Pea appends.

Jason glowers. Jughead scowls.

“What?” Jughead asks, stuffing his turmoil deep down. “If you guys aren’t afraid in the slightest, it’s only because you haven’t actually seen battle yet.”

Doiley raises his knife. He waves it gently to and fro in the dim light of the barrack.

“Death is…what do you call it, an occupational hazard, right?”

In the morning, Fischer runs to and fro through the barracks, rousing the XV Brigade from its uneasy slumber.
“Up! Up! Time to go!”

It’s still dark outside. The very first rays of light break over the dusty sierras in the distance. The soldiers rise unsteadily. Some of the bravado of the previous night has melted away.

Jughead sits up and buries his face in his hands. Gentle, tired chattering fills his ears.

The battalion musters beneath a fading moonlight.

“Hey! Hey! Blossom!” Jason spins around. Fischer jogs into view. He beckons Jason towards him. The redhead breaks away from the men and follows the quartermaster.

“What?” he asks.

“You got a call.”

“A call? What do you—“

“From…higher up the chain. Brigade HQ. Someone’s looking for you.”

“Someone…look, we don’t have time for this, we—“

“A militia patrol down on the Cordoba front picked some girl up. She says she wants to speak with you. Or Jones.”

Jason turns around and calls Jughead, who comes jogging to his side.

“Me or Jones? What girl?”

“Calls herself Veronica?”

“Veronica Lodge?” Jughead exclaims. “Wh—where is she? Why—“

“Wasn’t she on the fascist side of the lines? With her mother?” Jason asks.

“Well, she’s in our hands, now,” Fischer shrugs.

“We don’t have time for this,” Jason repeats. “There’s a fascist offensive in the works and—“

“What if she has something important to say?” Jughead asks.

“Like what?” Jason demands.

“Like something relevant to the…issues…we’re dealing with. Her father…”

Jason swears.

“Fine. But we have to move. Fischer, where is she, now?”

Fischer shrugs.

“Still being held by that militia in Cordoba, I guess.”

“Well—see if they can’t get her up to Madrid,” Jason says. Jughead nods.

Fischer nods and walks off.
“Got any ideas yet?” Jughead asks his friend turned captain, as they do an about-face and march out into the quiet streets of Albacete.

“God help us…” Jason Blossom murmurs.

“Take that as a no,” Jughead sighs.

Nick St. Clair has an appointment to keep.

He’s not well liked in the staunchly Republican Madrid. His sympathies with the rebels are an open secret, even if he tries to keep up a thin veneer of impartiality. He’s been refused service at a bar or restaurant more than once, his money answered with curses of; “damn fascist!”

But that’s fine. He doesn’t need the affections of these fucking reds. Franco will take Madrid soon and they’ll all go up against the wall anyhow.

Back home the well-laid plans of his father, Clifford Blossom, and Hiram Lodge will all come to fruition soon enough. But he has to prove that he’s useful to the cause. That he’s not just a kid playing at reporter. He’s been entrusted with eliminating one more loose end. It’s in his hands to ensure their final success.

Nick presents his credentials at the doorway of the National Palace, the Republic’s seat of government. It’s largely empty now that the government has fled to Valencia, save for the Republican officers who remain to coordinate the war effort. A guard grimaces and allows him entry.

He ascends the polished staircase with a sense of purpose.

His contact meets him in a wide, low room draped with national and party flags. Major Ernesto Casado is an officer in the Republican People’s Army, but besides that he is a soldier of Franco’s fifth column. Having forgone the opportunity to join openly with the insurgents at the outbreak of the war, he has decided himself more useful to the fascist cause here, embedded as a double agent with the army of the Republic.

He raises a hand and hails Nick.

“Nicky! Hello!”

Nick smiles and waves back.

“Hey, Ernesto.” He takes in the stacks of papers covering Casado’s desk. “The reds have got you working hard, eh?”

Casado winks.

“Not as hard as they think. A lost shipment of ammunition there…a misplaced order there…every bit brings them closer to defeat.”

Nick whistles.

“Sabotage. Nasty business.”

“Necessary business,” Casado reminds him.
“True enough,” Nick says. “Listen, I need a favor from you. Or rather, my father and his partners do.”

Casado spreads his hands.

“Anything for our friends across the sea. What is it?”

“Well, you’re familiar with the XV International Brigade?” Nick asks.

“Of course.”

“And you’re familiar with the Abraham Lincoln Battalion? New American battalion going into action soon?”

“I’ve heard tell, I think.”

“There are two men—two boys, in that battalion. Their names are Jason Blossom and Forsythe Jones. And they’ve been causing us problems for some time, understand?”

Casado smiles, beginning to catch the boy’s drift.

“Ah, I see.”

“Now, as I said, they’re slated to go into action, soon, on the Madrid front. I assume you could pull a few strings and swing their deployment to a…dangerous sector. And if you wouldn’t mind…make sure they meet some truly fierce resistance from the Nationalist Army. Make sure those two don’t make it back from the front alive. Can you do that?”

Casado’s smile widens.

“I don’t see why not, young Nicholas. I don’t see why not.”
All For One

The Lincoln Battalion arrives in Madrid in the first week of February.

Most of the men melt away into the crowds and cafes and theaters, eager to get a taste of the city’s attractions before they’re sent into combat, very soon.

Jughead stands in the middle of the Gran Via, where they’d marched out to fight the fascists in Carabanchel four months before. Jason stands at his side, tall and taciturn. They have no desire to partake of Madrid’s nightlife. Their minds are singly fixed on the travesty occurring back home in Riverdale. Jason has hardly slept the past few nights; Jughead knows because he hears him turning and sighing in the darkness. He worries and frets, for them, but most of all for his sister. Jughead thinks constantly of Betty, from whom he has heard so little, and whom he feels he has left to the tender mercies of Cliff Blossom.

They start towards the Hotel Florida, hoping to meet up with Toni.

Though most of the guys have gone, Sweet Pea and Fangs stick around. Mostly, Jughead figures, because Sweet Pea doesn’t want to miss the chance to needle Jason about this or that.

“Nice city,” Sweet Pea says.


“Can we get something to drink?” Sweet Pea asks.

“There’s a…bar at the hotel,” Jason sighs.

Two minutes of walking bring them to the hotel lobby. Stepping inside, they are struck by a sense of tragedy within. The place looks decayed since their last visit. The wallpaper is greyer. There is less merriment in the eyes of the patrons. The bar is near empty.

But at least, seated at said bar, with a glass of beer, as always, is Toni Topaz.

“Toni!” Jughead calls out.

“Toni?” Sweet Pea asks, as if confused.

“Toni?” Fangs echoes.

Toni cranes her head around. She smiles at the sight of them, but then her smile falters and sours when she catches sight of the two men with them. She stands briskly and storms over. Sweet Pea and Fangs giggle.

“Oh, great!” Toni exclaims, looking right past Jason and Jughead to the new recruits. “Now we’re gonna beat that bastard Franco, eh?”

“Well, well, well,” Sweet Pea oozes. “It’s nice to see you, too, Miss Topaz.”

“Wait—you know each other?” Jughead asks.

“Do we know each other? Unfortunately, yes.” Then she whirls around to face Fangs. “What the hell are you two doing here?”
“You know, taking a valiant stand for democracy. Waging glorious war against fascism and all that. Same as everyone else,” Fangs says.

Toni rolls her eyes.

“Where’d you find these two goons?” she demands of Jughead.

“They…volunteered for the battalion,” he says meekly. “We had no idea they knew you.”

“’Know’ is an understatement,” she sighs. “These two have plagued my life since I could walk.” Yet, even as she complains, a little smile creeps onto her face. She steps forward and allows Sweet Pea to pull her into a crushing hug. “Ah! Let me go, you idiot!” He does, only for Fangs to pull her into a similarly withering embrace.

Within a few minutes, all five are seated at the bar, enjoying a brittle peace and tepid beer.

“Now, I know you’ve always had a bit of a big head—out of proportion with the rest of your body, of course,” Sweet Pea needles. “But believe me, we did not come all the way from Long Island, across the Atlantic Ocean, and down the fucking Pyrenees just to annoy you.”

Fangs sips his beer. “Though believe me, that is a welcome opportunity.”

Everyone laughs awkwardly.

“They’re…the brothers I wish I never had,” Toni exclaims with a broad smile. "These are the ones I used to run the dart scam with back in New York, remember?"

"You told them about that?” Fangs asked. "Damn, now we can't put it over on them!

“So…” Sweet Pea says. “Toni, you’re uh…friends with Captain Redbeard and Commissar Steinbeck here?”

“Well, Sweet Pea,” Jason sighs. “I see we haven’t learned anything about addressing your superior officers with respect, have we?”

Fangs elbows the redhead gently in the side.

“Relax, comrade. No one else from Brigade is here to see. We won’t embarrass you,”

Jughead can’t help but chuckle a little bit. Then he remembers their great predicament.

“Toni…hey…uh…remember…remember that book you said you’d loan me?” He asks.

She quirks her brow and cocks her head. He gestures frantically with his lips, until she gets the cue to play along.


“Yeah…is it still up in your room?”

“Of course?”

“Why don’t we go up and grab it before I forget?” he suggests.

Unnerved, Toni agrees and stands.
“What, you’re gonna leave me here with these two?” Jason asks.

Fangs and Sweet Pea grin.

“Come on, captain, you know we don’t bite!” Sweet Pea says.

“You don’t shoot, either,” Jason mumbles.

Jughead takes Toni by the hand and hurries her away. He takes her up the stairs and around the corner, and there he stops.

“Toni, listen, those letters you passed on to us, did you read them?”

“What?”

“The letters! Did you read them?”

“Wh—no, of course not.”

“Why?”

“Well, I don’t know. They were yours! What if they were…love letters or something?”

Jughead shakes his head.

“Trust me, they most assuredly were not. But—listen, things have taken a serious turn for the worse. Do you remember everything we told you?”

“About—“

“About Jason’s dad. The…Fraternity. Their plans back home. How our friends were going to expose them?”

She nods, struggling to keep up.

“Right, right, yes, of course.”

“Well—Jason—Cliff Blossom, he found out. He found out that Cher—Jason’s sister, recorded the minutes of his meeting. Everything’s coming apart. It’s bad. My girlfriend…Jason’s sister… they’re…in a lot of danger, and I—“

“Slow down, slow down, okay. You’re telling me—“

“I’m telling you that my friends, and my hometown, and everyone is in a lot of danger. And I—“

“Have you told Jason about this?”

“Of course, but—“

“Well, we should work together. Come on, let’s go down and talk to him.” Jughead’s face turns red. He sucks in great, heaving breaths. “Hey…hey, Jughead…look, it’ll be okay, it’ll be alright. Now, let’s go down and—“

“What about Sweet Pea and Fangs?”

“What about them?” Toni asks, stepping back.
“Do you trust them? With…something like this?”

Toni is silent for a moment. Then she snorts.

“I wouldn’t trust those two to pick up a pound of salami from the corner store. But I’d trust them with my life, okay?”

Jughead sighs. He blinks back tears.

“Okay. Okay. Let’s go down.”

They descend the staircase together, and are hit by another great surprise.

Standing at the bar, next to Sweet Pea, Fangs, and Jason, is a very frazzled, very dirty Veronica Lodge.

Jughead bounds down the steps. He pulls her into a hug. The girl reels but falls into it.

“Wow. It is good to see you!” she exults.

“It’s great to see you, too!” Jughead exclaims. “Where have you been? I knew you were in Spain, but—he looks her over, tattered clothes and dusty face and dirty hands. “What happened…are you okay?”

Veronica makes an odd noise somewhere between a chuckle, a snort, and a sob.

“It is a long, long story, and I will be glad to share it with you, once we resolve the much larger problems facing us.”

“I—I’m sorry?” Sweet Pea asks, standing up. Fangs follows suit. “Can someone explain to us what the hell is going on?”

“Jesus Christ,” Jason moans. “I am so sick of telling this goddamn story.”

Jughead slaps the tall redhead on the shoulder.

“Well, comrade, we’re about to tell it one more time.”

Toni leans over the bar towards her two old friends.

“So, you two came all the way over here to save Spain from fascism. How’d you like to help save the States, too?”

“Woah,” Sweet Pea breathes, as he absorbs the tortuous story. “I’ve got a whole new respect for you, Captain. You really trashed your dad’s factory like that? Man, that’s aces,” he giggles.

“Yes—it was—look, that’s not important right now!” Jason exclaims. “We need to—to—“ he falls silent, like his mid is sputtering.

“Okay, somebody just…lay everything out for me,” Toni asks. “I need to make sure I’m following.”

“Okay,” Jughead says. He moves his fingers about the top of the bar, like he’s sketching a picture.
“Mr. Lodge’s gold ships out from Spain within a few days. Once it gets to the US, Cliff Blossom and all of his buddies can pay for all of the militia and soldiers and guns they need for their coup, and the country’s theirs.”

“Right…right…” Toni urges him to go on.

Veronica coughs.

“Veronica—“ Jughead starts.

“Listen!” Veronica exclaims. “I have spent the past…several months of my life living as a guest of a deranged fascist general and his blood-drenched cronies. I’ve had to smile and laugh and curtsy to the fucking scum that are trampling this country to death, and I’ve had to watch them butcher scores of innocent people, and to top it all off, I very nearly went up in front of one of their damned firing squads. So not only am I *more than eager* for a little payback, I think I know how to get it.”

Everyone leans in.

“Alright,” Jason says. “Go ahead.”

“Look, without that gold, my father’s, your father’s—their plan is dead in the water. So all we have to do is make sure the gold doesn’t get to the US. Better yet, that it *never leaves Spain*. And I happen to know where it is. It was shipped out of several cities, but most of it was in Salamanca. It’s traveling by truck with a military convoy as far south as Madrid. Then it’s going to break off and head south to Malaga, where they’ll stick it on a ship back to New York. But it’s moving *now*. It should be in the vicinity of Madrid *now*.”

“So we destroy it,” Fangs says, shrugging.


“Well we don’t know exactly where it is,” Jughead reminds everyone.

“The fascists…they’re mustering supplies, weaponry, vehicles, to the south of Madrid. For their new offensive. It’d be a perfect place to conceal that shipment. If it’s anywhere, I bet it’s there,” Toni says.

“We have to be *sure* of that,” Jughead says.

“And we *will* be.”

“Alright,” Sweet Pea sits up. He turns to face Jason and Veronica. “Say your daddies get wind that their cash has been blown all to hell. You don’t think they’ll just fold, do you?”

“What else would they do?” Toni asks.


“Wait. *Wait!*” Toni exclaims. “I’ve got an idea!” She whirls around to face Jughead. “Look, you said that…your girlfriend and Jason’s sister have got a tape, right? A tape that puts Blossom and Lodge and the rest of them dead to rights?”

“Yeah,” Jason says. “Except my father *found out* about it, so any notion of getting that tape to the press is dead in the water.”
“Except…maybe you don’t need to get it to the press,” she says. “My grandfather!”

“What about him?”

“He’s a senator. You know that. And you know if anyone would leap at the chance to take down Clifford Blossom, it’s him.”

Jason’s eyes light up. He smiles, despite it all.

“So we get Cheryl and Betty to bring the tape to your grandfather, yes?”

“Yes. It will be risky of course…for them…but I don’t see much of an option besides,” Toni says.

Jughead nods, hands shaking. He slams a fist down onto the bar.

“So here’s our agenda; we blow your fathers’ gold to hell, and we get that tape to Senator Topaz. And we win. Is that it?”

Murmurs of agreement and excitement.

“Good,” Jason says, sharp and confident. “No pasarán.”

“No pasarán!”

Cheryl Blossom awakens to a deceptively cheery morning in the second week of February 1937. The sun shines in through the shattered windows of the shack she and Betty Cooper call home. She can almost hear Sweetwater babbling in the distance. She rubs her head.

Cheryl looks around, and notices that Betty is gone. A sudden wave of panic hits her. She whirls around, certain any minute Sheriff Keller’s deputies or some of her father’s thugs will come barreling through the little house’s brittle walls, to haul her off in chains or worse.

“Betty?” she calls out.

There’s no answer, but then the groaning, rusty door squeaks open. Joaquin DeSantos slips inside. He flashes Cheryl a smile.

“Hey!” he calls. “If you’re uh…worried about Blondie, she’s fine. In fact, she’s waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me…”

“Yeah. Down at the Whyte Wyrm. You’ve got a phone call, actually.”

“A phone call…” Cheryl furrows her brow. Who could be trying to call them? Except—

“Your brother.”

Cheryl can’t help the voluminous and immediate grin.

“Jason!” she exclaims.

“Yeah. From the sound of it, it’s important. Come on. I’ll take you.”

Cheryl rushes out of the door alongside the young serpent. They hurry out to the Whyte Wyrm,
heads low. The Southside has historically been a place avoided by Keller’s men, but Cliff Blossom has pressed the sheriff to up the town’s police presence, in response to the recent escapades of his daughter and Betty Cooper. On the way to the Wyrm, they pass two deputies, lounging in alleyways and on corners, guns at their hips. Mercifully, the men are inattentive.

Inside the bar, Cheryl finds Betty Cooper already hunched over the Wyrm’s ancient telephone. A brilliant smile hangs on her youthful face. She looks happier than Cheryl could ever imagine given the circumstances. Betty looks up briefly to wave, then returns to the call.

“Oh—oh!” She exclaims into the receiver. “Oh, Cheryl’s here! Yeah! Okay! I love you, Juggie! I’ll talk to you soon, okay? Goodbye!” Betty springs to her feet. Cheryl walks over. She’s still a little foggy from sleep. “Hey. It’s for you, now,” Betty chirps.

Cheryl takes the phone.

“Cher?” comes the voice. It’s distorted, tinny, and distant, but it’s unmistakable. Happy tears spring to her eyes.

“Jason!” she cries out.

“Thank God you’re okay,” he sighs.

“Jason, I’m sorry, we screwed up, it—“

“No, you didn’t screw up, okay? You did more than anyone could have expected from you. And we’re not through, yet, okay. We’re gonna fix this.”

“Dad—he found out about the recording. I can’t go home again. God, Keller’s boys—the silvershirts...they're looking for us!"

“It’s okay, we have a plan. Where going to do our part here, but we need you to do yours, there.”

“You have a plan?” she pauses for a moment. “A good plan?” she questions, skeptical.

“A…solid plan,” he promises. “Listen, do you know Senator Topaz?”

She thinks for a moment. The name is familiar. Topaz! Yes, Thomas Topaz, the Senator from New York. His ancestors had suffered the Sweetwater Massacre at the hands of her ancestor, the illustrious Colonel Barnabas Blossom. No love lost between Topaz and Blossom.

“Yes, I know him.”

“Good, good. Listen; that tape. You still have it?”

“Yes, of course I do. Daddy can pry this tape out of my cold dead hands.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“You and Betty—you’ve got to take it to him. You’ve got to hand it over to him and only him, understand?”

“What, why? Why would we trust him to—“

“We wouldn’t trust him, not as Blossoms. But we’d sure as hell trust him to hate our father, wouldn’t we?”

“He—his granddaughter’s a friend of ours, okay? She’s nice, you’d like her, but—look, there’s no time to talk about it now. You’ve go to do it, okay? And we’ll do our part, here. Jughead and I—we’re going to make sure their filthy fucking money never gets out of Spain.”

“Alright. Alright. You can count on us, as long as we can count on you.”

“Always could. Always will.”

Cheryl blinks back her tears, joyful and fearful.

“I love you, JJ.”

“I love you, too. Good luck. I’ll see you again, soon.”

She smiles thinly.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”
"I still don't know about this plan," Jason says. He rubs his chin.

Jughead shrugs.

"Do you have a better one?"

He sighs and bites his lip.

"No." Jason’s eyes swing around. He fixes his gaze on Veronica, who stands stock-still. “But do you really think we can pass her off as a fascist officer? I mean to say…couldn’t we just find some Spaniard who…looks the part?”

"Well, I’d rather involve as few people as possible in this, wouldn’t you? And people we trust, at that."

"Yeah. Fine. I guess so."

Two field uniforms lie on the table, a little dusty and a little soiled. Authentic. One sports the insignia of a fascist sergeant, the other of a lieutenant. Above the lieutenant’s uniform is a set of false facial hair—a sharp little beard and a mustache.

“I guess that you didn’t have time to find ones in our sizes?” Veronica asks.

“Veronica…” Jason begins. “With all due respect, I’m not sure they make uniforms in your size. Now, come on, go try these on.”

Jughead and Veronica dutifully pick up the uniforms. They disappear into the bathroom. Jason listens to the scuffling and the cursing as they stuff themselves into the ill-fitting clothes. The uniforms are taken from the corpses of fascist soldiers killed on the field, and procured by Jason through a lot of haggling and lying to senior Republican officers. They were about the crispest ones he could find, most being marred with bullet holes or bloodstains.

The two soon-to-be spies emerge.

Jughead’s fits okay, though it bunches up at the ankles and the waist. He tugs the stiff collar.

The man who wore Veronica’s uniform must have been nearly a foot taller than her. It droops from her wrists and her hips and shoulders. She glowers back at Jason, and looks on the verge of disappearing into the mess of khaki fabric. The false beard and mustache look absurd on her, but one might imagine that in the dark and with a bit of half-decent acting, she could almost pass for a real fascist soldier.

“I’m going to need some clothespins if you don’t want me to look like a little kid playing soldier in daddy’s uniform,” she snaps.

Jughead chuckles. She shoots him a look.

“Clothespins,” Jason mumbles. “Right. We can swing that.”

“So where are you sending us, exactly?” Jughead asks.

“Come here,” Jason beckons them over. He unfurls a topographical map of Madrid and its
environs. Roads and hills and other landmarks of note are singled out in sharp red pen. “See, we’re here,” Jason says, pointing to the south of Madrid. His two companions nod. He drags a finger southward, stopping a few miles beneath the city, just within a low-lying valley. Someone’s outlined a great red circle there. “Here’s the largest concentration of fascist arm and supply shipments that we know of. If the money’s anywhere it’s going to be here.”

“So you want us to just waltz in and…ask around?” Veronica inquires.

Jason shrugs.

“More or less. Look, try to avoid any ranking officers, okay? Talk to enlisted men. Conscripts. Ask them about any new shipments that have come in, lately. From…Salamanca in particular you said, right? In all likelihood it’ll be disguised as a load of ammunition or rifles or something, so remember that.”

Jughead nods.

“And if—when we do find it?” Veronica asks.

“Then just hightail it back here, and we’ll figure out the rest.”

“What if we get caught?” Jughead asks.

Jason watches him with tired, glazed eyes.

“Please don’t do that.”

“We get guns, right?” Veronica asks.

“What? Yes, of course. You’re supposed to be fascist officers, you need guns,” Jason says. Then he pauses, purses his lips, and says: “alright, let’s hear it.”

Veronica’s face is questioning.

“Hear what?”

“Come on. Your ‘fascist lieutenant’ voice.”

Veronica sighs. She takes a deep breath. She clears her throat. She squares her shoulders. She flexes her fists.

“Preparaos a morir, perros rojos!” she shouts, with a deepened voice, and with impressive conviction and fury. “No hay ningun maldito Bolchevique que puede enfrentarse contra el el gran ejercito Nacional del Generalísimo Franco! Viva Franco! Arriba España!”

“Woah,” Jughead mutters.

“Okay…that…that was pretty keen, actually,” Jason says. “And…it’ll be dark, so…I can’t say but… good luck.”

“And me?” Jughead asks.

“What about you?”

“Well…what about my fascist officer voice?”
“You don’t…speak Spanish,” Jason says. “Just keep your mouth shut and mumble your way through it.”

Jughead nods.

“Right.”

“And take those uniforms off. Don’t put them back on until you get to the insurgent lines, or else some trigger-happy militiaman will think you’re actual fascists and shoot you both dead.”

An hour later finds Veronica and Jughead wandering down the Andalusia road south, out of Madrid. Each totes a heavy leather bag containing their respective uniform. They pass scattered militia patrols, growing less frequent as the approach no-man’s-land, and beyond that, the fascist lines.

The sun begins to sink out of the sky.

“You scared?” Veronica asks.

“Hell yes, I’m scared.”

They round a bend in the dusty road. A group of men hovers near the turn. They lift up their heads to appraise the two travelers. The head of the little patrol raises a clenched fist salute and slings his rifle over his back.

“Oye!” he calls out. “You’re heading right for fascist territory! Just a mile or two further!” he warns.

“We know,” Veronica answers.

They pass the group of militiamen, who watch them with curious expressions.

They continue down the road. After another twenty minutes of walking, Veronica motions for them to stop.

“What?” Jughead asks.

“I haven’t seen any Republican militia in a while. We’re probably close. Let’s change.”

They find a suitably large boulder. Veronica ducks behind it first, and emerges in her fascist uniform, pinned strategically back in a half-dozen places to minimize sagging. The fake beard sags on her chin, but Jughead squints and it almost looks real.

Jughead summarily slips into his own uniform.

They resume their trek down the road, subconsciously adopting a more measured, mechanical way to their gait. They don’t speak.

It’s another twenty minutes before they come across the soldiers. They emerge out of the gathering evening darkness. One raises his hand to greet them. As they come into view it’s clear they aren’t Republican troops. Indeed, they wear the off-green, rugged uniforms of Franco’s Legion.

“Alto!” one of the fascist troops calls. “Arriba España!”

“Arriba España!” Veronica cries back in her gruff, affected tone. Jughead hangs back, silent.
The fascist patrol moves forward to meet them.

“Who are you?” the first fascist legionary demands.

Veronica squares her shoulders, struggling to look as large as she can. Jughead looms behind her. Veronica sets her jaw firm.

“Lieutenant Ausencio Rosales,” she booms. The fake mustache and beard tickle her chin. She holds back a sneeze. “Sergeant Joel Barrero,” she continues, gesturing to Jughead, who nods.

“Corporal Pablo Martinez,” the legionary replies. Veronica breathes a sigh of relief that the man doesn’t ‘outrank’ her. He stands up straighter, and his face softens in the face of a ‘superior officer’.

One of the fascists spits.

Corporal Martinez looks over the much-shorter Lieutenant Rosales, and the taciturn Sergeant Barrero behind him. He squints. Veronica hopes to god it’s only the darkness, and not suspicion.

“Can we help you, Lieutenant?” one of the fascists asks.

“We seem to have gotten ourselves turned about,” Jughead says in surprisingly good Spanish.

“Quiet, sergeant!” Veronica admonishes. Miffed, he falls silent. “But…he’s right,” she admits. “The sergeant and I are a bit turned around. We were meant to inspect a shipment…that just came in from Salamanca.”

“Shipment of what?” the corporal asks.

“Is there more than one shipment recently in from Salamanca? Because, with all due respect, corporal, that sounded a bit like an enlisted man questioning an officer,” Veronica says flatly.

The corporal’s face pales. He turns around to confer with his men. They chatter softly for a moment. Then he turns again.

“We do have a shipment in from Salamanca, as a matter of fact. It came in two days ago, I think. Ammunition. Is that what you’re looking for?”

“Could be,” Veronica says.

The corporal nods.

“We’ll show you there,”

Jughead and Veronica step back and allow the fascist patrol to lead them deeper into insurgent territory. Veronica’s heart thums in her chest. She tries to keep to the shadows, out of the soldiers’ direct line of sight, lest they discover the ruse. Jughead, whose silence must surely have aroused some suspicion by now, hovers on the fringes.

They move slowly. The corporal talks and jokes with his men.

Jughead tries to murmur something in English.

“Shut up!” Veronica hisses.

Mercifully, the fascists don’t hear.
They climb down a dip in the earth, into a little valley.

The bosom of the valley is filled with trucks and tents and even a few tanks. It’s an arms depot, just as Jason had said. They scale the gently sloping walls of the valley and descend into the camp.

“This way!” the corporal urges.

They pick their way through the camp. Fascist soldiers busy themselves loading or unloading weaponry and materiel. They stand up tall, offer snappy fascist salutes, and nod as the visitors pass through.

Veronica passes a shining new German panzer. Its guns glisten in the moonlight. A few German crewmen swarm over the vehicle’s hull, chattering in their language.

*So much for non-intervention.*

The corporal leads them to a row of trucks parked near the southwestern edge of the valley.

“Is this it?” Veronica inquires.

“Ay,” the corporal informs them. “This is it. Arrived two days back, like I said.”

The beds of the trucks are covered in canvas. Veronica tentatively lifts the corner.

“I’ll check it out,” she says. And with that, she hops into the lorry, leaving Jughead outside with the fascist soldiers. The inside of the truck is stacked top to bottom with heavy wooden crates, stamped with the word **FUSILES.** Crates of rifles. Ostensibly at least. She grimaces and creeps deeper into the truck. Veronica jerks at the lid of one of the boxes. It doesn’t budge. Nailed shut.

She plucks the pistol from her hip. Leveraging the lid of the crate with one foot, and forcing the barrel of the gun underneath a protruding nail, she slowly pulls the bolt out of its place. One corner of the lid is loosened. She lifts it. The crate’s contents gleam. Not rifles. **Gold.** She resists the cry of victory boiling up in her throat. She’s *done* it. She very nearly calls out for Jughead, but remembers in time to keep quiet.

Veronica pulls back the canvas sheet and hops out of the truck.

She finds Jughead surrounded by the fascist soldiers, mumbling his way through conversation in a language he hardly understands.

One of the legionaries rattles off a series of tongue-tying sentences in Spanish. Jughead, entirely uncomprehending, feebly murmurs: “*bueno, bueno.*”

“Everything’s in order,” Veronica snaps.

The corporal stands up straight.

“Is that so, *lieutenant*?”

Veronica grabs Jughead softly by the arm and pulls him back.

“We were speaking with the sergeant a little,” one of the fascist legionaries says. “He’s not all that talkative. And when he is…”

Veronica’s throat closes up. Her hand inches towards the pistol at her hip.
“Yeah, he gets tongue-tied easy,” she says.

The corporal’s men step closer. The camp at large straightens up and takes notice.

“Almost as if he wasn’t even Spanish…” the corporal hisses. He plucks his rifle from his shoulder. The bayonet glimmers in the moonlight.

“Well…” Veronica laughs, terrified. “He’s no less Spanish than those German tankmen you’ve got over there,” she points over their heads, to the German engineers working on the panzer across the camp. The corporal turns his head automatically. His men follow suit. What she does next she does without thinking. She pulls her pistol free, levels it at the distracted corporal, and shoots him dead.

“Christ!” Jughead cries.

“Run!” Veronica cries. The two turn tail and flee.

The camp comes alive. Men leap into action. The fallen corporal’s soldiers raise their rifles and fire after the fleeing pair of spies.

“Rojos!” they cry. “Alto! Alto!”

Veronica grabs Jughead by the wrist and carries him along. They rush through the camp. Every fascist trooper on hand snatches up his gun and follows close on their heels. A bullet snaps past Veronica’s head.

“Alto! Alto!”

“Come on!” Veronica yells. “We have to get back to the Republican line—shit!” she cries, as another hail of bullets whips over them. They scramble up the slopes of the valley and out of the camp. Rocks and dust tumble behind them, billowing into the faces of their pursuers.

They spring into a copse of olive trees. Veronica flattens herself against a tree trunk, pulling Jughead down with her.

“Shit…shit…shit…” Jughead chants. “They’re gonna…”

“Come on,” Veronica says one more time. She pulls him to his feet and drags him forward.


They make a dash for the Republican lines. No-man’s-land is porous. It’s difficult to tell where insurgent-controlled territory ends and Republican-held territory begins. It’s doubly difficult in the darkness of night. Eddies of dust and dirt swirl through the lonesome Spanish country. Thick, heavy clouds obscure the horizon and the starlight. The pair stumbles in a vaguely northward direction.

Fascist patrols prowl the dusty fields and sierras. They walk all night, leaping into gullies and ditches at the sight of dim shadows or the sound of murmuring voices. At least twice, they very nearly approach the hopeful little lights of campfires, only to realize in the nick of time that the soldiers set about singing are fascists.

Just before dawn, they round a little hill.

“I’m fucking exhausted…” Jughead moans. “I…”

“I think we’re almost there,” Veronica replies.
“I—“

“Alto! Fascistas!”

A section of Republican militia emerges from the morning mists, rifles primed, bayonets glittering. In a moment of sheer terror, Veronica remembers they’re still wearing the insurgent uniforms.

“Don’t shoot!” she cries. She rips off her fake beard and throws it to the ground. “Don’t shoot! We’re not fascists!” She and Jughead throw up their hands. The militiamen advance. “We’re not fascists!”

“On the ground!” one of them shouts. “On the ground!”

Veronica and Jughead duly comply.

The militia surrounds them. Bayonets smile in their faces.

“Put your damn rifles away!” Jughead shouts. “We’re not fascists!”

“We’re not fascists!” Veronica tries one more time.

“So then why are you in fascist uniforms?”

Veronica grimaces.

"If you don’t shoot us, maybe we’ll tell you!”

Captain Jason Blossom sits in the lobby of the Hotel Florida, next to Toni Topaz, Fangs Fogarty, and Sweet Pea. Their beer has long since run dry, but they’re all far too high strung to drink, anyway. Jason drums his fingers on the countertop.

“So…” Sweet Pea drawls. “Your plan hinges on a five-foot even woman passing as a fascist officer?”

“It was the best we could do at moment’s notice,” Jason snaps.

“Right, right.”

Earlier in the day, just after he’d dispatched Veronica and Jughead on their mission, an emissary had come by from General Gal, commander of the XV International Brigade, both to ask where Commissar Jones was, and to inform him that the Lincoln Battalion was to move into positions on the front line within two days.

“Hey! Look who’s back!”

“Ah, shit,” Jason moans.

Nick St. Clair, as undesired as always, approaches. He glides across the room to the little group and takes a seat in their midst, as if it had been set aside for him.

“And this is…” Fangs inquires.

“Nicholas St. Clair,” Toni seethes. “All-around bastard.”

“Aw, come on, sweetheart. I thought we were friends.”
“You think a lot of things, Nick, and most of them are wrong,”

“You think a lot of things, Nick, and most of them are wrong,” Fangs says.

“Sorry, buddy. No idea who you are, but my friends and I were right in the middle of a conversation,” Fangs says.

“Sorry, buddy. No idea who you are, but my friends and I were right in the middle of a conversation,” Fangs says.

“Sorry, friend. I don’t think we’ve been introduced?” Nick says.

“I’m Fangs and this is Sweet Pea,” he says flatly.

“And you are…”

“I’m Fangs and this is Sweet Pea,” he says flatly.

“International Brigades.”

“International Brigades.”

“Right. Of course,” Nick says, smiling. “You know, General Franco’s just launched another offensive. That ought to keep you boys busy for a little while.”

“Right. Of course,” Nick says, smiling. “You know, General Franco’s just launched another offensive. That ought to keep you boys busy for a little while.”

“Oh? And who are you rooting for?” Sweet Pea asks.

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“I don’t take sides,” he smiles.

“I don’t take sides,” he smiles.

“Nick, you’re about as impartial in this war as Hitler and Mussolini,” Toni snaps.

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The doors of the Hotel Florida swing open. Veronica and Jughead stumble into the building, framed in the light of a rising sun.

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Jason throws his head back and breathes a sigh of relief.

“Coming to Spain was your idea. My blood is on your hands, regardless.”

“Coming to Spain was your idea. My blood is on your hands, regardless.”

Jason smiles and slaps him on the shoulder.

“Woah. Ronnie?”

“Woah. Ronnie?”

Nick stands, a great smile on his face.

“Oh God,” Veronica groans. “As if this trip could have gotten any worse!”

“Oh God,” Veronica groans. “As if this trip could have gotten any worse!”

“Does everyone in Madrid know each another?” Jason asks.

“Does everyone in Madrid know each another?” Jason asks.

Nick takes a step towards Veronica.

“Nick, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Nick, what the hell are you doing here?”

“Providing a neutral and balanced coverage of the Spanish Civil War.”

“Providing a neutral and balanced coverage of the Spanish Civil War.”

Veronica’s fatigue dissipates.

Veronica’s fatigue dissipates.

“Oh, give me a damned break.”

“Oh, give me a damned break.”

“Look, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you, Ronnie, and I don’t wanna fight. So I’ll…let you mingle with your new friends, and we can catch up later, yeah?” Before she can respond, he leaves.

“Look, it’s been a while since I’ve seen you, Ronnie, and I don’t wanna fight. So I’ll…let you mingle with your new friends, and we can catch up later, yeah?” Before she can respond, he leaves.

Except—he doesn’t exactly leave, but melts off into the crowd. He hovers on the fringes of the room, ears open, eyes ever-cast towards the little group at the bar.
“So, you know him, too?” Jughead asks, wiping a streak of grime from his forehead.

Veronica sighs.

“New York social scene. Yeah, I know him.”

“Piece of work, huh?” Toni mumbles.

“Yeah. That’s a way to put it.”

“Alright, forget Nick,” Jason says. “You are two alive and not missing any pieces. That’s good. Was the mission a success?”

“Do you mean by that; ‘did we pinpoint the shipment of my father’s gold’? Because if so, then yes we did. Granted, we were almost shot while doing it—once by the fascists, once by our side—but, still.”

“You were almost shot? Wh—“

“Doesn’t matter,” Jughead says. “The point is, we know where it is.”

“Of course, it won’t stay there for long. It’s slated to be in Málaga within a few days, and a day after that it’ll be on a ship to New York. So we have to act now.”

Jason nods.

“Where?”


Jason nods.

“Good, good. You know, we’re—the Lincoln Battalion’s moving into positions south of Madrid in two days. On the Jarama River. We’re supposed to help blunt one of the wings of Franco’s offensive on the Valencia Road. So what I’m thinking…” Jason snatches up a napkin from the bar. “Someone give me a pen.” Fangs produces one and hands it off to him. Jason quickly sketches out a rough map of Madrid and the surrounding countryside. He jabs the pen into the spot that marks the Jarama Valley. Then a rough half-moon shape, just beyond the curve of the Jarama River. “We’re supposed to be deployed here,” he says.

“That’s—the arms depot, the camp, is right there,” Veronica says, pointing to a spot just across the lines from the Lincoln Battalion’s future position.

Jughead nods.

“Okay…here’s my line of thinking…” Jason says. “If I can swing our deployment to the section of the front just across the lines from that camp, then when we go on the offensive, I can personally make sure that arms depot—and the money—is knocked out. The Dimitrov Battalion is supposed to be assigned to that sector of the line, but maybe I can convince General Gal to give it to us, instead.”

“Okay…okay…great,” Toni exclaims. “So you take the fascists by surprise and hit the gold with a goddamned artillery shell or something?”

“Sounds fun,” Sweet Pea says with a manic grin.
Jughead allows himself a smile.

“It *does* sound fun.”

Late that night, Jason Blossom and Jughead Jones go to meet with General Gal in a little house just outside Madrid, not far from the front lines.

Gal is a tall, willowy Hungarian with a five o’clock shadow and a pair of wild, eager eyes. He lifts his head as the two boys step into his command post. Two guards usher them in.

“And you are…”


Gal nods.

“Yes. Of course.” He stands. “Why are you here? You’re slated to take up positions tomorrow.”

“And we will. But we need to talk to you, general.”

Gal leans back.

“About what?”

“The deployment of the Lincoln Battalion.”

“The…deployment? You have a problem with your deployment, commissar?” Gal demands, eyeing Jughead, who resists the urge to shrink away.

“Not…exactly,” Jason says.

“Stop answering for one another,” Gal snaps. “It’s…odd.”

Jughead points to the detailed map of the front tacked up to the wall behind Gal. The general turns around. Jughead walks up to the map. He scans the ragged countryside south of Madrid. Little flags pinned to the map denote the positions of the opposing armies. He finds the arms depot he and Veronica infiltrated two nights before. “Who’s deployed, here? I mean…who’s slated to advance on this fascist depot in two days time?”

“The Dimitrov Battalion,” Gal says firmly.

“Right. Right,” Jughead says.

“We were hoping…the Lincoln Battalion could be assigned that position, instead,” Jason explains.

Gal squints.

“Why? It’s a heavily fortified position. Why do *you* want the responsibility of its investment?”

Jason breathes. “You see these hills, here?” he points to the ridges marked out on the map. “Whatever Republican unit is assigned that position is going to have advance over them. Well…my men are well trained in fighting through hills and gullies. And I’ve trained them well.”

It’s a lame explanation. Gal snorts. Jason’s heart sinks. If they’re denied this position, all may be
lost. He *could* just tell Gal the truth of it, but he really *shouldn’t*. He wants to keep as tight a lid on everything as possible. God forbid some insurgent saboteur get wind that he’s planning to destroy a couple million dollars’ worth of fascist gold reserves.

“That’s it?” Gal asks.

“There’s…something, more,” Jughead starts. Jason cranes his head around, hoping his friend isn’t on the verge of saying something counterproductive. “This war is about public opinion, right? Not just in Spain, but abroad? Think about it; the democratic countries are starving the Republic of arms while Germany and Italy throw money and weapons to Franco’s fascists. We’ve got to get people in France, Britain, and America, to pressure their governments to lift the embargo on Spain. Let’s say an American battalion takes a leading position in this counter-attack. Wouldn’t that do wonders for public perception back in the states?” Jughead asks.

Jason smiles. It’s a good angle.

Gal squints again. He cocks his head and plants his fists on his hips. He takes a step towards the two boys.

“You make a decent point,” Gal concedes. He slides back behind his desk, broadening his shoulders and assuming a position of command befitting a general. He swings his eyes back to Jason. “If it means *that* much to you, captain. Then I’ll reassign the Lincoln Battalion to the position we’ve just discussed.”

Jason beams. He resists the urge to pull Jughead into a hug.

“Thank you, general.”
Cheryl sits, cross-legged, in a little copse of trees just east of Sweetwater River. She breathes in slowly, and then pushes the air out through her nose again. A little leather haversack sits by her side on the pine needles. She pats it furtively. The tape is still in there. Good. There’s no reason why it wouldn’t be, but she needs to be damned sure.

She girds herself for battle. This is her hour. Well, their hour, technically.

“Hey. What are you doing?” comes the voice of Betty Cooper. Cheryl cracks one eye open. She looks over her shoulder. The blonde hovers in the shadow of a big maple tree.

“I’m preparing myself. Mentally,” Cheryl informs her.

“Okay…but…we probably ought to get going, right? We’re…against the clock here.”

“I need to be in the proper frame of mind.”

Cheryl stands. She sighs. Turns around. Betty clasps her hands at her waist and shifts anxiously from foot to foot. Cheryl slings the haversack over her shoulder. She claps Betty on the arm.

They turn and leave the Sweetwater River at their backs.

Kevin and Archie, enjoying considerably more freedom of movement than the two fugitives, have done a bit of research for them. Senator Thomas Topaz lives in the south of New York State, not so far from the city. In a town called Midvale. His address is a matter of public knowledge. Now the only thing is to get there.

They skirt around the edges of Riverdale. The town is with each day falling further into the black of despotism. Keller’s deputized twenty men total in the past few weeks, at Cliff’s behest. The old man himself is driven half mad by the sheriff’s inability to find his missing daughter. The deputies swagger about town with pistols on their hips, clacking jackboots on the pavement and demanding free drinks. The silvershirts stick close to Thornhill, though on occasion they leak into the town to terrorize Riverdale’s citizenry and do a poor impression of Hitler’s stormtroopers.

So they avoid the town. They move through the forests and along the abandoned, rusting factories and workshops on its edges. They creep through the shadows of crumbling industry and forsaken future.

On the south road that leads out of town, parallel to the river, a little red car sits idle near a bank of trees. Leaf-laden branches hang over the trunk and the windshield, obscuring it from the casual eye.

Cheryl and Betty approach tentatively. It’ll be dusk, soon. Two figures step out from behind the trees. Joaquin DeSantos comes first, followed by Kevin Keller and then by Archie Andrews.

“I went through hell to get ahold of this car,” Joaquin says. He smacks the hood. The entire structure seems to rattle.

“How far from here to Midvale?” Betty asks.

“About sixty miles, we found out,” Kevin says. “Senator Topaz lives on the outskirts of town, though, so it ought to be a little less. You know, with luck.”
Betty nods.

“Which one of you is driving?”

“I uh… I don’t know how,” Betty admits.

Joaquin’s eyes swing to Cheryl. The redhead’s eyes flash. She turns her head up at the sky, as if done with these mortal shenanigans. When she comes back to earth, she crunches her lips together and says: “I don’t know, either.” She’s loath to admit it. “I mean… I haven’t had time to learn, yet.”

Joaquin whistles. He crosses his arm. The leather of his jacket crinkles.

“Well no one sure as hell ever taught me to drive. I couldn’t afford driving lessons, much less a car.”

Archie steps forward, sheepishly.

“I can drive,” he says softly.

“Of course you can,” Cheryl drawls. “Will you?”

He looks down at his feet. He kicks at the dust. He chews his lip. His friends watch him, expectantly.

“My dad won’t know where I went.”

“He’s not supposed to know, Archie,” Cheryl snaps. “No one is.”

“It’ll take a day, at most,” Kevin offers.

“Right, a day,” Archie echoes. He takes a step forward, towards nothing in particular. It’s a symbolic step. “Okay, I’ll do it,” he says.

Betty rushes forward and hugs him. He smiles meekly.

The two girls, along with Archie, pile into the red car. Joaquin slaps his hand onto the roof. “Hey, I’ll come along.”

“Why?”

He shrugs.

“Dunno. Bored.”

Kevin stands in the road. He sighs.

“Guess I’ll stay here?”

“Try to keep your dad’s guys off of our backs,” Betty requests.

“Right. Yeah. Whatever’s in my power,” he says.

“Thanks.”

Archie fiddles with the car’s steering wheel. The engine hums and then roars and then the wheels spin to life. They start off down the road, leaving a lonely Kevin Keller in a cloud of dust. The sun sinks down behind him.
“Good luck,” Kevin says to no one and nothing. He turns around and starts back towards town.

As he emerges from the sparse woods at the turnpike leading back into Riverdale, he’s struck by a supreme discomfort. He looks over his shoulder. There’s no one there. He steps forward. He turns around again. There’s someone there.

Three men in silver shirts bar his path.

“Where you coming back from, kid?” inquires the silver shirted militiaman at the head of the pack.

Kevin considers running. Pistols gleam at the men’s hips. One has a rifle over his shoulder. They leer at him.

“Just out for a walk. Nice night, you know,” he says, surprised at his own cool.

The silvershirts grin. Their leader reaches out for him. He stumbles back. While he frets, two of the men step around on either side of him. Before he can make any effort at escape, he’s surrounded.

“A walk, huh? Not a drive, like your friends?”

Oh, shit.

“What the hell are you guys talking about?” Kevin demands.

“I sure hope you didn’t know where Miss Cooper and Miss Blossom were all this while. Mr. Blossom is just heartbroken about his daughter up and running out on him, you know.”

Kevin sneers. He stands his ground. These guys don’t have any official authority, he reminds himself. They’re just a gang of fascist thugs Clifford’s called in from out of town as personal security.

“Look, my father’s the sheriff,” he says. “I suggest you let me get back into town, because I know damn well you don’t have any right to harass me like this.”

The head silvershirt reaches into his pocket. He retrieves something. It’s a slip of paper. He thrusts it into Kevin’s hands. The boy’s heart sinks. Even without reading it, he recognizes the bit of ordinance proclaiming this man a sheriff’s deputy.

“Actually, kid, we do.”

One of the silvershirts grabs him by the shoulders. Fear coils up in his gut.

“Now, we suggest you tell us exactly where your friends got off to, and why,” one of them hisses.

“Drop dead!”

A fist closes around his collar.

“Drop dead, huh?”

The car cruises through the back roads of upstate New York, heading due south. Joaquin drives, Cheryl sits shotgun, and Betty crams into the backseat alongside Archie’s considerable bulk.

“God, how long has this been?” Cheryl moans. She flings her haversack into her lap and pats it, verifying the tape’s presence.
“Dunno. Four, five hours?” Joaquin mutters. Outside, night falls and the trees lining the road melt into a mass of solid black and grey. The road ahead is illuminated only so far as the feeble headlights can reach. Archie’s fallen asleep, head thrown back over the backseat, snoring intermittently.

“How am I supposed to do that?” Betty demands.

“I don’t know! Figure something out!”

She halfheartedly smacks Archie in the chest. He neither wakes nor stops snoring.

“Probably we’re going to have to stop for gas, soon,” Joaquin says.

“Oh. Right. Of course we are,” Cheryl snaps. “How far to Midvale?”

“Well, considering I haven’t seen a road sign in about an hour, I haven’t the slightest idea,” he responds.

Another moan of discontent from Cheryl.

“God, this is unbearable!”

“Cheryl, you know, your complaining isn’t making this ride any more enjoyable,” Betty says.

“Would you prefer I just suffer in silence?”

“Yes!” reply Joaquin and Betty, in unison.

Cheryl crosses her arms, stares out through the windshield, and mutters heatedly to herself.

They round a bend. A low, hulking building looms up in their path. They speed closer. It’s a gas station.

“Oh, thank God,” Joaquin sighs.

The building is old and decrepit. The simple words ‘GAS’ and ‘FOOD’ have been all but effaced by the wind and rain. Loose shingles beat against each other in the breeze.

“I hope they’re open,” Betty says.

They pull in. Joaquin steps out. Cheryl stumbles after him, just glad to be on her feet again. Betty awakens Archie. In a moment, all four have exited the car.

“Hello?” Archie cries.

There’s no response.

Joaquin swaggers over to one of the pumps.

“Hello?” Betty yells.

Still no answer.

The little building at the center of the gas station sits silent. Joaquin turns in a slow circle.
“Well, shit.”

“Back in the car, then?” Betty asks.

Then, mercifully, a door to the building swings open. An old man, craggy-faced and horny-handed, ambles out with a rag in his hands.

“Look at that, eh?” he cries. “Customers!”

The kids can’t help but smile in relief.

“You have gas?” Archie asks.

“That’s all we’ve got,” the old man says with a crooked smile.

“Well, fill us up then, old-timer,” Joaquin requests.

They lean back against the car while the old man preps the pump. He’s just finishing when another pair of headlights floods the road. Everyone stands at attention.

“Just someone else looking for gas, probably,” Archie offers. Cheryl shrinks back from the headlights.

A truck sweeps into view. It banks, turns, and glides into the gas station parking lot. The old man squints at the new arrivals. Four men leap out. The kids shrink back in terror.

They're silvershirts.

“Run!” Betty cries.

The old man cocks his head, uncomprehending. Then one of the silvershirts fires his pistol and the old man falls down dead with a bullet in his gut.

The four survivors turn and flee. They dash into the woods, away from the gas station. With a hoot and a holler, the silvershirts follow on their heels. Cheryl crunches twigs and leaves under foot. Without even stopping, she rips off her shoes, throws them aside, and hastens her flight. Joaquin is in the lead, easily bounding through the dark forest with practiced grace. Archie races alongside him, fast and strong in the legs. Betty lags just behind, tripping over branches and stones.

“Betty, come on!” Cheryl urges.

The wood comes alive with the brilliant glare of flashlights and the cries of men as the silvershirts plunge into the forest after them. There’s a splitting crack. At first, Cheryl thinks someone’s stepped on a particularly noisy twig. Then she realizes it was the report of a rifle. There’s another crack, and a bullet buries itself in a tree to her left.

She charges on, her haversack with the all-important recording slapping against her hip.

Betty stumbles. Cheryl grips her by the wrist and carries her along. Both girls gasp in exhaustion, kept in action by sheer terror and determination.

“Stop running!” one of their pursuers cries.

“Stop chasing!” Cheryl shouts back.

Another bullet.
Ahead of them, Archie and Joaquin have almost vanished into the murk. They dash through a clearing, the bobbing flashlights burning at their backs.

Twigs stop snapping. The shouts cease. Then three rifles fire at once. Betty falls down and cries out. Cheryl whirls around. The blonde has crumpled to earth, whimpering and clutching her thigh. With gathering horror, Cheryl realizes she’s caught a bullet in the leg.

“Ow…ow…ow…” Betty sobs.

Cheryl bites her lip.

“Betty, come on, it’s not that bad. Get up, we have to go!” She doesn’t know how bad it is, of course, but they do have to go.

Joaquin and Archie, realizing their companions are no longer at their heels, turn around and sprint back towards them.

“No!” Betty cries, grimacing in pain. “Go! Go!”

“We’re not leaving you, you stupid—“ Cheryl begins. The silvershirts storm closer.

“You have to go!” Betty hisses. “Believe me! Leave me here!”

“Betty, shut the hell up an—“

Archie and Joaquin reach them. Archie gasps in horror at the sight of the blood pooling around his friend’s leg. He kneels down.

“Archie, don’t!” Betty snaps.

“Betty, oh my God, you’re hit!”

“You all have to go!” Betty repeats.

“She’s right,” Joaquin hisses.

“Are you out of your damned mind?” Archie demands, he spins around and looks on the verge of clocking the young serpent.

“She’s right,” Joaquin repeats. “Do you want to throw away your shot at getting that tape to the world? We have to go, now!”

The silvershirts emerge from the murk. Dark shadows become jubilant faces and wicked smiles.

Cheryl sucks in a deep breath. She stands. Maybe they won’t hurt Betty. And anyway, it’s a hideous sacrifice, but she is right. They can’t throw away this chance.

“She’s right,” Cheryl finally says. “Archie, come on. She’ll be okay. She doesn’t have anything to give them, anyway. They won’t hurt her.”

“Bullshit! I’m not leaving her!” Archie insists.

“Archie, damn it!” Betty snaps. “If you don’t go right now I am never speaking to you again!”

“But—“
“They’re here!” Joaquin hisses. He turns on his heel to flee. He grabs Cheryl by the wrist and pulls her to her feet. They take off, leaving Betty and Archie behind them.

“Archie, goddammit, go!” Betty shouts once more.

“No!”

Even if he could muster the fortitude to leave her, it’s too late. The silvershirts are upon them. Fists and boots crash down upon them.

“Where is it?” one of the silvershirt lieutenants shrieks. He grabs Betty by the wrist and yanks her to her feet. She cries out in pain. The bullet has bored its way deep into her thigh. Blood pours down her leg and soaks into the soles of her shoe. “Where’s the tape you little bitch?”

Somewhere, she finds the reserves of courage to sneer and say: “what tape?”

The silvershirt strikes her in the chest. She dry heaves as the air spills out of her lungs.

To her left, Archie is thrown to the ground, kicked and punched and beaten with the stocks of rifles.

“Grab them,” one of the fascists snaps. “We’ll see how long it takes ’em to squeal.”
The Lincoln Battalion arrives at its new positions before the crack of dawn. There are no trenches and no pillboxes waiting for them on the barren hills just east of the Jarama River.

Jughead rides in the back of a grumbling army lorry, gripping the sides of the truck bed. Jason sits alongside him. Toni and Veronica have come along as well. Slowly, tentatively, the rattling old truck navigates the unpaved little country roads. Everyone is perfectly silent. There are five trucks behind them, and six in front. Eventually, all 300 or so of the Lincoln Battalion will be bussed in.

The dark night sky hangs low. The moon swims lazily overhead.

As the convoy trundles towards the front, they pass lines of hardy, leather-faced peasants at the sides of the roads. They work, stooped over, pulling up stumps and roots or digging deep irrigation ditches. As the Internationals pass, the laborers lift their heads and salute with the clenched fist. The soldiers return the gesture.

The trucks grind to a halt, fanning out in a broad line. Their sector of the front is about a mile or two long. On their right is the Dimitrov Battalion, with which they’ve swapped positions after Jughead and Jason’s entreating of General Gal. Covering their left flank is the 24th Battalion, a Spanish unit. Jason hops out of the truck, first. Everyone else follows suit.

Bob Merriman walks up.

“No trenches?” Jughead asks.

“We’re to dig our own,” Merriman replies.

“Who’s the military incompetent that deployed you like this?” Veronica asks. She cocks her hip.

“What?” Jughead asks.

She turns around. They stand, along with a hundred worth of the battalion, on the southern slopes of the hills. A mile across the low, arid Jarama Valley lurk the fascists, long since dug into their positions. Jughead squints south. The enemy positions are invisible in the murk. When the sun comes up over the Spanish sierras and slices down across the valley, he will see the curling networks of the insurgent trenches, the little red-gold fascist banners fluttering like toy flags in the distance, and the little ant-like shapes of Franco’s soldiers scurrying across the horizon. But for now, he can see only darkness.

“You’re on the broadside of these hills,” Veronica points out. “That means you’re exposed against the hills. Without trenches, when the sun comes up, the fascist artillerymen will have a perfect line of sight to blow you all to hell.”
Jughead shivers. She’s right.

“Well,” Toni says, dryly. “I guess we’d best start digging trenches.”

“Great,” Jason clasps his hands together. “Where are our shovels?”

Two hours later finds the Lincoln Battalion scratching shallow, ragged trenches out of the unyielding Spanish earth with helmets, bayonets, and bare hands.

“You’re not really surprised, are you?” Jughead inquires. “Come on now; supply shortages have been the order of the day here ever since we arrived.”

“No,” Jason sighs, as he scoops out another mound of dusty earth in the bowl of his helmet. “It’s still…upsetting.

A few yards away, Doiley is running a series of rapid calculations on earth displacement and bullet trajectory to determine the precise depth and width the coming trenches out to be. Sweet Pea, Clayton, and Fogarty stand by, gripping their bayonets, waiting for his conclusions. Everyone’s hands are caked in dust. Jughead grabs a giant rock and heaves it out of the slowly appearing trench. His knuckles begin to crack. Blood seeps through the lines of his fingers and palms.

“I’m hardly going to be able to handle a rifle after this,” he moans.

“We can complain to Gal or Marty afterwards,” Jason replies.

Down the line, Toni helps Chuck Clayton work a winding trench around the curling roots of a troublesome olive tree. The branches shudder and olives rain down as they work.

“Even the olives are bleeding,” Jughead mutters as he wupes his bloody, dirty hands off on his trousers.

Dawn draws closer and fear grips the Lincolns. They must have a serviceable line of trenches done by the time the light breaks and the fascists across the valley have got a direct line of fire. Jughead rams his bayonet into the hardy soil. Their trench is about two feet deep, now. Not near deep enough.

Toni jogs up to them, covered in dirt, breathing hard.

“Hey, I just thought it’d be good to let you guys know. Two hours before dawn. We probably ought to double-down on this, huh?” she smiles sheepishly.

Jason renews his efforts, and plunges the rim of his helmet into a particularly stiff clump of earth. He scoops it out with a cry of victory and hurls it over the side of the emerging trench, barely missing Toni’s feet. She steps back.

“Woah. Don’t…bury the messenger, huh?”

“Sorry.”

“I am never…digging…another ditch…as long as I…live!” Jughead gasps. His bayonet clangs and sparks as it clashes against a deeply buried rock. He pulls it back and tries again, this time managing to pry the stone out of the ground.

The first rays of the sun break through the gaps in the mountainous skyline to the west. Jughead squints into the brilliant glow.
“Dig faster!” someone shouts.

Jason begins to sing, meekly at first.

“When the Union’s inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run there can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun…”

Jughead rolls his eyes. But shortly, he picks up the song, too, if for no other reason that it takes his mind from the burning in his arms and back.

“But what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one? But the union makes us strong!”

One by one, the Lincolns join in the chorus. Mounds of earth and dust fly. Muscles burn. The trench deepens.

“Solidarity forever! Solidarity forever! Solidarity forever! For the union makes us strong!

When the sun finally climbs up into a spotless Castilian sky, the trench, five-foot deep, unimpressive structure that it is, is finished. It stretches over a hundred yards, just barely connecting with the trenches of the Dimitrovs on their left and the 24th Spanish Battalion on their right. The Lincolns file into the trench. They can set up barbed wire and sandbags later, there’s no time for it now.

Jughead squints across the valley. Crammed in among the hills and olive groves, he can see the little shapes of the fascist soldiers and the dark, serpentine curves of their trenches.

Chuck Clayton unloads a machine gun from one of the lorries, with the help of Veronica Lodge.

“Hey! Where do you want this?”

“Right there, in the bend of the trench,” Jughead points out the position.

They set up the gun quickly. Veronica smacks the barrel.

“Can I fire a few rounds?” she asks, eager to draw a bit of fascist blood.

Before Chuck can respond, Jason cuts in: “No one is firing off any rounds, right now. Certainly not while our trenches still look like latrines. Last thing we need is to give the fascists any reason to shoot at us.”

No one notices the fascist artillery rolling into position across the valley. Jughead turns to Toni.

“I’m amazed we got that done bef—“ his sentences dies in his throat as a barrage of shells slam into their positions all along the line. He’s thrown to the ground. Toni flies some ten feet and sprawls against a pile of sandbags. The blast sets his ears ringing. His entire body seizes up. He curls himself into a ball. Another six shells crash down around him. They rip into the earth and send up great gouts of sand and dirt.

When the fusillade is over, the Lincolns rise to their feet and appraise the damage. Entire sections of the just-dug trench are destroyed. John Seacord has got a nasty laceration across his shoulder. Jason climbs out of the trench, bleeding from a cut across his forehead. Toni staggers upright, shaken but unharmed.

Everyone’s alive.
Sweet Pea speaks first. “What are they trying to do, kill us?”

The joke doesn’t land.

Jughead stands on a dry little hill overlooking the Jarama Valley. A thin screen of olive trees shields him from the sight of the fascists across the way. He produces a pair of binoculars. From his position of elevation he can see past the trenches, barbed wire, and machine gun nests on the insurgent line. He can see into the enemy rear, and he can see into the very camp he and Veronica had infiltrated a few nights before. He smiles.

Jason walks up alongside him.


Jason squints.

“I see…a fascist arms depot, just behind the lines?“

Jughead’s smile grows.

“The fascist camp,” he corrects. “The one Veronica and I were in. Look a little to the left.”

Jason complies.

“Alright, I’m looking.”

“Do you see that row of trucks there?”

“Yeah. They look like ammunition wagons. Covered in green tarps?”

“Right. They do look like ammunition wagons, but they’re not. That’s where the money is.”

Now it’s Jason’s turn to smile.

“I’d say it’s about a mile from here to there,” the redhead estimates. “So tomorrow when we advance, we storm their camp and blow all that fascist gold into ash.”

Jughead nods.

“Except…maybe not.”

Jason furrows his brow.

“What do you mean?”

“Their lines are fortified something fierce,” Jughead says. “Just in case we don’t break through… maybe we can get in an airstrike directly on those trucks.”

“Alright…Alright…yes! I’ll radio Brigade and see if I can’t get them to set a few bombers aside for action tomorrow!”

Jughead claps him on the shoulder.

“Good man.”

“Hey, you know, Jughead, this is almost over.”
“What do you mean?”

“I mean…this whole nightmare. We can all go home again.”

Jughead allows himself to believe that.

“Right. Almost over.” He raises the binoculars to his eyes again. Then makes a peculiar observation. “Hey…you called me Jughead.”

“What?”

“You’ve never called me Jughead. Not once. Something up?” It’s eerie. Jughead is fairly certain this is the first time he’s heard his name leave Jason’s mouth.

“Well…I think I’ve earned the right, if nothing else, to call you ‘Jughead’,,” Jason says. “Don’t you?”

Jughead laughs.

“Yeah. I guess you have.”

They descend into the Lincoln trenches. Jason jogs into a dugout-command post and rings Brigade HQ. He puts in a request for a few bombers, along with a phalanx of Soviet tanks, for the attack tomorrow. Gal grants it, after a half hour’s worth of haggling.

Jughead meanders off towards the rear of the camp. He finds Veronica Lodge near a row of ilex trees. She smokes a cigarette and stares up into the starry Spanish sky with glazed eyes.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey.” She offers him a drag. He takes it.

“I’ve been meaning to ask…are you okay?”

She smiles.

“Okay? In what sense?”

“Just…well, you haven’t said much about what happened while you were on…the other side of the lines.”

She takes another drag. The cigarette burns down.

“An astute observation. I haven’t said much,” her voice is simple and steely and cold.

“Do you uh…well…do you want to say anything about it?”

Veronica pauses. Her eyes narrow.

“Fuck Franco,” she spits.

“Is that all?”

“That’s all,” Veronica affirms.

“Good enough for me,” Jughead says.
“Do you miss Riverdale?” she asks.

“She of it,” he replies.

“Which parts are those?”

“Our friends.”

She nods. Her cigarette runs out. She grinds it under her heel.

“God, I wish I’d been consulted before the past half year of my life transformed into a pulp adventure.” Her dark lips curl into a smile.

“Hey, it’s been a full year for me,” Jughead says. “Count your blessings.” He shakes his head. “You know, a little over a year ago I was sitting in Pop’s, with Archie, sketching out my…stupid novel while he went on about music or construction or…God knows what. And now I’m…I’m…this. And I’m 18 fucking years old for God’s sake.” He laughs, high and shrill

Veronica laughs, too.

“Well, you are a writer, right. I’d think you would enjoy the drama of it all, if nothing else.”

He sneers.

“I’ll enjoy the drama of it all when this is all good and over and I’m sitting in Pop’s again with my friends and a milkshake in my hand.”

“God,” Veronica sighs. “If I had a drink…well…I’d drink to that.”

They embrace briefly.

“You want a sip?” Sweet Pea holds his flask out to Toni.

“Of what?” she questions.

“It’s Spanish wine,” Fangs says. “We bought it off some street vendor in Madrid. It’s good.”

She takes a sip.

“It’s water.”

Fangs shrugs.

“For here, it’s good.”

Toni sits down on the ground. Dust puffs up around her. It’s getting dark. The olive trees rustle smoothly in the intermittent breeze. Her two friends kneel down to her level.

Their faces are warm and familiar. It puts a soothing hum in her chest. Toni feels almost like they’re back in Manhattan.

“Fate just can’t seem to stop throwing us together, can she?” she asks.

“What?” Sweet Pea teases. “You’re not glad we’re reunited?”

“It’s bittersweet.” she jokes.
“No, you’re delighted to see us,” Fangs says. And he’s right. She scowls good naturedly.

“Why did you guys even come here? I mean—“

“There was a UAW meeting,” Fangs says. “Some speaker shows up and says ‘come and help us take down the fascists in Spain.’ Anyway, we’d just been canned, so we figured—“

“Why the hell not?” Sweet Pea finishes. “One big union, right? I was going to shoot somebody, whether it was a Spanish fascist or that prick of a floor supervisor at the plant.” He shrugs.

Toni laughs.

“No…you never could hold down a job, could you?”

“I’ll hold down the first job you show me that pays me a wage I deserve.”

“In this economy? Good luck.”

“Don’t you remember our first real job?” Fangs asks, smiling. He scratches at the dirt with his toe. “Remember what happened?”

“Oh, yes!” Toni chuckles. “How could I forget? Did you even stick around long enough to collect your first week’s pay?”

When they were about fourteen, Sweet Pea and Fangs had been hired by the landlord of a crumbling Bronx apartment complex. Cleaning gutters, wiping windows, sweeping walkways, that sort of thing.

On their second day there, a local woman and her son suffered eviction after their third failure to pay the monthly rent. Toni remembered watching a crew drag their paltry belongings—the beat up old armoire, the rusty bed-frame, and the tattered piles of clothes—out onto the curb, while the evictees stood by, wiping away tears. Penury and beggary would claim two more souls.

Sweet Pea and Fangs, without a word, and right before the bewildered moving crew, calmly took all of the woman’s possessions and carried them back up to her room.

The movers, perplexed and annoyed, summarily went and brought the things back out. They were not so gentle this time.

Sweet Pea and Fangs carried them right back up again.

It was a rather hopeless gesture of defiance. The angry movers finally held the two boys back while they toted out the woman’s possessions for the final time, hurled them into the back of a truck, and carried them away.

They were shortly fired by a furious landlord.

Sometimes Toni still wonders what happened to the woman and her child.

“That landlord wanted to skin us both,” Fangs says.

“Well, I wanted to skin him,” Sweet Pea says.

“Have you ever met anyone you didn’t want to skin?” Toni asks.

“Not that I remember.”
Fangs faux-whispers: “he’s lying. He’s never wanted to skin you.”

She smiles.

An hour later Adjutant Commander Robert Merriman summons the battalion together. Jughead emerges from the darkness carrying two great burlap sacks. He sets them down.

Jughead throws one of them open.

“In my capacity as battalion commissar, I brought you guys donuts.”

Someone cheers.

“Is this a…last supper sort of affair? We’re all going to die tomorrow so you give us pastries?” Sweet Pea demands.

“No,” Jughead snaps. “What, we can’t do something nice without it being some insidious plot to mentally prepare you all for glorious deaths?”

Someone steps forward and takes a donut. Soon, the bags are reduced to empty. Jughead grabs one for himself.

Jason steps into the dugout. The battalion stands at attention.

“At ease, guys,” he says. The men relax.

“I saved you a donut,” Jughead says. He hands it over.

“Thanks.” Jason eats it quickly. He turns to address the assembled Lincolns. “How’s everyone doing?” There’s no response. He nods. “This is a…bloody front. The British Battalion suffered 50% casualties last week.” He pauses again. Still no one says anything. “I suppose all I’m saying is…be ready, yes? For whatever comes.” The silence remains, but it becomes a palpable, uneasy silence.

Jughead steps forward.

“He’s just trying to scare you all.”

There’s some nervous laughter. Jason smiles. “Are you guys glad you’re here?” he asks.

Another silence. Then Clayton steps forward and says: “yeah.”

It isn’t the most convicted ‘yes’, but it draws a chorus of affirmative answers from the Lincolns.

Jason nods.

“Good. Me too. Well…I suggest everyone get a good night’s rest. We’ll need it.”

No one sleeps very much that night. A bunch of guys from the Dimitrov and 24th Battalions, along with a few Soviet technicians, come over into the Lincoln trenches, bringing cigarettes, vodka, and guitars. A mild, gloomy sort of party ensues. The soldiers try to drive away the gnawing fear of coming battle with the flow of alcohol and the trill of music.

Chuck Clayton and Dilton Doiley dance an impromptu jig, cups of vodka in hand, while a large Hungarian volunteer strums at his guitar. Veronica comes in from the cold and hovers in the
corner, smoking another cigarette. Toni gets one of the Spanish boys to play the chords to "Oh! Susanna" while she sings along.

Jason ambles over to Jughead about midnight.

"Hey, Jones."

"Yeah. What is it?" Jughead takes a sip of vodka.

Jason shakes his head. He reaches into his jacket and retrieves a picture. He hands it over. Jughead lifts it to the dim lamplight. It's a photo of Jason and Cheryl, a few years younger. He can make out the curve of a beach behind them, and the crashing foam of the Atlantic on the white sand dunes. To the right, the spires of Coney Island curl up into the sky.

"Look…not to be corny or anything…I brought it with me, just to remember home. If I…you know, can you give it back to Cheryl? We only have the one copy."

Jughead smiles.

"You're right. That is corny."

Jason slugs him lightly in the arm.

"Ah, go to hell."

"Don't sweat it. Yeah. I'll do that, of course. But don't worry, you'll be fine."

He smiles.

"I'm sure."

One of the Spaniards with a guitar steps forward.

"Mira, compañeros. I'm going to sing…our song. The song of the XV Brigade." The soldiers applaud. "Ready?" He begins. "Viva la quince brigada! Que se ha cubierto de gloria, ay Manuela, ay Manuela!"

Long live the XV Brigade, for it has covered itself with glory, oh Manuela!

Everyone picks up the tune.

"Luchamos contra los moros, mercenarios, y fascistas! Ay, Manuela, ay Manuela!"

Jughead subtly produces his notebook and commits the words to paper.

"Solo es nuestro deseo: acabar con el fascismo! Ay Manuela, ay Manuela!"

We have only one desire: to end fascism forever! Oh, Manuela, oh Manuela!"

Jason leans his head against Jughead's shoulder. The dugout shakes with the force of the song.

The last line rings out.

"Viva la quince brigada!"

Jughead closes his eyes. When he opens them, he turns to find Jason fast asleep.
The Saboteur

The morning after the artillery barrage finds the Lincoln Battalion strung out along the length of their trenches. Clayton and Doiley fiddle with one of the few functional machine guns. The barrel is warped. Repairing it is a top priority. Jughead lounges against the trench walls, picking through his copy of *Don Quixote*. Toni sits beneath the shade of an olive tree, hammering out an article’s outline. Jason strolls up to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Writing. An article. On you guys, actually.”

Jason rests his rifle against the trunk of the tree and crouches down beside her.

“Can I see?”

“Sure.”

She plucks the first two pages free and hands them over. Jason peruses. He smiles and begins to read aloud.

“...But this time, the Spanish people do not face down Franco’s legions alone. From every land and every nation of the earth, hearts bound together by a common love of liberty, have come the men and women of the International Brigades. Not least among them are my own countrymen: the volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. These boys have come across the sea, from a country beset by the scourges of poverty and Jim Crow and have said to the people of Spain: ‘we are here. Your cause is our cause. The defeat of injustice and tyranny is the common cause of all nations.’ These brave souls are ferociously committed to the salvation of democracy and the destruction of fascism and have seen clearly what I fear so many will see only too late—that if fascism is not checked here in Spain, it will go on to sink all the world into war. I am proud to count friends among its ranks, including the leaders of the battalion, soldiers as brave and good as any that commanded troops at Gettysburg.”

Jason grins.

“What? A little much?” She asks.

He shrugs.

“I’m flattered. But uh…you’re not pretending at neutrality anymore, I guess?”

“Well, it’s an opinion piece. Anyway, show me a really neutral reporter and I’ll show you a liar. I’m just being honest about it.”

“It sounds kinda like something Jones would write. Same uh…bombast.”

“Yeah? Maybe he and I could trade writing tips.”

Jason sits back next to her. He lays his shoulder into the olive tree.

“You two could write a book about all of this. When it’s over,” he says.

Toni smiles.
“I think you and Jughead should write the book. You two have got a…productive dynamic.”

His lips twist into a little smirk.

“Productive?”

Toni squints. She plays with a lock of her hair.

“Are you two friends or…”

“I don’t know. I hope so. He’s…well, he’s the closest thing I’ve had to a friend in a while.” Jason laughs awkwardly. He turns his face up to the spotless February sky. “I like Jones. He’s a really good guy, you know. He tries to act like he doesn’t care…a lot of the time. But he does. I think I annoy him a bit sometimes but…I’m glad to have him. Not sure if he feels the same.”

Toni claps him on the shoulder.

“I think you probably do annoy him sometimes, just like I’m pretty sure he annoys you. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t like you. He does. I can tell.”

Jason beams.

“Thanks.”

The exchange is cut short by a great blast in the valley. Jason’s first thought is that an artillery shell has gone off. But after a moment he realizes it was more like a trumpet blast. He and Toni stand. They jog back into the trench.

“What’s going on?”

Veronica Lodge appears. “They’re giving us a free radio show.” She gestures into the bowl of the valley. On the other side of no man’s land, the fascists have brought to bear a heavy-duty truck with a loudspeaker mounted in the bed. The Lincoln Battalion tunes in.

The loudspeaker blares in perfect, lightly accented English.

“Red dogs! You have come here to die! Spain is not your country! This is not your war! Go home, now, or this valley will be your tomb!”

There’s a moment of silence, then someone shouts: “We’ll go home when the Italians and the Germans do!”

The floodgates open to a torrent of jeers and shouts.

“Fuck off, fascist bastards!”

“Come over here and kiss my ass!”

The propaganda broadcast having failed, the fascists try another artillery barrage. The shells come crashing down again, but in the time since the last cannonade, the Lincoln Battalion has shored up their trenches with sandbags and solid networks of barbed wire. They fling themselves to the ground and cram themselves into crags and gullies in the cracked earth. The barrage ends shortly, with no one injured.

A lone machine gun fires short, desultory blasts. Jason assumes it’s the fascists’, until he works up the courage to lift his head and finds Veronica, stationed at the perimeter of the trench, manning
the gun and sending steady streams of fire in the direction of the enemy.

“That’s for everyone in that bullring!” She ducks down as a round of answering fire sails by her. Then she springs up and continues shooting. “That’s for throwing me into that goddamned prison! That’s for Nicolás!”

He doesn’t know whom she’s talking about. He figures a great many things probably happened to her while in fascist territory. It’s probably not his business. But it is his business that she’s consuming ammunition and drawing enemy fire. He scurries over to her, keeping his head low.

“Veronica! Veronica! Stop!” he hisses.

“Why?”

“Because—shit!” A few fascist bullets go by, missing them by inches. He grabs her by the cuff and yanks her down with him, away from the gun. “You’re going to—look, when we go on the offensive in a few days time, you can man a machine gun if you want. But until then…let’s not provoke them.”

On the night of February 22nd, 1937, Colonel Ernesto Casado phones General Gal.

“General Gal,” he sighs through the phone.

“Colonel Casado. What’s the issue?”

“Oh, nothing much. I’ve orders to relay, from General Miaja.”

“Which orders are those?” Gal asks, sniffing.

“What have you got set aside for the offensive in the Jarama Valley tomorrow? As far as tanks and planes go?”

Gal swears, tearing through the paperwork that deluges his desk.

“I’ve got…the XV Brigade advancing on the fascist lines with twenty planes and ten tanks.”

Casado sighs through the phone.

“That won’t do.”

“What do you mean ‘it won’t do’?”

“We can’t spare that many for the Jarama sector. General Miaja says that all tanks and planes are needed to anticipate a fascist Italian offensive north of Madrid.”

“I spoke with the Captain of the Lincoln Battalion a few days ago,” Gal says. “He assured me he needed as many tanks and planes as we could spare.”

“And we can’t spare those,” Casado says. “Divert at least 80% of those planes and tanks to the northern sector.”

“But—without them, the XV might be slaughtered.”

“Orders are orders,” Casado replies, affecting sadness. Gal is the sort of man to be convinced by the insistence that ‘orders are orders’.
“But—“

“I’m afraid it’s out of my hands, general. I’m only relaying orders from on high.”

“Very well,” Gal sighs.

“Thank you, general.” Casado hangs up. He smiles. Mr. St. Clair should be pleased. Gal is right. Without air and armor support, the XV Brigade probably will be slaughtered. And with a bit of luck, among those slaughtered will be those two troublesome boys from New York that Mr. Blossom and Mr. Lodge and their friends are so eager to be rid of. Casado lights up a cigarette. All is going according to plan.

He rings St. Clair, who he knows will be at the Guatemalan Embassy right about now.

“Hey! Ernesto!”

“Mr. St. Clair. Good news.”

“Yeah? What kind of good news?”

“I’ve just made a few phone calls on your behalf. Your problems should be taken care of by tomorrow.” He can almost hear the boy beaming over the line.

“Well…fantastic. My dad and his partners will be glad to know,” he says.

“I’m sure they will,” Casado replies.

“Thank you very much, Ernesto.”

“I’m always happy to help.”

“Viva Franco.”

Casado doesn’t worry about the line being tapped. The Republican Army trusts him.

“Arriba España.”

Casado has one more call to make. This one is through a secret line. It connects him directly to Colonel Fernando Barrón, an old friend of his, and now a commander in Franco’s army. If the government found out he possessed such a line, he would surely be shot for treason on the spot. But he’s sure it won’t come to that. The republic can hardly keep itself together, much less ferret out double agents. He doesn’t worry.

“Ernesto!” Barrón booms over the phone. “How are you?”

“As fine as I can be. Surrounded by reds.”

Barrón laughs.

“You do us an invaluable service, Ernesto. We need men on the inside.”

“Yes, yes. Listen; are you aware the reds are planning to attack you at Jarama tomorrow?”

More laughter.

“Of course I am aware! We’ll be ready for you—uh, for them, don’t worry.”
“Yes, well, spearheading the move against your forces is a battalion of American volunteers.”

“Yes, my reconnoiters have their positions all mapped out. We’ll push them back without much difficulty, I expect.”

“All the more so because I’ve just denuded the poor bastards of any planes or tanks,” Casado says with a smile.

“As I said. You’re invaluable!” Barrón says.

“But listen—regardless—I want you to focus everything you have on this…Lincoln Battalion. Do not just ‘push them back’—wipe them out. Leave not a man alive, if you can manage that.”

“Have they personally offended you, somehow?” Barrón asks mirthfully.

“It’s not a matter of that. Just do me this favor, Fernando.”

“Sure, sure. Let me make you a promise, Ernesto; when the ‘Lincoln Battalion’ comes out to play, the Spanish Legion will drown the bastards in their own blood.”

Ernesto chuckles.

“Good man.”
February 23rd is a cold day in Spain. A howling wind blows down from the Guadarrama Mountains north of Madrid, where Republican troops still hold a tenuous line against the forces of General Mola. The wind courses south through the embattled city, rattling the bones of its noble citizens, and continuing on to chill the men in the trenches strung out along the Jarama River south of the capital.

The Battle of Jarama has raged for three weeks. Fascist troops desperately claw their way towards the Corunna Road to Valencia, but are thrown back time and time again by the Republican defenders in flurries of blood and steel. The sector manned by the Lincoln Battalion is for the moment, quiet. But a heavy build-up of troops and war materiel on the fascist side of the lines tells of an impending assault. The Republicans aim to beat Franco to the punch.

Jughead awakens to the blast of artillery shells. He rolls out of his sleeping bag and springs to his feet, instinctively grasping for his rifle.

“They’re shelling us again,” Jason says, absent-mindedly. “They’ll be done soon enough. Then we’ll attack.” He sounds distant. Detached. Jughead stands. He finds his gun. The Lincolns run up and down the trenches, moving boxes of ammunition out of the fascist line of fire. The dugout shakes with the force of the guns.

“You ready?” Jughead asks.

Jason turns to him. He looks paler than usual. His lips are chapped and dry. He nods.

“Yeah. I’m ready.”

Soon enough, the pounding of the heavy insurgent guns ceases. A deceptive calm falls over the Jarama Valley.
They eat a thin breakfast of garbanzo beans, as usual. Jughead slurps his down. The soup is watery and thin as always, but he’s damn hungry. Jason clinks his bowl with a rusty spoon. He hardy touches the broth. He gives the rest to Chapoff.

They stride out into the sunlight.

The battalion has already formed into the companies for the coming assault.

The 1st Rifle Company is to lead the attack, covered by the 2nd Rifle Company fanning out behind it, and both supported by the 3rd Machine Gun Company in the rear.

Clayton leans against his machine gun, eager to put it into action. Sweet Pea steps forward, rifle on his shoulder, looking for once not in the least bit surly. He salutes. Fangs forms up behind him. Doiley hovers in the rear, holding a glinting bayonet in the one hand and his cherished bowie knife in the other.

Veronica stands beneath an olive tree, watching the battalion with a grim, resigned expression. She salutes Jason and Jughead as they pass by.

Toni approaches Sweet Pea. She rises up on the balls of her feet and cups his face. She throws her arms around his neck.

“Try not to die. Please,” she implores him. “Or I’ll never speak to your stupid ass again.”

Sweet Pea grins. He squeezes her tight and lifts her off of her feet.

“No promises,” he replies.

She smiles sadly. Then she turns to Fangs. It’s him that reaches forward for a hug. Before she can admonish him, he says: “you know I only did three years of school. I don’t know how to die, don’t worry.” He kisses her on the cheek and she returns the gesture.

Jughead turns and fixes his sight on the fascist positions across the valley. Through the jagged hills and scattered olive trees, he can almost see that row of trucks. Their all-important target. His heart pounds in his chest. He thinks of his father and Fred Andrews in France, twenty years ago. He imagines them huddling in their trenches just like this, as German shells rain down on their poor, foolish heads. He turns to look at Jason, who stands tall, his olive tunic tucked into his belt, aquiline face towards the enemy lines, looking very heroic. It’s no time to huddle, now.

“Doiley got that one machine gun fixed,” Clayton says with a great, genuine smile. “The little guy’s a genius.”

Doiley nods and bows.

Private Jack Shirai organizes the Battalion’s rifles in little pyramidal stacks, to be snatched up by the Lincolns when the time comes to advance.

Doiley directs Oliver Law and Raymond Steele in setting up the battalion’s three machine guns in proper position.

Jason coughs. He licks his lips again.

Jughead hears the rumbling of engines. He recognizes the sound of tanks, and for a terrible moment fears to see German panzers or Italian fiats trundling towards him. But he turns around and instead sees two Soviet tanks approaching from the rear. Their armored support. The Lincolns
cheer as the T-26 tanks roll into position. One on the left flank, the other on the right. A tank hatch flips open, and a young Russian driver pokes his head out. He shouts something in his language. No one understands, but everyone cheers nonetheless. The Russian offers a clenched fist salute and disappears back into his vehicle.

“Jughead, get everyone together, will you?”

Jughead, with some help from Toni, Sweet Pea, and Veronica, marshals the Lincoln Battalion together in a copse of olive trees. The branches provide barely adequate shade from the rising midday sun. A current of anticipation runs through the air. The guys grip their rifles tight. The bayonets catch the sun. They keep their heads low; this is well within the range of a good fascist sharpshooter. The rumbling thunder of artillery gently shakes the earth beneath their feet.

Jason walks to a spot at the head of the battalion. He perches himself on a protruding root.

“We’re going to soften them up a little with our own big guns; then we’re going to attack. This is it, comrades. You all performed fantastically under that artillery barrage a few days back, but today we see the elephant. People are going to die. There’s no avoiding that. But I have faith in all of you.” He waits. “That’s all.” He steps down from the root. The brevity is appreciated. The battalion applauds.

Jughead steps forward, caught up in the moment.

“No pasaran!” he cries.

“No pasaran!” the battalion thunders back. “Let’s give ‘em hell!”

“Go, Lincoln!”

The battalion’s artillerymen leap to their guns.

The Lincolns cheer as their artillery slams into the fascist lines. Little plumes of smoke and flame erupt across the valley. Jughead squints into the distance. He watches the insurgent troops scurry for cover as shells come down all around them. Entire sections of their trenches and barbed wire redoubts disappear in the fiery deluge.

Jason grabs Jughead by the arm and pulls him aside.

“Listen: we’re going to need an aviation signal to direct our planes to those trucks.”

“Right, right. Like a giant arrow, yeah?”

“Yeah. We can—I know, we can make it out of shirts.”

“...Shirts?”

“Sure, we’ll string a bunch of shirts together and lay it down out in the field.”

Jughead sighs. Then he turns around and shouts; “hey, we need about ten spare shirts! Actually, even if they aren’t spares—we need your shirts!”

He strips off his own undershirt, and buttons his tunic back over his naked chest. Jason follows suit. They tie the two shirts together by the sleeves. In five minutes, the Lincolns have furnished them with the requested ten shirts. They tie them together in the rough shape of an arrow about nine feet long and three wide. When laid down in no man’s land, it will direct the Republican
bombers to the targeted trucks behind the fascist lines.


Jason steps up and orders the battalion forward. All five hundred or so Lincolns form up in the very first-line trench. This is it. They perform last minute rifle checks. Republican artillery continues to pour into the rebel positions. Smoke wafts towards them over the valley.

Jason stands up, clutching the string of shirts in his hand.

“Today, you are privileged to fight as part of an army that’s struggling not for land or glory or power, but for those sacred principles of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Today, your cause is the cause of the entire human race. The world is watching, comrades! Spain is where free people will say: ‘no more!’ to fascist depredation. This land will be the tomb of fascism! Today—“

Jughead steps up.

“For God’s sake, Jason, let’s go!”

Jason shuts up. He turns around and braces himself to leap out of the trench. He thrusts his bayonet forward and drags the string of shirts behind him. Seacord and Fogarty each take a corner of the aviation signal.

“Libertad!” he cries. And then he leaps into battle.

The Lincolns pour out of the trenches, rifles primed, bayonets fixed. Jughead scrambles into action, shouting at the top of his lungs.

The Lincolns advance across no man’s land. The fascist trenches loom up in the distance. Groves of olive trees greet them. The Americans charge forward, with steely determination. Jason moves at their head, one hand gripping the aviation signal and the other his rifle.

The two Soviet tanks move up in support, blasting the insurgents with cannon fire. The valley floor shakes beneath their feet. Jughead stoops, slamming the stock of his rifle into his shoulder.

Then the fascists fire back.

The scores of machine guns open up with a sound like a torrential rain. Bullets pour down from the rebel positions, ripping up great gouts of earth and churning the branches of olive trees into splinters. Fascist artillery is centered and fired. The shells fall and consume everything in bright flashes of yellow and red. Jughead’s ears ring. Men fall torn by bullets or cooked by cannon.

Advance shock units of fascist troops leap forward to meet the Republican advance—the feared Spanish legionaries take the lead. A squadron of some twenty fascists rushes on, screaming, rifles aimed. Their bullets sizzle in the air, mingling with the cacophony of the machine guns and the cannon.

Jason continues on, undaunted. He holds the string of lashed-together shirts in a death grip, while Seacord and Fogarty pick up the end of the aviation signal, like a bridal train. Jughead fires aimlessly over their heads, seeking to draw fire away from them.

A heavy shell lands some fifty feet away. All four of them go sprawling to the ground. Five Lincolns are eaten up in the blast. Jughead watches their bodies lift up into the air, as if on strings.
Then their bodies just come apart. Arms and legs separate from trunks. Heads spiral away, trailing blood and gore.

John Lenthier from Boston falls, shorn nearly in two by a fascist machine gun.

William Henry, from Belfast shudders and dies as an artillery shell takes away his left arm and leg.

A Soviet T-26 rolls through an olive grove. Then an insurgent artillery piece scores a direct hit on the tank. It crumples in like a can, and then bursts into a brilliant ball of flame. The screams of the crew are quickly drowned out by the roaring fire.

The other tank, its operators’ nerves shattered, beats a hasty retreat back to the Republican trenches.

“Where the hell are they going?” Jason screams. No one hears him.

The advance continues. Jughead’s boots pound against the hard-packed earth. Two fascist soldiers materialize in their path.

“Arriba España!” one of them cries.

“Fuck you!” Jughead shouts back. “Arriba this!” He fires, and one of the fascists falls down dead.

Jason, managing rather impressively to operate his rifle single-handedly, shoots the second.

“Shit! Give ‘em hell!” Seacord shouts.

They charge forward.

Behind them, Clayton and Doiley and the 3rd Machine Gun Company struggle to maintain a suppressing fire on the fascists. It’s little good. They are severely outgunned. The Lincolns duck and dodge their own side’s machine guns along with those of the enemy.

Soldiers fall by the dozens. The valley air sings with the interminable shudders and shrieks of war machines. Jughead struggles to keep his head cool. He shakes with adrenaline. Blood runs through the olive groves in little rivulets.

“Fifty feet!” Jason shouts. “We lay the signal down, there!”

“Where the hell are our planes?” someone cries over the beating of guns and cannons.

*Where are they?*

The sky is clear. Jughead’s stomach turns.

The Lincolns struggle on. The fascist returning fire forms a solid, impassable wall. Men rush the insurgent trenches, and fall within feet of the barbed wire. Their numbers rapidly fall. Bile rises in Jughead’s throat. The guys he’s been helping train for weeks lie in bloody, twisted heaps all along the plains. Tangles of arms and legs and heads, sometimes connected, sometimes not. The advance loses its impetus. Men begin to seek shelter behind trees or rocks.

A new round of machine gun fire enfilades the signal-bearers. Seacord turns his head to yell something to Jughead. He doesn’t get the chance. A stream of bullets cuts through his chest and he pitches forward, dead.

In the Lincoln trenches, Clayton slaps Doiley on the shoulder.
“Come on! We have to go! They’re getting cut to fucking pieces out there!”

“We’re supposed to stay here, with the machine gun!” Doiley responds.

Veronica jumps down into the trench.

“I’ll take the damn gun! Go! Go!”

The two give her a look. Then they nod, salute, grab their rifles, and leap into the fray. Veronica dutifully commandeers the machine gun, an old Great War Browning. She raises the barrel and directs a heavy fire onto a row of fascist troops across the valley.

“You’re not so tough when I’ve got a gun, too, are you?”

Jason reaches the spot. It’s a clearing between two rows of olive trees. He and Fogarty rush to lay down the signal and spread it out in the shape of an arrow. It points directly to the fascist arms depot, and to the trucks idling there. Through the machine gun nests of the fascist lines, Jughead can actually see the little specks of the tents and the green tarps of the trucks in the camp beyond.

The aviation signal is laid down.

Then Fogarty stumbles back. A red stain blooms across his chest. He keels over. His hand comes to the ugly wound. He takes one rattling breath and falls silent.

“Goddammit!” Jughead shouts. He fires three rounds towards the fascists. None hit their mark.

Jason, both hands freed, grips his rifle like a spear.

Jughead looks up at the sky.

*Where are our planes?*

He charges forth, behind Jason. The signal is set; all they have to do is await the bombers. If they come.

The fascist lines are only some twenty yards away, now. The fire grows absolutely withering. Bullets rake the ground at Jughead’s feet. His head feels like it’s splitting. His guts squirm in his stomach. They’re never going to reach the fascist arms depot. Their only hope is the planes. But they advance nonetheless.

Doiley and Clayton, having abandoned their machine gun for the fight, charge forward. Doiley hurls grenades at the fascists, plucking them from his belt and lobbing them as fast as he can pull the pin. Clayton follows close behind, firing his rifle in support. Doiley, with inhuman precision, leaps over gullies and the corpses of comrades. One of his grenades annihilates three fascist troopers. He comes within feet of the fascist lines. He hurls one more grenade. It spins through the air, and lands in an insurgent trench. Before he can watch his charge explode and take four more rebels with it, he falls down dead with a bullet through the head. Clayton cries out, but is prevented from coming to his aid by a quick round of fascist rifle fire that sends him scurrying for cover.

The Lincoln battalion is cut to half strength. Half lie dead in lakes of blood or writhing in agony. But they advance nonetheless.

Jughead focuses on Jason’s red hair, moving ceaselessly towards the enemy. The crackle of rifle fire, like fat sizzling in a pan, slices through the olive branches overhead. The whole world is red and yellow, fire and blood. His fingers freeze. Cold sweat drips down his face. A bullet rips past his thigh. The round grazes him and tears away a strip of his pant leg. He cries out in pain.
kneels down to take a shot.

“Hey—“ Jason shouts. Then there’s a burst of machine gun fire. Jason’s head whips around, fast. He falls forward.

Jughead drops his gun and rushes forward to his friend. He flips Jason around. An unimaginable horror stabs him in the gut. Jason stares up at him, blue eyes blown wide. He grasps at Jughead’s collar.

Jason’s throat is torn wide open by a fascist bullet. Blood pours in spurts and spasms down over his olive tunic, staining his chest and belly bright red. Jughead gasps in shock and disgust. Jason’s fingers twitch uselessly.

“Oh, fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

He grabs Jason under the arms and drags him out of the vicious fire. Fascist bullets chase them all the way to meager cover beneath the branches of an olive tree. Jughead rips Jason’s ruined tunic open. The wound is truly hideous. His jugular forces out rivers of blood that paint Jughead’s hands an ugly scarlet. The boy covers his mouth, and inadvertently smears his face with his friend’s blood. Jason tries to breath. He can’t.

The aviation signal, attended by the corpses of Fogarty and Seacord, lies silently in the dust a few yards away. It points towards the fascist lines. Towards Hiram Lodge’s gold. Towards victory or defeat.

“Fuck! Fuck! Help!” Jughead cries. “Help!” Even as he cries out, he knows there will be no help. Who can help? They are all too busy dying, themselves. “Come on!” He whimpers. “Come on, you’re okay.” Jason grips him by the shoulder. Jughead bends low and hugs him. “Come on you stupid communist bastard! You’re fine! We’re gonna—oh God…”

He’s so wrapped up in his friend’s agony that he hardly notices the ugly, heavy droning sound. Like a giant mosquito, the humming starts quiet and then climbs into a splitting crescendo. The sound of a warplane. But Jughead cannot hear it. He presses his hands to Jason’s throat in a vain attempt to staunch the bleeding. He succeeds only in further bloodying himself.

A strange concoction of grief, rage, and fear erupts from his throat with a cry of: “you fascist sons of bitches!” he snatches up his rifle and springs out from behind the olive tree to fire. Jason grabs him by the belt and yanks him back down. A moment later, a hail of bullets slams into the empty air where he would have stood. Tears well up in Jughead’s eyes. Jason points up. Jughead fails to understand. Then he does. He cranes his head up.

The plane appears from behind, like a wonderful vision from a dream. It’s a Soviet SB bomber, its red wingtips flashing magnificently in the midday night. The battlefield falls silent as the warplane swoops overhead. Its shadow passes over the shattered remains of the Lincoln Battalion. The pilot dips low. He sees the aviation signal, and understand his target. The propellers whirl. The plane roars forward. Fascist troops scatter in terror. The bomber’s belly opens up to deliver its payload. The little black bombs fall silently to earth. Jughead watches in awe.

They strike the trucks head on. The explosion outdoes the sun. Brilliant flashes of red fire spring up into the sky.

Hiram Lodge loses a fortune in a fraction of a second.

Gouts of melted gold splash up over the field like a fountain. The trucks burn and burst as their
gasoline catches fire. What’s left of the gold bars soon trickles away in the inferno. Jughead’s eyes reflect the glorious deed. They’ve done it. They’ve won.

He looks back to Jason.

“Hey! We did it! We did it! We won! We—“ There’s no response. Jason’s pale blue eyes stare back, still and silent. His chest fails to rise or fall. A lump rises in Jughead’s throat. He sobs. Tears trickle down his cheeks and stain the collar of his tunic. The blood on his face begins to dry. His lips tremble. “We did it,” he mumbles, meekly. “We did it.”

The Lincoln Battalion achieves its objectives at a truly hideous cost. The infantry never reaches the fascist arms depot, just as Jughead predicted. But the air force—even reduced to one plane through Casado’s treachery—does its work. Few of the American volunteers understand the magnitude of what they’ve done. Perhaps the knowledge that the efforts of the battalion have saved their homeland from fascist dictatorship would soothe their injured spirits.

Because nearly half the battalion is dead.

And those that still live are not yet safe. Dozens of men are still strung out across no man’s land. They cannot safely return to the Republican trenches without coming under fire from the fascists. They huddle behind flat stones or in little ditches dug out with their bayonets. They wait for the safety of night to creep back to their lines.

Jughead presses himself against the trunk of his olive tree. He has hardly moved for the past five hours. He fears exposing so much as a finger or the toe of a boot to the fascists. His thigh burns. The wound there is ugly but not life threatening. It’s carved away a hunk of meat from his leg. He keeps the weight on his hip.

Jason lies next to him. Jughead’s long since closed his staring blue eyes. He tries to avoid looking at his dead friend, lest he suffer a new round of tears. Jason’s handsome face and bright red hair are stained all around with Spanish dust and specks of sand. His lips part slightly. One hand is thrown across his chest. He looks peaceful, at least.

Jughead feels like he’s been shot through the gut, not the leg. He vomits twice. In the distance, hundreds of yards away, he can see the twinkling lights of the Republican trench. It might as well be across the goddamned continent. He’ll never reach it alive. Staring out across the valley, he can see other guys in the same position, hiding behind whatever pitiful cover they can find, praying for a moonless night. The fascist trenches are only a few yards away. Jughead can hear them chattering and celebrating the slaughter they’ve just visited on the ‘reds’. His chest burns with hatred.

He leans his head against his friend’s shoulder. His leg burns awfully, but he’s also exhausted. Tired, hurt, angry, and miserable, he soon falls asleep.

It’s dark when he’s awakened by a rough boot in his ribs.

“Hey! Wake up”

He springs up, falls back against the tree, and gropes around for his rifle. A powerful hand grips him by the shoulder and throws him back to the ground. He shakes his head, clears it of cobwebs, and takes stock of his attackers.

“Be fucking quiet goddammit!”
Sweet Pea and Chuck Clayton stand over him, faces grim and dusty, clothes torn. Sweet Pea still has his rifle. Chuck doesn’t.

“Listen!” Sweet Pea hisses. “We’re gonna sneak back to our lines now. It’s dark. We move real slow, and the fascists might miss us.”

Jughead nods, he stands, slowly. The sounds of carousing and conversation carry on the wind from the fascist trenches. The stars twinkle overhead. The moon is tragically bright, illuminating a valley littered with broken, bloody corpses. Illuminating them. Getting back to their lines alive will be no mean feat.


“No,” Chuck says, flatly.

“What?” Jughead hisses, eyes blazing.

“We’re not bringing him,” Sweet Pea says.

“I’m not leaving him here!” Jughead snaps. “Now help me, both of you!”

“We can’t carry him,” Clayton insists.

“I outrank you both, and I’m ordering you—“

“Dammit, Jones!” Sweet Pea snarls. He points to the aviation signal, rumpled and dusty. Next to it lays the corpse of Fangs Fogarty, eyes open, staring up into the sky. “I’m leaving my best friend since I could fucking walk out here! Because we’ll never make it back alive carrying anyone and you know it!” He looks to Jason’s body. His face softens a little. “And you know he’d tell you the same thing!”

Jughead’s lip trembles, but he manages to choke back the tears. He nods. He leans down next to Jason. He brushes aside a few locks of dirty red hair. He presses a soft kiss to his friend’s forehead. He stands, wincing as a lance of pain shoots through his wounded leg.

“Are you hit?” Clayton asks.

“It’s fine,” Jughead responds.

The other two men nod.

Jughead spares one last glance over his shoulder at Jason’s corpse before they turn and start back towards the Republican trenches.

The crawl back to friendly lines is agonizing. They pick up another six men as they go. They pass countless more corpses. Bundled up under trees. Curled in the dust. Lying sprawled over rocks or branches. Dry blood cakes their faces and hands. Sometimes they still nobly clutch their rifles. Their mouths are thrown open, in screams or battle cries. But they are all simply, perfectly dead.

The survivors creep on their hands and knees, sticking close to tree trunks and little folds in the ground. At the slightest sound they flatten themselves against the earth and throw their hands over their heads. Little pinpricks of light bob over the fascist trenches. Jughead identifies them as cigarettes between the lips of soldiers.

The merciless moonlight cuts across their path, illuminating them perfectly for the fascist gunners.
Jughead expects any moment to hear shrieks of ‘rojos! Rojos!’ from the fascist lines, and in the next moment to feel the final, mortal sting of bullets cutting into his flesh.

He never does.

His leg screams in pain. Blood trickles down his shin and soaks his ankle. They creep along the dry earth like a winding snake, moving with excruciating caution and yet struggling to outpace the sun, lest it rise and expose them to the fascists.

The trek back to Republican lines should have taken twenty minutes at most. Instead, it takes five hours. At the mouths of the trenches, their own sentries stop them.

“Halt!”

“It’s us!” Jughead croaks. His leg has given out. Clayton throws his arm over his shoulder and helps him hobble forward. “It’s us! Don’t shoot!”

The sentries, relieved, usher them into the safety of the dugouts.

A sense of loss and gloom pervades the Lincoln trenches. Those who were lucky enough to fall wounded within striking distance of the lines were hauled back to safety hours ago. So were the corpses of those who died in the first few steps of the assault.

Adjutant Commander Merriman lies back in an improvised hammock-stretcher. His shoulder shattered in the first moments of the advance. He’s captain now.

Toni rushes up to the returning soldiers, face carved through with concern.

She hugs Sweet Pea stiffly. Her eyes shine, great and dark and melancholy.

“F—Fangs?” She asks, prepared for the answer she knows will come. Sweet Pea lowers his head. Toni nods, choking back tears. They flow anyway. Sweet Pea melts into her embrace, and she weeps into the big man’s shoulder.

“Jason?” Veronica asks, cautiously approaching Jughead. Her own lips set into a firm, hard line.

“He’s dead.” Jughead stares back at her, face still streaked with blood, tears, and filth.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

Jughead nods.

Outside, a bloody sun sees fit to rise over the valley of slaughter.

Mourning hangs heavy over the Republican line all along the Jarama front. The British Battalion has suffered even worse casualties than the Lincolns. Upwards of 50%. The 24th Spanish Battalion and the Dimitrovs have been cut to pieces.

Jughead retreats into the rear. He wavers and mopes beneath the shivering olive trees. The brilliant red sun beats down on his brow and paints the dusty Spanish earth the color of gore. He retrieves his notebook. A bullet has caught it in the corner. He writes.

All that he can think of, and God knows why, is that goddamned song Archie was always so fond of—Red River Valley. It bounces around in his skull and blasts again and again in his mind. The tune etches itself onto his tongue and stamps itself behind his teeth. He doesn’t understand it. Jason
Blossom is dead. Half the battalion has been massacred. All he can think of is *Red River Valley*.

He runs across Alex McDade, from the British Battalion. The man’s face is sallow, his eyes deep and wounded. *Red River Valley* plays on in Jughead’s head. The words cycle again and again through his juddering psyche.

Together, they write a crude, sad song. In the memory of the slain. Of the blood spilled on and for the Spanish earth. It is all they can do. Jughead writes. He writes, of course, to the tune of *Red River Valley*.

*There’s a valley in Spain called Jarama*

*It’s a place that we all know so well*

*It was there that we gave of our manhood*

*Where so many of our brave comrades fell*

Chapter End Notes

I felt a little sad writing this chapter--I'd gotten attached to the Jason I created over the past year. He can't catch a break, no matter the AU.

Anyway, full credit for writing 'Jarama Valley' (one of my all time favorite tunes) goes to Alex McDade, who didn't need Jughead's help IRL.
The Belly of the Beast

The bag is whipped off of Betty’s head. She clenches and unclenches her fists. Her fingernails dig into her palms. A ragged length of cloth is tied into her mouth. She breathes in short, sharp gasps. Saliva drips from the corner of her helpless mouth and down her neck. She moans in anger. She bites down onto the rag between her teeth.

The room is dark. A single blistering light glares down from the ceiling. The windows are shuttered. Betty tries to move her legs. Her ankles clash against cold metal.

She’s tied firmly to a bed-frame.

The ride here had been chaos. After a vicious beating that left her right eye swollen shut, her stomach twisted up into knots of agony, and probably a rib or two broken, the silvershirts had tossed her into the back of their lorry with a bag over her head and a rag stuffed into her mouth. After a searing race over uneven country roads that might have been ten minutes or an hour, they had yanked her to her feet, hauled into this building and strapped her down. Betty swears into her gag.

A dark shape stands over her. She sees the outlines of a broad hat and a pair of grim eyes shining in the gloom.

“Hey!” the figure growls.

She hyperventilates into the gag. The silver shirt reaches down and plucks the rag from between her lips.

“Where’s Archie?” she demands.

“It doesn’t matter where your friend is,” the man says brusquely.

“Where is he?”

The silvershirt presses a palm to her sore stomach. He forces his hand into her gut. She cries out.

“I’m going to ask the questions, and you’re going to answer them. Understand?”

“Fascist bastard…”

“Shut up. Tell me where your friends have gone.”

“We will stop you.”

He drives his fist into her solar plexus. The silvershirt’s lips curl into a furious snarl.

“No. You won’t, see? We’ve already won. Let me show you.”

He deftly unties Betty’s ankles from the bedposts. She kicks and thrashes. He pushes her legs aside and unties her wrists. Then he yanks her upright and twists her arm behind her back.

The silvershirt frog marches her to the nearest window. He throws the shutter open. Betty blinks back at the light. She looks out on a grassy green field ringed by whitewashed wooden buildings. She gets the impression she’s in a camp of some sort.
On the field, a few rifle sections worth of silver shirts stand at attention. Their shoulders are squared, their firearms firmly planted stock-first into the ground between their feet. They hold their heads high, their faces shadows in the brims of their campaign hats. A captain strides down the line. He does an about-face and executes a fascist salute.

“Where am I?” she breathes

“Bit of a party secret, I’m afraid. You’re…in the thick of it. Do you see these men out there?” She says nothing. “Do you?” he shakes her vigorously.

“Yes!” she groans at last.

“There are about fifty on that field alone. Some two thousand in this camp. Over the country, we’ve got nearly twenty thousand,” the silvershirt exults. She can practically hear his splitting grin. “And that isn’t even counting our friends in the armed forces. See, in a few days time, we’ll be ready, and we’ll march on the capital. And that’ll be that.” He spins her around to face him. “And as for you and your friends…I can’t say you’ll have much of a place in the new order.”

“There’s not going to be any new order!” she spits with much more conviction than she feels.

He smiles tolerantly, like she’s a silly child.

“Of course there will be. And if you cooperate, perhaps it will be kind to you. Now, I’d like very much for you to tell me; where is that tape?”

“And if I don’t?”

The silvershirt steps closer. He opens one hand and draws an ugly, glimmering blade from his belt.

“Well, if you don’t…”

“I’m getting real sick of this, son,” sighs the old silvershirt.

Archie slams and rattles his bonds.

“Yeah, me too,” the boy says through searing pain. A brutal sweat pours down his face. He’d tried to lay a fist into one of the silvershirts when they’d dragged him in, and all he’d gotten for his trouble was a broken wrist. Every time he moves his right hand, bolts of pain shoot through his arm. He’s strapped tight to a chair. His head is lashed to the back of the chair by a rope around his neck. It yanks his face up and forces him to stare directly into the room’s single incandescent light. He’s long since given up trying to turn away. Even when he tries to close his eyes, the light burns through. The bulb blinks and flashes like a little sun. It’s a direct, ugly form of torture.

“Well, then let’s make it stop, why don’t we?” coos the silvershirt, an elegant man of about fifty or sixty. He saunters closer. Their methods had been rather crude so far. The bright light screaming in his face, and a length of heated metal pressed to the bare skin of his arms and legs. He’s given them nothing yet. “We have your girlfriend here too, you know.”

“Girlfriend? Wh—Betty! She doesn’t know anything!”

The silver shirt produces the strip of red-hot iron. He brings it near Archie’s neck. The boy sucks in terrified gulps of air.

“I find that very hard to believe, young man. Very hard, indeed.”
The silver shirt presses the hot iron to Archie’s neck. Vicious, brutal pain rips through his flesh. He howls in impotent agony. The man yanks the iron away. Archie’s goes limp. His head would fall to his chest, but for the ropes holding it in place.

“Go…to…hell!” he manages.

“Where is that tape?”

“I don’t know!” he screams.

“No?”

The silvershirt presses his fingers into the scorched flesh on Archie’s neck.

“Ah, God!”

“Hmmm…maybe the girl knows? Shall we ask her, instead?”

Archie manages to twist his lips into an agonized smile.

“She’ll…she’ll never tell you anything.”

“You are a troublesome bunch,” the Silvershirt sighs. “We’ll get you to cooperate. And if not…I suppose we’ll pick up your other friends soon enough, too. Mr. Blossom’s daughter, and that little street rat. Perhaps they’ll be more helpful.”

Archie squeezes his eyes shut tight, hoping to God Cheryl and Joaquin can deliver the tape in time.

“Good luck,” he manages to spit.

“Good luck, indeed,” the silvershirt says. He raises the hot iron again.

Archie has never been a particularly political guy. People will call him dumb, but it’s simply not the sort of thing he’s any good at. He has his opinions. He certainly doesn’t want to see the country become some sort of iron-fisted dictatorship. But most of all, he doesn’t want to let down his friends. Not Betty, who’s here with him, and surely ready to resist to the last. Not Jughead and Veronica, over in Spain. So he stands fast against whatever torture these fascist thugs can bring to bear.

Betty writhes against the bed frame. She’s alone in the room, now. Her silvershirt interrogator has gone. If she just pulls a little harder, she can just maybe free her left wrist. And then her ankles. And then she’ll be free. And then what? She’ll cross that bridge when she gets to it.

She turns her head to the side and stares out of the window. The parade ground is empty of silvershirts, too. It would be the perfect time to escape the camp. If only she could get her damned wrist free. Her life depends on it. Her friends’ lives depend on it. The future of democracy and civilization depend on it.

The door swings open. She goes limp. A silvershirt steps inside. A younger one, this time. Probably not much older than her. He tips his hat.

“Miss Cooper,” he chirps.
Betty glowers. The silvershirt hums.

“What now?” she hisses, bracing herself mind and body for the next torture.

“Nothing too awful,” the silvershirt assures her. He swaggers over to the bed and drops down into an available chair. “I just want to talk for a moment.”

“I’ve got nothing to say to you,” Betty assures him. “Except that your days are numbered.”

The silvershirt smiles tolerantly.

“Betty, what are you fighting for, here?”

Betty tightens her fists.

“I don’t know. I know what I’m fighting against.” She fixes the boy with a shattering glare.

He nods.


She shuts her eyes and clenches her teeth.

“Am I supposed to stand by and do nothing while you drag millions of people into dictatorship?”

The silvershirt shakes his head.

“You’re a real spitfire, sweetheart. We only want what’s best for America and her people. This country needs order, not anarchy and Roosevelt’s…soft bolshevism. You’re not a Jew. Or a red. A family like yours, Miss Cooper—good, old stock Americans—has got nothing to fear from our new order. So why fight us?”

Betty narrows her eyes.

“And those people who aren’t ‘good, old stock Americans’?”

“We’ll clean out whatever refuse we need to in order to save this country. There’s no reason for you or your friends and dear ones to be swept out with that trash.”

“So what’s it going to look like?”

“What?”

“When you win. When you impose your…new order. What’s it going to look like?”

The silvershirt’s eyes flutter closed. He looks into his glorious future.

“Less chaos. Democracy is tired. It’s had its day. It was a long day, but still, a day. See, we want a new nation. A new world. One without all of the factions and parties and dissent. One where people are united. In blood and purpose. What’s wrong with that?”

“Everything. You make all people follow and think the same way and follow the same lines and they stop being people. You put them in chains.”

The silvershirt sighs. He turns his head up towards heaven. He sucks his teeth.

“Well, Betty, you see chains, I see direction.”
“You can see whatever you want, but you’re never going to win.”

“We can leave that up to fate.”
The little Greendale café sits grey and quiet beneath a February rain-shower. The windows shudder and shake in the draft. A little radio hums in the corner. It’s early morning, and the first cracks of sunlight split the boiling clouds. The raindrops glimmer. The café is sparsely populated with its few occupants ensconced behind wrinkled newspapers, warming themselves by cups of bitter coffee as they gather themselves for the day.

Another day, another dollar, if they’re lucky. A little less than that, most likely.

Two figures sit at a corner table, hunched over, bundled up in their jackets and scarves. Two cups of coffee sit between them, untouched. Hot vapors spiral up from the mugs in twisting spirals, and then vanish into the morning air. The figure on the right spins a quarter across the polished tabletop.

“This is what you call ‘fucked nine ways from Sunday’,,” Joaquin DeSantos says.

Cheryl Blossom scowls.

“Don’t give me that,” she snaps.

“You have any ideas?” he demands. His hand twitches towards his coffee, but he pulls it away.

“We do what we set out to do. We get the tape to Senator Topaz. Once that’s done, we’ll alert the authorities, and they’ll rescue Betty and Archie from my father’s fascist clutches, and all will be well with the world.”

“Is it a rich people quirk, thinking nothing ever ends badly?”

“No, it’s a Cheryl Blossom conviction, and those are never wrong,” she growls.

“Right, right.”

The radio crackles on, dispensing weather forecasts and grim lists of closing businesses. A waitress, greasy-handed and grey-faced, fiddles with the knobs.

“…General Franco’s most recent efforts to capture Madrid have come to naught, thanks to the spirited resistance of Loyalist forces. In a uniquely American twist to the Spanish nation’s tragedy, within the last several months enough Americans have offered their services to the People’s Front government to form a self-styled ‘Abraham Lincoln Battalion’ fighting with the government troops.”

Cheryl’s head snaps up.

“Jason…”

“What?” Joaquin takes a sip of his coffee at last. “Is that his unit? Him and Jones?”

Cheryl nods, throat tight.

“Yes.”

“The question of foreign fighters has cast a shadow over the Spanish conflict since the first days of the war. Thousands have listed in the ‘International Brigades’ on behalf of the Loyalist
government. On the other side of the lines, Italy and Germany furnish thousands of soldiers to fight in Franco’s ranks, along with tanks and warplanes. The Lincoln Battalion, for its part, played a crucial role in foiling the latest insurgent drive on the capital, at the price of nearly half its effectives. Among the slain are said to be the battalion’s captain, a certain Mr. Blossom from New York State…”

The rest of the broadcast fades into a grumbling nonsense. Cheryl’s pupils dilate. She feels her chest constrict. That can’t be right. It can’t be. Her head spins. She suddenly wants to vomit. She clutches the edge of the table, knuckles a fierce white. Joaquin watches her intently. Cheryl dry heaves.

“No…” she mutters.

“You—you don’t—we don’t know that’s true,” Joaquin offers. “News from the front is always fuzzy. It’s probably malarkey. It—“

“Yes,” Cheryl chokes out. “It’s got to be. It—“

“…The SS Normandie, carrying the first Americans of the ‘Lincoln Battalion’ home from Spain, docks in the city in two days time.”

Cheryl comes to her senses again.

“We’ve—I’ve got to go to the city. I’ve got to see if Jason’s on that ship. If he’s okay—“

“What about the tape?” Joaquin asks. “Betty and Archie? We’re still on the clock here, aren’t we?”

“No,” Cheryl gasps, trembling. “Jason can help us. If he’s on that ship. Jughead is probably there, too. They're both coming home. They can help us. We just have to go and meet them—“

Joaquin looks into her dark, terrified eyes.

“…Listeners are advised to be on the lookout for two youths recently vanished from Riverdale Township. The first is a girl of 18 years of age, by the name of Cheryl Blossom. She is red of hair and fair of complexion. Her companion is a young man of similar age, dark haired…”

Joaquin stands.

“I think that’s the kick in the ass we need,” he hisses. “Let’s get out of here.”

A few heads swivel around. Cheryl takes Joaquin by the arm and leads him outside. A wave of mutterings sweeps over the café patrons. The two quickly disappear down a side street.

Jughead wanders about in a daze for the next few hours.

“The bullet didn’t do much,” says the battalion doctor as he digs the shattered round out of Jughead’s thigh. “But if it had been a little further down…it would have hit something important. And the way you were out there all night? You would have bled to death, no doubt about it. You got lucky.”

Jughead looks up at the ceiling of the canvas tent over his head, nodding blankly. A mess of white bandages winds its way around his thigh. He hobbles out of the tent.
The fascist offensive on Corunna Road is blunted thanks to the herculean efforts of the Republican People’s Army. Madrid is yet again saved. Franco is again humiliated, much to the chagrin of his backers in Rome and Berlin.

A cruel breeze turns and blows northward, carrying the stench of decay across the valley of the Jarama into the Lincoln trenches. Fascist fire renders the recovery of the slain impossible. Their bodies lie moldering beneath the olive trees and on the open ground. The hideous Spanish sun bakes their flesh and subsumes the heroism of their sacrifices in the rank indignity of death.

Jughead nestles into the trunk of an olive tree, in the little grove just behind the lines. He lights up a cigarette. His hands shake so violently that the smoke goes tumbling into the dirt. He doesn’t bother to pick it up. He leans his head back against the tree. His eyes brim with tears. His shirt is stiff and starchy. Great splotches of dark red mar the fabric from collar to waistline. He’s still covered in Jason’s blood.

“Hey,” Toni says, stepping into the olive grove. Her own face is covered in the same grief as his. “How are you? Your leg.” She adds, unconvincingly.

“I’m fine,” he says quickly. “I’m sorry about Fangs…and, everyone.”

Toni sits down next to him.

“Yes. Me too.” She kicks aside the smoldering butt of his cigarette. “But you didn’t make him come over here. No one did.” She pauses. “I’m sorry about Jason.”

Jughead sniffs. He wipes his nose and blinks a few tears away.

“You know, I was always giving him a hard time…always needling him just…about his stupid Marxist nonsense and…you know…he always had his head in the clouds. I don’t know, I feel like a son of a bitch. Like maybe he died believing I never even gave a shit.”

She lays a soft hand on his shoulder.

“Look, he knew you cared. He did. About…him. About all of this. About everything. He knew. I can promise you that.”

He tries to say ‘thank you’, but it comes out an ugly, mangled sob instead. Toni looks into his eyes, fighting to keep herself together.

“And he didn’t die for nothing. None of them did. You know that.”

Jughead nods. She’s right.

“Yeah. I know.”

As the battle draws to a close and the lines calcify again, the soldiers retreat to mourn their dead. Two miles behind the trenches, the XV Brigade gathers to commemorate their slain comrades. Those corpses that could be retrieved are buried. Those that could not are remembered.

Jughead still wears his bloodstained uniform.

A sizable crowd gathers on a barren, unremarkable strip of land. What’s left of the Lincoln Battalion, some 160 effectives, attends. Long, deep trenches are cut out of the earth and the dead are laid down. Jughead peers into the mass of mourners. A motley mixture stares back, composed of Spanish Republican soldiers, Internationals, and Spanish civilians come to pay their respects.
Sweet Pea hugs him briskly. They exchange sympathies for their fallen friends. Chuck Clayton stands stiffly by an olive tree, rifle in hand. Veronica slaps Jughead on the shoulder.

Two faces emerge from the crowd. He does not recognize them in the din. Then his head clears. They are Mariano and Isidora. From Barcelona. From Toledo.

Has it only been a few scarce months? Could that be?

“Torombolo!” Mariano lunges forward and squeezes Jughead tight. The boy blinks absently.

Isidora pats his arm.

“Salud, compañero.”

“Long time. We’ve been fighting the fascists for weeks to the west of here.”

Jughead smiles. He looks the dusty, tattered man over.

“You look it.”

“Donde esta Jacinto?” Isidora asks.

Jughead swallows. He fears to speak.

“He’s uh…esta…no esta.”

The two nod solemnly. They lower their heads.

“Lo siento,” Isidora says. “Seguro que murio como verdadero hijo del pueblo.”

“She says; she’s sure he died like a true son of the people,” Mariano translates.

If Jughead were not so broken, he might laugh. Jason Blossom—a true son of the people.

“Thank you,” he mutters.

As the highest-ranked survivor of the Lincoln’s massacre at Jarama, a host of eyes turn to him. Veronica leans in.

“Do you want to say something?”

“Say what?”

“I don’t know…” she shakes her head. “Something.”

He sighs, and ambles on up. There’s no podium, nor even a nice flat stone or a tree stump to stand upon. So he just squares his shoulders and stiffens his back and hopes people listen. A thousand heads turn. He faces down a sea of eyes blank and empty of everything but grief. The war has come and torn great hunks of flesh out of Spain. The rolling crowd clench its fists and flexes its fingers, reaching out for the friends and comrades torn away. He chokes down a lump of misery.

“Hi…hello…everyone. I know most of you probably can’t understand me. My Spanish isn’t very good, and my German and French are worse, and don’t get me started on anything else,” he smiles awkwardly. “Sometimes…they…my friends used to tell me I was always a little too eloquent. So I’ll try to keep it brief. I want to say to everyone here today… that I know what it feels like. I found out two days ago. I wish I hadn’t. But I did. I’ve been in Spain for nearly half a year now.
I’ve seen people die in every way. Bombed, shot, stabbed. But it wasn’t…I had a friend…a good
dfriend of mine, die in my arms. I couldn’t do anything for it. I couldn’t…” he pauses for a moment,
and forces away another sob."I couldn't..."

I’m sorry. I’m sorry for your brothers and your sisters and your friends and comrades that you’ve
lost. I’m sorry for mine. But I just…God, I know this is hokey. To hell with it. They died for
something better. They died because they wanted to be free. Because they wanted us all to be free.
And…maybe I’ve read too many books. Maybe there’s no such thing as a good death. But if there
is, that’s got to be it, right?” He looks out on the crowd. He feels that they can understand him. He
decides to believe they can. “So we can keep them here with us. Let’s look to them, because they
were the best of us. And let’s keep fighting. Let’s keep fighting until this fascist cancer is finally
wiped out!” he cries. “And let’s remember them. Until the day we die, whether that’s tomorrow or
in eighty years. Let’s remember them. More than anything, let’s remember them.” Tears roll freely
down his face. His hands tremble. Through the tears and the shaking, he manages to raise a
clenched fist over his head. “Because…goddammit…they're worth remembering.”

Mariano steps forward. He throws a clenched fist salute.

“Arriba parias de la tierra, en pie famelica legion…los proletarios gritan; ‘guerra!’ hasta el fin de
la opresion!”

Jughead smiles, despite it all. His own wavering voice joins in the song.

“Arise, you prisoners of starvation. Arise, you slaves no more in thrall. The earth shall rise on new
foundations, we who have been naught shall be all!”

The mournful valley comes alive with the rousing strains of the Internationale. In a hundred
languages. In a thousand voices. The sea of mourners becomes a sea of raised fists and burning
eyes.

“‘Tis the final conflict, let’s each stand in our place! The internationale shall free the human
race!”

Jughead’s heart swells. The song cannot beat away his grief, but it can temper the pain. The dark
shade of misery lifts from the valley. A bright, shining hope bursts forth from the hearts and throats
of the gathered mourners. Jughead sees with perfect clarity, as the Internationale sweeps him up in
its mighty, stirring refrain. And he sees that they must win. The fascists can kill Jason and Fangs
and Doiley and Seacord and they can kill every man and woman in Spain who dares resist them.
They can slaughter their way through the whole world. But they can never win. Not as long as one
fist is raised against them.

He smiles.

The song ends.

“Viva la libertad!” Jughead cries, so loud he fears he’ll tear his stricken throat.

“Viva!” the crowd cheers.

“Death to fascism!”

“Death!”
Toni Topaz picks through a stack of papers. She hasn’t wired any correspondence home in weeks. She was too caught up. First in the thrill and the excitement of international conspiracies and the gun smoke of war. Then—

Fangs is dead. In part she wishes she could have been there when he died. In part she thanks God she didn’t see it. In whole she wishes it never happened. She throws down the papers. They’re covered in brutal, shorthand typing. The way it always comes out when she’s in a rush. Messy, hand-scribbled notes fill the margins. Maybe they’ll fire her if she doesn’t send something in, soon. At least a paragraph or two. Some dry report on the frontline situation.

*Just wire in: REBEL OFFENSIVE ON THE JARAMA HALTED,* she tells herself. They’ll already know that, of course. Nick will have sent it in. At least Madrid hasn’t fallen. Nick’s got to be pretty burned about it. That makes her feel a little better.

She digs her fingers into her scalp. She’s all cried out. She and Fangs and Sweet Pea—they were never the type for a lot of tears. Toni remembers the time Fangs and Sweet Pea were evicted from a ratty little apartment they shared on the Lower East Side because the assholes at the cannery had slashed everybody’s wages for the umpteenth time and they couldn’t meet their landlord’s exorbitant demands. They had all been only eighteen, then. Sweet Pea had cried a little, because he was a kid and he was scared and he didn’t know what they were going to do. Fangs had hugged him briefly, and then Toni had said; “don’t get mad, get even.”

She shakes her head and smiles to herself.

And they had. They’d gone and trashed the landlord’s car something bad. Then they’d all split a sandwich downtown.

Her hands feel cold. She flexes her fingers and digs her nails into her palms. What idiots. What a stupid idea. What in God’s name had possessed her two best friends to sail halfway across the world and get themselves to shot to hell in some stupid fit of bravado?

Then again, she’s here, too.

Toni sighs. She wishes she had more pictures of Fangs. But cameras were a luxury. Days gone by. She leans back. She should head back into Madrid, soon. She’s been out here in the Lincoln Battalion’s trenches for near a week, now.

Sweet Pea steps into the dugout. He lays his rifle against the doorframe, as if to clarify he comes in peace.

“Hey, Tone,” he says, softly.

“Hey,” she replies. She looks into his face. His dark eyes look so big and baleful she wants to cry all over again. “How are you?” she asks, gently.

“Fine!” he says too quickly. “How are you?”

“We’re not fine, Sweet Pea. Knock it off.”

He sits down next to her, drawing his long legs up to his chest.
“Ok. We’re not fine. I’m not fine.” His affected calm melts away. His lips tremble. His face burns red. He produces a bullet from a pouch on his belt. He rolls it slowly between his thumb and forefinger. “Fuck!” he hurls the bullet at the wall. It clatters to the floor.

Toni hugs him. He puts a wide, heavy arm over her shoulder. A few fresh tears fall from his eyes and cling to her hair and the fabric of her shirt. She rubs his back.

“I’m sorry,” she sighs.

“I’m gonna kill every last goddamned fascist in Franco’s army myself!” he snarls. “Then I’m going to march into Burgos and put my bayonet through the fucker's throat. The last thing he’s ever going to see…” his voice trails off. He sniffs.

“We don’t need to lose you, too,” Toni says.

“Something wasn’t right out there,” Sweet Pea says flatly.

“Out where?”

“On the field. That day. We were supposed to have planes and tanks. Captain Blossom…he said as much, before we went over the top. We were supposed to have twenty planes overhead and a dozen tanks. Instead we had two tanks and one bomber. If they’d been there…Fangs would still be alive. Blossom would still be alive. I’ll bet half he guys would still be alive.” He turns to face her, face twisted up with rage and incomprehension. “So where were they? What the fuck was Brigade doing that they couldn’t spare us a few goddamned tanks?”

Toni doesn’t respond. She looks down at her hands. She does recall Jason mentioning much heavier air and armor support than what materialized that day on the field. It is odd. Perhaps it was simple administrative incompetence. That’s about the only thing in ample supply in Republican Spain. But she feels something else. She knits her brow. Something feels off.

Toni stands.

“Where are you going?” Sweet Pea demands.

“I’m going to find Jughead.”

“Wh—why?”

Toni rushes out of the dugout without answering. She finds Jughead leaning back against a crate of freshly delivered Russian rifles. He scribbles furiously into his notebook. He mutters something to himself.

“Jughead!” she calls.

He raises his head.

“Toni?”

“The day before you went into battle at Jarama—Jason radioed into Brigade and requested additional air support and armor, didn’t he?”

Jughead squints.

“Yeah. He did.”
“Something like twenty planes?”

Jughead’s lip twitches.

“Yeah. And a hell of a lot more tanks than we ended up getting.” He stares off into space. The same ugly threads of suspicion that run through her mind coil together in his. “But…they never showed,” he mumbles.

“Right,” Toni hisses. “Why not?”

His answer is to leap to his feet, stuff his notebook into his pack, and bustle off towards the communication trench. She follows on his heels.

“Anybody see Captain Merriman? Where’s Captain Merriman?”

“He’s in back,” Clayton says, as he cleans the blade of a shining bowie knife. “Just got off the phone with Brigade.”

Toni and Jughead rush to the battalion’s one portable field telephone. Merriman stands next to it, scribbling notes. He works with one arm, his shoulder still swaddled in bandages.

“Hey! Robert!” Jughead calls.

Merriman salutes.

“Commissar Jones.”

Toni speaks, quickly. “We were supposed to have about ten times as many planes and tanks for the assault at Jarama last week. Do you know what happened to them?”

Merriman shakes his head. He removes his wire-framed glasses.

“Ten times—no, I don’t know. Wh—says who?”

“Jason requested them from General Gal the night before we were all fucking massacred in that valley!” Jughead growls.

“I don’t know—“ Merriman says.


“Hello?” comes the hoary, impatient voice of General Gal.

“General,” Toni begins, just barely respectful. “Four days ago Captain Blossom contacted you from here. He requested twenty planes and ten tanks for the Lincoln Battalion’s action in the Jarama sector? Do you remember that?”

“Well, yes, I—“

“Well we never got them, and 150 men died. Do you want to explain that?”

“Who is this speaking?” he demands.

“Answer her question!” Jughead snaps over her shoulder.
“Jones, is that you?”

“Answer the question!” Merriman concurs.

“Listen—I received orders from higher up that the equipment was desperately needed in another sector. There was nothing I could do?”

Jughead takes the phone.

“What sector?” Jughead demands. “Orders from who?”

“From General Miaja. I—“

“You spoke with Miaja?”

“Well, no, bu—“

“Then who did you talk to?”

“Colonel Casado. He’s stationed in Madrid.”

Toni’s ears prick up. Colonel Casado. The name is devastatingly, infuriatingly familiar. But she can’t place it. Colonel Casado.

“Colonel what Casado?” Toni asks.

“Colonel what Casado?” Jughead relays into the phone.


Colonel Ernesto Casado. Toni batters herself for the significance of the name. Then it hits her. A brief, brisk little conversation at the bar of the Hotel Florida, all those months ago. Just a week or two before the battle for Madrid.

“Sure. I’ve got a contact in the Republican military. Colonel Ernesto Casado, his name is. Good guy. One of the few reds I can stand.”

Toni grits her teeth. Her heart thrums with rage. Her pupils explode.

Nick St. Clair.

“I heard about what happened at Jarama,” Nick says into the phone. He smiles broadly. “An—and I quote—‘unmitigated military disaster’.”

On the other end of the line, Casado is quiet.

“Yes. Indeed—your American battalion lost half strength.”

Nick leans in towards the mouthpiece. He peeks out through the windows of his Hotel Florida room. In the streets below, a cleanup crew removes the rubble left behind by the latest fascist bombing raid.

“And the two—Blossom and Jones. They’re dead?”
“I know the battalion’s captain is dead. That was Blossom, wasn’t it?”

“Yes!” Nick exults. “And the other one? Jones?”

“What was his rank?”

“I…shit. I don’t remember.”

“Well then I don’t know if he is dead or not. I know the adjutant commander and battalion commissar survived.”

Nick snorts.

“He’s probably dead. He would have been right next to that idiot Jason. My dad—and Mr. Blossom—will be delighted to hear.”

More silence. Casado coughs.

“Listen, Nicky—there’s more.”

“More, what?”

“The attack was a failure in one sense, yes. They failed to dislodge Barron’s men from their positions, but in another…”

Nick swallows. Had there been some minor hiccup?

“What?”

“Several hundred thousands of American dollars worth of Mr. Hiram Lodge’s money was in transit to Malaga.”

“Right, right. My father told me. They need that money, is it—“

“A red bomber struck it head on.”

“What? What?”

“It’s gone. All of it.”

“What? All of it? There was nearly a million dollars in that—all of it?”

“All.”

“Son of a bitch! I have to call my father!”

“Nicky—“

He hangs up. He slams his fist into a wall.

“Fuck!” This is unbelievable. Incomprehensible. How had this happened? On his watch? His father would butcher him. Assuming the entirety of the Fraternity didn’t find itself in prison, now that their funds had vanished into smoke. He swears. Nick dials his father, fingers trembling.

“Dad?”

“Nicky? Hey!”
“Dad I have some…some bad news and good news.”

“Good news first?”

“Jason Blossom and his friend are dead. You can tell Mr. Blossom that.”

His father coughs.

“He’ll be glad to hear. And the bad news?”

“Dad…I…he…your money…Mr. Lodge’s money…”

“Nicky…”

“It’s gone, dad,” he says, voice strangled. “All of it.”

“Gone? Gone how?”

“The reds blew it up.”

“What? Are you joking? This can’t—oh my God. With everything else that’s happened—oh, Lord.”

“What?” Nick demands, gripping the receiver tight. “What else has happened?”

“Cliff’s daughter and her friends…they tried to turn us in to the authorities. They…”

“What? Who?”

“His daughter, Cheryl, and a few kids from their little shithole town. Look, we’re going to take care of it—Cliff’s guys already picked up one of them, and we’ll get her to tell us where the rest of them are—but on top of this it’s…”

A furious knock sounds at his door.

“Shit!”

“Nicky? What is it?”

“I don’t—“

“Open up!”

“I have to go, dad.”

“Nick!”

He hangs up.

“Open up you fucking fascist!”

His stomach turns. His room on the third floor. He throws the window open. The building’s façade is covered in pillars and crenellations. He could climb down. But then—

The door splinters and a team of Republican militiamen storm into the room. Nick finds himself staring down the barrels of three ugly rifles, bayonets gleaming. He breathes and relaxes his shoulders. Then he leaps for the window. A hand shoots out. It grips him by the collar and throws
him to the floor. The stock of a rifle slams into his gut. He heaves. A boot connects with his ribs. Something cracks. He cries out in pain.

“Little fascist weasel!” the miliciano shouts.

Then a rifle butt slams into his skull.

The lorry squeals to a stop before the Model Prison. Jughead Jones leaps out. He slams a pistol into his belt. Toni Topaz, Veronica Lodge, and Sweet Pea follow behind him.

The prison looms over them, an ugly 19th century structure pressed back into overtime service with the coming of the war. The cells burst with pro-Franco prisoners who pass the time jeering their guards and dreaming of the day the insurgent troops march into Madrid at last.

Jughead stomps up to the prison gates. A militiamen steps out to bar his way. Toni sidles up next to him. She produces a little note stamped onto crisp, yellow paper. She hands it over to the guard. He looks it over, and shouts back into the prison.

A moment later Arturo Barea emerges, looking wearier than usual. He raises a hand in greeting.

“Señorita Topaz.”

“I’m not even going to correct you, this time, Arturo,” she sighs.

The man smiles grimly.

“Thank you.”

“Is he here?” Jughead demands.

“Where is he?” Sweet Pea roars.

“He’s here.”

“Let them in,” Barea says.

“You can bring two,” The militiaman tells him.

The militiaman steps aside. Barea leads Jughead and Toni into the building. Veronica and Sweet Pea hang back outside.

“God,” Veronica mutters. “What is this place, the Bastille?”

Jughead, Toni, and Barea move through the dank, murky corridors. They hew close to the center of the hall, away from the cells. The prisoners inside stare out through dark, calculating eyes. A few have the temerity to cry: “viva Franco!” or “Arriba España!”

Barea takes them into a wide, empty concrete room. Dark, conspicuous stains are splashed over the grimy walls. Barea nods and steps out.

A door at the other end of the room opens. Three figures storm inside. Mariano and Isidora manhandle Nick into the cell, each gripping one his arms. Nick is hardly recognizable beneath the hideous purple bruises and dark streaks of blood. He stumbles forward, but his captors catch him and yank him back.
“The bastard tried to run, so we had to give him a working over,” Mariano explains.

“I can see that,” Jughead says.

Toni steps up. She leans in to examine her erstwhile colleague. Nick cranes his neck up. Clumps of dark hair strung together with dried blood hang over his face.

“Well, well, Nick. I guess your press credentials didn’t save you this time, huh?” she growls. He spits. Toni steps back.

“Fuck you!” Nick snarls. “Fucking reds!”

“We know what you did you…goddamn weasel,” Jughead growls. He takes a step closer. The blood throbs in his veins.

“Oh, really?” Nick taunts. “What did I do, huh?” His voice cracks and breaks. He winces in the grip of his captors. Then sees the tears in Jughead’s eyes. “Oh…I’m sorry I killed your blockhead friend,” he sneers. “It’s too bad they missed you.”


“You fucking slime. Look at me.”

Isidora grabs a fistful of Nick’s hair and brings his head back up.

“Fuck you, Jones.” He swings around to face Toni. “And fuck you, too, bitch. When we…when we take power back in the States, I’ll make goddamned sure neither of you have any homes to go back to.”

“You’re not in any position to be making threats,” Toni snaps.

“When you ‘take power in the States’?” Jughead shakes his head. ”What the hell are you talking abo—are you…are you working with Hiram Lodge? Cliff Blossom? DuPont?”

“Do you…do you think I’m scared of you?” Nick giggles. “Oh, that’s sweet. Real swee—“

Toni swings a fist into his stomach. The air bursts from his lungs. He dry-heaves. Isidora and Mariano sneer. Toni thrusts her face towards his.

“I’ve wanted to do that for a hell of a long time,” she snarls.

“Bitch—“ he moans, gasping in agony. She hits him again. Then she snatches Jughead’s pistol from his belt. He’s not in the frame of mind to complain. Toni presses the gun to Nick’s head. Despite himself, he whimpers.

“Listen to me—150 guys died last week. One of them—every one of them was worth a hundred of you. I’d gladly see you dead a thousand times to bring my friend back for twenty seconds, so if you think I won’t blow your goddamned brains all over this filthy fucking room…” He simpers, but says nothing. She swings the pistol to the side, and fires a shot into the far wall, right next to Nick’s ear. The report explodes through the little room like a cannon. He cries out in pain and snaps his head back. Toni presses the gun’s muzzle to his forehead.

“Look!” He cries. “Look!” He turns his eyes to Jughead. “Look, Cliff Blossom wanted you and Jason gone. He didn’t want you…fucking anything up in Spain. But congratulations! You managed to, anyway! You blew a million dollars worth of Hiram Lodge’s money to hell!” He giggles wildly.
A string of saliva tinged with blood hangs from his lips. “It won’t matter, though, we’ll win. Wait and see. Yeah…wait and…” he hocks up another load of spit and blood. “Wait, I’ll have you and all your goddamned friends and family strung up in Times Square. We’re already off to a good start with…”

Jughead shakes him by the collar.

“With what?”

“Jason’s sister…”

Jughead’s skull throbs. He’s angry. Confused. Frightened. Tired. He’s hardly slept in four days. A strange prickling sensation creeps over his flesh. His heart throbs. And now—what, had Cheryl and Betty run into some kind of trouble back home?

Betty!

“Cheryl? What about her?”

“Fuck off…” Nick half-sighs, half-sobs.

Toni cracks him in the skull with the grip of the pistol. He moans.

“Answer him you fucking…”

“God! Alright! Look…my father…he said that Cliff’s daughter and some of her friends…tried to turn them in…” Jughead’s throat tightens. “But his guys…Cliff’s guys…they caught some stupid girl who…”

“Stupid girl?” His vision flickers. Tentacles of panic curl around his guts. Betty? Is he talking about Betty? His breathing gets shallow and sharp. “What girl?”

“I don’t know!”

He grabs Nick by the throat and shakes him mightily.

“What girl?”

“Some friend of Cheryl’s! I don’t know! They were going to try to turn them in to some…senator or something. I—they’ve got them at the camp.”

“Son of a bitch!”

Jughead turns.

“Where are you going?” Toni demands.

“I have to go.”

“Bu—“

“I have to go!”

He rushes out of the Model Prison, mind reeling. He finds Veronica still at the gate, speaking with Sweet Pea.
“Jughead, h—“

“Veronica, we have to get back home.”

“Wh—“

“Back to the US. Now.”

“What’s going on?” Sweet Pea demands.

“Betty’s in trouble!” Jughead blurts out.


“I think…I think your father…I think Cliff’s guys have her.”

“What?”

“Nick said…nevermind, come on, we have to go!”

They ride back to the Lincoln trenches, and Jughead gives a quick run down of what he knows.

“How fast can we get back stateside?” Veronica asks. “I mean, I hardly got out of Seville with my…head attached, much less with my passport. Not to mention Queipo’s boys stripped me of every cent I had on me when they threw me in jail. About $300, too! Some fascist goon is probably gambling it away as we speak—ugh!”

The truck screeches to a stop. Jughead hops out. He races through the camp, searching for Merriman, technically now the ranking officer.

“Hey,” he asks Clayton, whom he finds polishing Doiley’s old knife. “Where’s Merriman?”

“He’s at the telephone. Gal’s screaming down the line at him.” Clayton grins, flat and grim. “You in a rush, commissar?”

“Yes!”

Jughead rushes off. He finds Merriman just where Clayton said, babbling helplessly into the receiver. He can hear Gal on the other end in his shrieking martinet’s voice.

“Captain Merriman!” He salutes.

“Commissar Jones. I’m—“ and just like that, Gal hangs up on him. Merriman sighs. He hangs up.

“What is it?”

“Comrade, I need to go.”

“Go? Go where?”

“Home. There’s…something pressing. Family business.”

“Family business?”

“Please. I can’t explain, now. I have to go.”
Merriman furrows his brow.

“With that leg, we could invalid you out, anyway.”

Jughead nods.

“Yes. Thank you,” he pats Merriman on the shoulder.

There is no time for a real farewell to the battalion. Not in the least because Jughead doesn’t wish to have to explain the reason for his sudden departure. And because there is little time to waste. He darts into the little dugout anchoring the trench network and retrieves his few belongings. His knapsack, stuffed with his novel-in-progress. The few books he’s brought with him, and the scorched copy of Don Quixote he picked up in Toledo.

Halfway through feverishly stuffing his things into the bag, he stops. There, across the little dugout, sits Jason’s pack. Jughead rises and steps gingerly towards it. He gently undoes the strings and opens it up.

Jughead rifles through the pack. There’s Jason’s well-thumbed copy of *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* A few pamphlets stamped with the seal of the Communist Party-USA. He smiles grimly. He opens up *Soviet Communism*. A slip of paper falls out, beginning to curl and yellow at the edges. Jughead unfolds it into a little newspaper clipping. The unmistakable stamp of the *Riverdale Register* gleams in the corner. The headline pronounces: **BLOSSOM MAPLE FACTORY VANDALIZED**. Jughead runs a finger over the fading ink. He smiles and tucks it into his pocket.

Then the next item. The wrinkled little picture. Jason and Cheryl, at the little beach in Coney Island. Jason smiles out at him from the photo, happy and carefree. The breeze tousles his bright red hair. His sharp blue eyes almost have color. He slides it into his pocket before it can bring tears.

He picks up Jason’s knapsack, along with his own, and exits the dugout. He collects Veronica and Toni and ushers them to a waiting truck. They hop into the bed.

Sweet Pea sidles up to the rumbling lorry.

“Sweet Pea?” Toni asks. “You coming?”

He spits and shakes his head.

“Back to the states?”

“Yeah,” she says.

“No. I’m staying. I’m gonna bloody Franco’s fucking nose for Jarama, wait and see.”

Toni nods.

“Good luck.”

Jughead salutes the man with a clenched fist.

“No pasaran.”

“No pasaran,” Sweet Pea returns.
Veronica taps the truck’s cab. The driver urges the engine to life and the lorry peels away down the dusty road away from the sorrowful Jarama Valley. Jughead leans out of the back of the bed, watching the trenches melt into the horizon and disappear. A cool wind blows down, shaking the olive trees and whipping through his hair. His stomach is an acrid pit. A few tears spring out in the corners of his eyes and then dry up in the breeze. Fear creeps up his spine.

How long will it take to get back to the States? Assuming they can navigate the French border, it will take days to get to port and charter a ship. Another few days to make the Atlantic Crossing. Every day is another that his friends—and everyone else back home—are in grave danger. Jughead clenches his fist. He already misses his rifle.

Regardless of how long it takes, they will get home. They will rescue their friends. They will see Cliff Blossom and Hiram Lodge and the rest of them hang for what they’ve done.

Jughead owes Jason that much.

The lorry bounces along the unpaved road through the craggy country back to Madrid.

“Solo es nuestro deseo, acabar con el fascismo, ay Manuela, ay Manuela…”

Veronica leans back up against the truck bed. She sighs. Toni stares straight ahead, eyes unblinking, wind picking up her dark hair. Jughead recognizes his own expression in her face: that of loss and anger.

Anger.

More than anything else, that’s the emotion that takes primacy in their hearts. Sadness, fear, and anticipation, certainly. But anger above all. Veronica replays again and again in her mind’s eye the indignities suffered and seen in Queipo de Llano’s Seville. Toni struggles and fails to shake the awful memory of Sweet Pea crawling back to the Lincoln trenches that night—without Sweet Pea. Jughead can still feel the hot, sticky residue of Jason’s blood on his hands. Congealing in the folds and lines of his skin. Drying under his fingernails.

Anger.

Above all else, they desire vengeance.

The truck speeds on. An improvised road sign of weathered plywood reading ‘A Madrid!’ pops up along the way. As they near the city, something dark appears on the horizon. A long, winding shape, creeping closer with each yard, rattling and rustling along the roadside. They come closer, and Jughead recognizes a column of soldiers marching in the other direction. To the front. The soldiers at the head of the line hold aloft their Republican flags, and wave brilliant red banners.

The truck rolls on by the fresh recruits. The young boys in their helmets and berets smile and throw clenched fist salutes. Jughead smiles bitterly and returns the gesture.

“Viva la Republica!” A young man cries, holding his rifle aloft.

“Viva España! Y afinad vuestra punteria, porque esos hijos de putas Franco y Queipo y Mola todavía no se han muerto!” Veronica shouts.

The Republican soldiers holler and cheer.

The truck continues on its way. The column of troops disappears in their wake, shouting and singing as they march off to face the fascists, youthful courage yet untested by battle.
They get back to Madrid before nightfall, just in time to catch the aftermath of another fascist air raid.

The trio dismounts the lorry. The street is impassable thanks to the rubble and heaps of corpses left behind by the Nazi bombers. Teams of grim militiamen and civilian volunteers clear away the gory wreckage, while stricken madrileños watch. Rebel pamphlets, dropped by the planes in the wake of the bombs, litter the flagstones. The face of General Franco, serene and avuncular smiles out from the cheap, mass-produced little booklet.

‘General Franco offers you peace, justice, and order!’ The pamphlets scream. ‘The red ‘People’s Front’ government in Valencia offers only war, starvation, and death! All true Spaniards rally to the National Banner! Viva Franco! Arriba España!”

Jughead makes sure to grind one of the pamphlets under his heel.

Jughead, Toni, and Veronica stand on the curb, at the edge of the frothing crowd, watching the blood dry on the stones and the dust settle over shattered homes and mangled bodies.

Toni turns her face up to the sky.

“They’ll have to answer for this, one day,” she says, dryly. “They’ll have to.”

“They will,” Veronica responds, straight-faced.

Dead silent, they walk the streets of embattled Madrid until they reach the Telefonica building, where Aturo Barea awaits them. The grim Spaniard lifts his head from his work to greet them.

“Evening, Arturo,” Toni says, glum.

Barea steps out from behind his desk. He saunters over to the trio. He nods. Then he pulls Toni into a hug.

“You’re leaving Spain, then?”

“Got to go,” she says, shrugging. “I guess there’s a fire we’ve got to stamp out in our backyard.”

Barea nods again. He swings his gaze to Jughead.

“I want to say again, Mr. Jones; I’m sorry for what happened at Jarama. If you’re going out from Spain, go assured that the rat St. Clair and the treacherous officer who helped him will pay for their crime.”

Veronica leans in. “How will they pay for their crimes?”

“The officer—Casado—I think he will be shot. We should like to do the same with Mr. St. Clair.”

“Good,” Toni seethes.

“I uh…as much as I’d like to see that little weasel go up against the wall, I think some caution may be prudent here,” Veronica cuts in.

Barea raises an eyebrow.
“Oh?”

“At the end of the day, he is an American citizen, and shooting him is not going to endear the Spanish Republic to the international community.”

“The republic needs all the good press it can get—“ Jughead says. “Squandering that would be the…last thing the guys at Jarama would have wanted.”

Barea nods again.

“Yes, yes. I suppose the military authorities will talk it over. What he’s done is espionage, under the guise of journalism—he richly deserves to be shot. But perhaps we will simply expel him from the territory of the Republic.” He looks up, scowling. “And should he ever be foolish or daring enough to return…”

“Then you’ll shoot him?” Toni asks.

“Without question.” He changes tack. “And what is it that requires you three to speed back to America?”

“It’s best not to talk about it, now,” Jughead says. “Ears everywhere, you know…Nick is an instructive case. Perhaps when it is all over, you’ll see. The world will see. Just know we’ve got our own domestic fascists to nip in the bud.”

“Can you arrange a quick trip out of the country for us?” Toni asks. “Make sure we don’t have any trouble with checkpoints or militia.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll try and make sure you have no trouble between here and the French border.”

“Thanks,” Veronica said.

He nods, and hugs Toni again.

“You’re a fine woman and a fine journalist—one of the few,” he says. Then to Jughead: “you’re a fine man and a fine soldier.” He turns to Veronica. “Miss, I don’t know you, but if this is the company you keep, I can only imagine you are a good, stout-hearted woman. God speed you all along.”

Jughead instinctively throws a clenched fist salute. Barea returns it.

And then they are on their way.

The trip out of Spain, thanks to Barea’s machinations, proceeds with little difficulty. Military checkpoints and roving militia patrols let them pass without issue. They leave Madrid that very night and find themselves in Barcelona the next morning. The three speak little.

Walking down La Rambla in Barcelona, Jughead finds himself choked with tears. Could it really have been half a year ago now that he strolled this same street with Jason? Even the city seemed to mourn. There were not so many snapping red banners or Catalan flags in the air. No one sang the Internationale and the militia seemed sapped of their revolutionary enthusiasm.

Was Jason really dead?

They board a train to the French border. Halfway to the little seaside town of Gerona, Jughead lifts his head and exclaims; “Fangs!”
Toni’s eyes light up. She whips her head around instinctively, as if she expects to see her old friend ambling down the aisle towards her. The pain in her face when the reality strikes is palpable.

“What about Fangs?” she asks.

“His…his family. Did…who is his family?” Jughead asks.

Toni smiles sadly.

“He didn’t really have a lot of family,” she says. “None, really, that I know of. Just me and Sweet Pea.”

Jughead nods.

“I see.”

“Jason?”

“What about him?”

“His family?”

“Cheryl…” Jughead sighs. “God, I’m going to have to tell Cheryl. If she’s even…God, I hope she’s okay. And Betty. Archie…we should never have put any of this on them.”

“Nobody twisted their arms,” Veronica cuts in. “And they’ll be okay. We’ll see to it. We’ll all be okay. We’ve got to be.”
The moonlight flickers over the dark waters of San Francisco Bay. In the midst of the frothing whitecaps, a black rock juts out sharp and jagged against the twinkling sky. An island.

Hiram Lodge gets to his feet and ambles over to the window of his Alcatraz cell. The bay is deathly silent, save for the crash of the waves and the cries of seabirds. A dog-eared book sits on his cot.

Nearly two years now. He’d been shunted around a cavalcade of federal prisons since 1935, and spent the last six months in the newly opened maximum-security facility at Alcatraz.

He watches the black water shimmer and dance. He squints. He’s waiting. Then it comes. The sharp rap on his cell door. Hiram smiles. The door creaks open. A guard steps inside.

“Mr. Lodge?”

“Yes?” he asks, smooth and oily.

“You have a visitor.”

Hiram nods. “I know I do.”

It’s a privilege most prisoners aren’t afforded. Private visitors to their cells in the dead of night. But most prisoners don’t have his pocket book. God bless America.

The guard steps aside. A dark figure appears from the hall. It steps inside, thrown into grim relief by the corridor light. It creeps into the cell.

“Hello, Hiram.”

Hiram jerks his head away from the window.

“Good evening, Cliff.”

Cliff Blossom inclines his head and ventures deeper into the dark cell. He takes a seat on Hiram’s cot. He picks up the book discarded there.

“Les Miserables,” Cliff reads the title aloud. “I think my daughter used to like this book.” He sets it back down on.

“We’re not going to shake hands?” Hiram asks with a smirk.

“We’ve got business to discuss. I’ve had a sleepless…two days speeding pell-mell from New York to California. I didn’t do it to shake your hand, Hiram.”

Hiram does an about-face and approaches his visitor.

“Alright, Cliff. Let’s discuss what we’ve got to discuss.”

“Your money is gone,” Cliff says quickly.

Hiram’s brow furrows. He squints. His lip twitches. He knows what money Cliff is speaking of, of course. He’s not an idiot. But how could that be? Gone? What does he mean? So he asks anyway.
“What money?”

Cliff shakes his head and snorts. He plucks a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lights up.

“You know what money, Hiram. Your damned…Spanish gold. It’s gone.”

“Gone? That was a million dollars. What do you mean ‘gone’? My wife was supposed to—”

“I mean something went wrong. The reds blew it up. It’s all gone.”

“The reds…” Hiram feels his vision dim. His head throbs. He clenches his teeth and resists the urge to reach out and throttle Cliff Blossom. “Blew it up? How did they ever discover it?”

“My son…had something to do with it. It doesn’t matter. The money’s gone.”

Hiram pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Do you understand what this means, Cliff?” he snarls. “How are we meant to pay Pelley’s silvershirts? Or our friends in the military? Or do you think they’ll help us overthrow the blasted government for free?”

Cliff shakes his head.

“Careful how you speak to me, Hiram. I’m not your bootblack. We’re partners. And at the end of the day, I’m a free man and you’re not.”

Hiram steps back and chuckles. It’s a shrill, desperate, angry chuckle. He curses the goddamned cell that keeps him here. Clearly his partners still at liberty can’t be trusted to themselves.

“I’ve been holding off my trial for near two years now. I don’t intend to hang for high treason. But if I do, then by God I will make sure you, St. Clair, MacGuire, DuPont, and all the rest of the Fraternity hang with me.” He steps forward and pushes his face towards Clifford, who refuses to back away. “So, for your own sake, fix this,” Hiram snarls.

“Hiram, how am I meant to fix this? The entire business about that money is that it was clean. It wasn’t traceable to any of us. I can’t damn well conjure another million dollars like that out of thin air!”

Hiram nods. He brings a hand to his mouth. He turns around and storms back over to the window.

“Allright. Fine, then. Who knows about this? Who knows the money’s gone?”

Cliff shakes his head.

“I do. St. Clair does. His son is in Spain; he’s the one who informed us. You know, now. Assuming St. Clair can keep his dumb mouth shut, that’s it.”

Hiram sighs. He shudders in fury and frustration. Things are still salvageable, then. Just barely, but they are.

“Fine, then. Tell no one else. No one. As far as the Silvershirts and our allies in the army are concerned, that money’s fine. In fact, it’s on its way across the Atlantic to the states right now, and they’ll all be handsomely paid just as soon as we’ve secured Washington. If we play this right, they won’t know the truth until everything is said and done, and by then it won’t be an issue anymore. We’ll have access to the whole damned US treasury to pay them with. But we need to move fast.”
Cliff plants his hands on his hips. He puffs his cigarette.

“We’re ready. All we were waiting on was that cash. We can march on the capital in three days time if need be.”

Hiram’s worried face breaks into an easy, shining smile. He reaches out and claps Cliff on the shoulder.

“Good, Cliff. Very good.” He’s silent for a moment. He drops his head and thinks. Then he remembers. There’s another issue that requires addressing. “How about that tape, Cliff?”

“The tape?” Cliff asks.

“Come, you know which one I mean.”

“The tape,” Cliff says one more time. “Yes. The tape.”

“Have you recovered it?” Hiram demands.

Cliff chews a lip. He scratches his head, and his wig goes askew.

“No. Not yet. My boys brought in Archie Andrews and the Cooper girl. They didn’t have it on them.”

Hiram digs his fingers into his scalp. He grumbles.

“Well then, who does have it on them, Cliff?”

“My daughter.”

“Your daughter wants to turn us in to the authorities, and your son is the one who cost us a million dollars in Spain? Your children aren’t studies in loyalty, are they, Cliff?”

He catches the flash of rage across Cliff’s face. But it’s gone as soon as it comes. Hiram chuckles nonetheless.

“I’ll get her back in hand before she can cause us any more trouble. You can count on that,” Cliff says.

“I am counting on that,” Hiram snorts. “I don’t have a choice but to count on that.” He gestures to the bars on his cell window.”

Cliff turns to walk away. He adjusts his cap and the lapels of his coat. But he looks over his shoulder and offers a few parting words.

“As far as my son and his loyalty…he won’t be a problem any more, I’ve been assured.”

Hiram is quiet for a moment. Then his eyes twinkle and he laughs.

“Is that so? Well, Cliff, I can’t say we’ve always been best friends but…you’ve always been willing to do what it takes to achieve what needs to be achieved. And I respect that.”

Cliff touches the brim of his hat.

“Enjoy your evening, Hiram.”
“Godspeed.”

The *SS Normandie* tears through the salty green Atlantic, charging towards New York Harbor. Jughead leans over the ship’s prow and stares down into the frothing sea.

They’re meant to make port today. He begins to doubt that, as the sun creeps lower and the shadows grow longer. They’d embarked at Newhaven three days ago. *Three days*. Three days that his friends are in the hands of Cliff Blossom’s thugs, while he creeps with agonizing torpidity across the sea. Helpless all the while. He can hardly bear the passing hours. His hands shake. His head spins. His stomach churns. He needs to be home *now*. Time is scarce.

Light, airy music and laughter trickle out from the ship’s spacious cabins. The *Normandie* is a luxury liner. He, Toni, and Veronica had only won their spaces aboard thanks to the helpful intervention of a few Breton longshoremen. He only wishes the gentlemen and ladies packing the *Normandie’s* first class compartments knew the vitality of his mission.

He spits into the swirling Atlantic.

Veronica appears beside him.

“Hi,” she says.

“Hi,” he replies, eyes and mouth dry.

“The captain says we should see the Statue of Liberty within a few hours,” she assures him.

Jughead nods. He swallows, and then spits again.

“Good, good.”

“It’ll be okay, Jughead,” Veronica says. “Archie…Betty…they’re tough. They can hold out until we get back.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“This is all too much, isn’t it?”

Jughead manages to smile. His chest hurts.

“Far too much.”

He thinks of Betty, brave and beautiful as she’s always been, chained up in some dank fascist dungeon of a basement somewhere. He thinks of Archie having his fingers methodically broken by some silvershirt bastard. He shudders.

It’s another two hours before the jagged New York skyline breaks up the green horizon. Dusk begins to fall. Stars tumble out of the darkness and meet the sparkling city lights. The Statue of Liberty lights the way home with her flashing torch, shimmering on the harbor’s tranquil waters.

The *Normandie* pulls smoothly into port. An army of dockworkers and ship hands throws itself into action, and the vessel is shortly secured to the pier.

A small crowd gathers to greet the returning ship. There is no cheering or jubilation. Scattered little bunches of people in scarves and coats float over the docks. They raise and bob their heads and shuffle their feet and search the disembarking mass of passengers for familiar faces. Friends or
family returning from business or pleasure in Europe. Or war.

Veronica descends the gangway first, Jughead and Toni trailing behind. The ship groans in the water. They move slowly, in grim synchronization. The world flows around them.

“Veronica! Jughead!” The voice restores them to consciousness.

Jughead’s head whips around. He searches the gathering faces on the docks. It isn’t hard to find the speaker.

Cheryl Blossom claws her way through the little crowd in a brazen display of disregard for the health and safety of those around her. She nearly sends them all tumbling into the little gap between the ship and the dock. Much to Jughead’s surprise, when she reaches him, she throws her arms around him and folds him into a brutal embrace. When she releases him, she refocuses on Veronica and does the same.

Another figure emerges from the crowd, moving without Cheryl’s ardor or desperation. Joaquin DeSantos slips into the light and acknowledges the returning travelers with a nod.

Cheryl’s eyes swing from Jughead to Veronica and back, boldly ignoring Toni.

“Where’s Jason?” she demands.

“Cheryl—” Veronica starts. “What are you doing here?”

“Where’s Jason?” she asks again, voice shrill and brittle. Jughead watches her hands and shoulders tremble. He wonders if offering another hug would be the proper thing to do. “Where is he?” she repeats. “Is…is he still on the ship?”

“Cheryl…” Jughead says, softly. He considers the thousands of expressions he’s picked up through years of listening and reading. ‘He’s gone’. ‘He’s not coming back’. ‘I’m sorry’. But he knows in an instant that none of them will do. Cheryl does not—and never has—appreciated condescension or sugarcoating. So Jughead purses his lips, bows his head, wipes away a stray tear and says: “Jason’s dead.”

For a moment, it seems like the whole world is going to come crashing down. Cheryl blinks. The next breath from her lips falters and shudders. It reminds Jughead of the rattling last breaths militiamen would give as they died on the battlefield. He watches her deep brown eyes fill with tears. She digs her fingernails into her thigh.

But she doesn’t scream. She doesn’t cry out. She doesn’t even sob. Jughead watches her swallow her agony and hold her head high again.

“We need your help,” Cheryl says, firmly, with only the hint of a tremor in her voice.

“What’s happened?” Veronica asks, stepping forward.

“I—Joaquin, Betty, and Archie. And I. We—“

“Did you get to my grandfather?” Toni cuts in.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” Cheryl demands.

“Toni Topaz. Senator Topaz is my grandfather.”

Cheryl grimaces.
“No,” Joaquin interjects. “We didn’t get to him. A couple of silvershirt goons hit us along the way. They got uh…”


“We know,” Veronica replies.

“How do you—“

“Doesn’t matter,” Jughead says. “Do you still have the tape?”

Cheryl reaches into her pocket and produces it. “Of course I do.” Jughead gives it a once over and nods, satisfied.

“We still have to get that to my grandfather,” Toni says.

“And Betty and Archie?” Cheryl presses.

“We’re going to rescue them, of course,” Jughead assures her.

“Do you know where they are?” Veronica asks.

Cheryl swears under her breath. The wind picks up and whips the harbor into a foaming broth.

“No…no I don’t. But…”

“Back in Spain, Nick mentioned something about a camp,” Jughead says. “A silvershirt camp. Does that mean anything to you?”

Cheryl’s face goes hazy for a moment. Then her eyes clear and she shakes her head.

“Yes…yes…I remember the silvershirts at Thornhill…in the midst of their fascist blathering…they said something about a camp somewhere near Midvale. You know, a training ground. An old military base or something of the sort.”

Jughead nods, catching and filing every piece of information thrown his way.

“Right, right. An old military base near Midvale. That shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“Midvale’s a ways off from the city,” Joaquin cuts in.

“We’ll need a car.”

“Cars,” Toni says. “While you go and find your friends, some of us will go and deliver that tape to my grandfather. Does that…work for everyone?”

“I’ll go for Betty and Archie,” Jughead says so quickly he trips over the names.

“I’ll go with him,” Cheryl says, moving to stand by his side.

“Alright,” Toni says. “I’ll go to my grandfather.” She stretches out a hand towards Cheryl, who holds the tape close to her chest.

“You trust her?” Cheryl asks of Jughead and Veronica.

“Absolutely,” Jughead replies.
With great trepidation, Cheryl places the tape into Toni’s waiting hand.

“Give your life before you give it up,” she says, hard and cold. “My brother died for it.”

Toni stares back at her. An immeasurable sadness captures her face.

“So did mine.”

Cheryl doesn’t understand. She doesn’t ask.

“I’ll go with Toni,” Veronica says. She pats Cheryl on the arm in an awkward attempt at comfort, and then moves to stand by Toni.

“Joaquin?” Jughead asks.

“I’ve been wandering New York State for half my life. I can’t drive, but I can point the way for someone who can. I can get them to your senator’s mansion. Quick.”

So it is decided. The group slips away from the docks and into the dark streets of New York. A light drizzle falls. They move loosely, far enough apart to deflect the suspicion that gangs of youths attract.

“Where are we going to procure two cars now?” Cheryl demands.

“Leave that to me,” Joaquin says.

Joaquin, seeking out suitable streets and alleys with an almost preternatural skill, leads them easily through the city’s back ways until they come to a sprawling, empty lot occupied by a few scattered automobiles.

“Which ones do we want?” Jughead asks.

“Who cares?” Toni snaps.

Joaquin paces up and down the lines of cars. He finally selects a small Ford at random.

“Do you have the keys?” Cheryl calls

“Don’t need them!” he calls back. Springing the lock with practiced ease, he leans in, digs his way into the engine’s wiring, and quickly forces the car to life. He does the same with the vehicle next to it, a Buick, and soon both cars are rumbling and glowing and ready. He slaps one on the hood in a fit of pride.

“So you can fix a car to run without the keys, but you can’t drive one?” Cheryl asks.

“Sure. Division of labor. A friend of mine back in Greendale taught me—but he never got around to teaching me to drive. I’d fidget with the thing’s wires, and the other guy would drive.”

Cheryl shrugs.

“Fine.”

“So,” Joaquin asks. “Who is driving?”

Toni steps forward and slips behind the driver’s seat of the Buick. Joaquin and Veronica pile in after her.
Cheryl and Jughead clamber into the Ford.

“In case any of you fine folks are feeling the pangs of guilt,” Joaquin jokes. "I’m sure the owners of these vehicles would be delighted to know they’ve given their cars for the preservation of American liberty.”

“Good luck!” Veronica calls out.

“See you on the victory stand!” Jughead responds.

“Save it for your book!” Toni says.

And then the two cars peel off in opposite directions.

Every epic has its grand finish. The last settling of accounts. The final curtain. But life is not an epic, and in its course there are no grand finishes. There are paroxysms of fury and passion, and yet there are no endings. When the smoke has cleared, the world goes on its way.

Yet if there is such a thing as a true life ‘ending’, I had to believe that we were heading for one as our stolen Ford picked its way through the rugged New York countryside by flickering headlights. Sometimes Cheryl wept. Sometimes I did. There was so much to weep for. We cut no noble image, stricken with sorrow and hunger and exhaustion. But our cause was as noble as any. It was the one Cliff Blossom’s laborers had struck for a year ago. The one that my father and Archie had taken bullets for. The one that for which Jason Blossom had given his life on that bleak Spanish plain. If we failed, then every bit of that blood and every protest in the name of liberty or democracy would be in vain.

So we would not fail.

Could not fail.

Cheryl and Jughead pull into Midvale at the crack of dawn. The sun breaks over the treetops and rouses the little town from bed. It is, Jughead thinks, just like Riverdale. They pass by shuttered stores and faded signs advertising long-passed clearance sales. A weather-beaten board hanging from a rusting telephone pole commands: “Jobless men keep going”.

Jughead struggles to keep his eyes open. He’s been driving for nearly six hours. He’s hardly gotten full night’s sleep since leaving Spain.

“How did he die?”

The question shocks him fully into consciousness. He turns to find Cheryl staring at him, chewing her lip.

“What?”

“Jason. How did he die?”

Jughead refocuses on the road. His throat closes up. He can hear the olive trees of Jarama rustle and feel the sticky ooze of Jason’s blood on his skin. He digs his fingers into the steering wheel.
“If…if it’s possible to have a good death, that’s how Jason died,” Jughead says, struggling to keep his voice even and calm.

Cheryl sighs.

“It isn’t that I don’t appreciate the romantic sentiment, but I’d delight in an actual, straight answer. How did he die?”

“In battle. At a place called Jarama. We were laying down what’s called an aviation signal. It’s like…a big arrow you set down so the planes know where to drop their bombs. We dropped a couple of tons worth of ordnance on Hiram Lodge’s gold like that.”

Cheryl nods and sniffs.

“Good. Good. Did it…was he…was somebody with him?”

Jughead’s face twists up with hurt.

“I was with him. I was right there. The whole time. He was never alone.” Jughead turns to see the tears running free down Cheryl’s face. Her lip trembles, and he feels that familiar, miserable pressure in his chest. “Cheryl—“ he tries, but it comes out strangled and odd. “He wasn’t afraid. He was never afraid,” he promises. And it is true.

Cheryl nods, struggling to wipe away her tears. As if she could hide them.

“I know. He couldn’t have been.”

Then silence retakes them.

“My father—“ Cheryl begins again. “Did he…”

“He wanted it done,” Jughead says. “It was him.”

“I’ll kill him,” Cheryl says calmly. “I swear on my brother’s bloody grave I’ll see justice done.”

If it weren’t for the sheer gravity of the moment, Jughead might have laughed at her bombast.

“So—we’re in Midvale, now,” Jughead says, after some time has passed. “Do you have any idea where that camp is?”

Cheryl shakes her head.

“No. I don’t know.”

They cruise on through the town, until they round a corner and find a young man in a newsboy cap leaning against a wall, flicking through a paper. Jughead slows the car and rolls down a window.

“Excuse me! Oliver Twist!” Cheryl calls out.

The young man leans towards the car, but neglects to peel himself away from the wall.

“Yeah?”

“There’s an old army base around here. Do you know where it is?”

The young man lowers his newspaper.
“Yeah. You keep doing down main street. It’ll take you out of town to the north. About a mile out, you see a little dirt road heading east; that’s the old base road. There’s a sign. You won’t miss it.”

“Thanks!”

“Hey! Be careful. A couple of loons showed up a year or two ago and bought the place.”

“Guys in silver shirts?” Jughead asks.

“Right. They all pack real big guns and like to strut around the place, playing soldiers. Real trigger happy, too. Be careful,” he repeats. “What do you want with them, anyway?”

“Revenge,” is Cheryl’s ominous response. Jughead shoots her a look.

The young man raises an eyebrow.

“Good luck,” he says.

Cliff Blossom feels strange.

Jason is dead.

His son is dead.

He wanted it done, and it’s done. St. Clair had told him some days ago.

His only son is dead.

He had to do it, didn’t he? Jason was a threat to everything he’d built.

And yet he feels something tugging in his chest. A sense of loss. He’s still lost his son.

Cliff feels, also, a sort of cold, unbidden respect for his boy. He’d fought, unyielding, to the very finish, even if he was a goddamned red. And even as he died, he’d managed to bloody his father’s nose one last time. Imperiled everything. All that money. Gone. And it was Jason’s doing.

Yes, he has to admire the iron resolve and reckless courage of his boy. Jason was a Blossom after all.

Penelope does not know yet of her son’s demise. She will be broken when she learns. Cliff will never disclose his part in it, of course, just as he has never disclosed to her the full extent of his plans. She would not understand.

No one understands. That’s the problem. Why can’t people just understand? Why can’t the seething masses of reds and firebrands and ‘reformers’ that hound him understand? He only wants what’s best for all his countrymen. All the world. Not just himself. He wants order and peace and prosperity.

He’d crushed the strike for the sake of order.

He’d shot FP Jones and then bundled him off to prison for the sake of peace.

He’d taken the life of his only son for the sake of prosperity.

He will take the reins of this nation for the sake of order, peace, and prosperity.
If only the world could understand. If only Jason could have understood, instead of going to his death in the service of some mad fool cause. If only Cliff could have had his sharp-minded, valiant son with him instead of against him.

Cliff cannot even console himself that he still has Cheryl. Because he does not. She’s deserted him, too.

The Blossom name has nothing, now.

Except the cause. And the cause must triumph. Now or never.

He picks up the phone. He spins the globe beside his desk.

“Kessel?” Cliff addresses the Silvershirt lieutenant cautiously. “Yes—tomorrow. Yes, you’ll get your money soon enough. Put the word out to Colonel Kurzman. Everyone—silvershirt and soldier—must work in perfect concert. We rise tomorrow, or we don’t rise at all. Godspeed.”

He hangs up.

Tomorrow, the nation is reborn.
The Last Fight Let Us Face

"Success to the old fashioned doctrine

    that men are created all free!

And down with the power of the despot,

wherever his stronghold may be!"

~Lincoln and Liberty

“A senator lives here?” Joaquin inquires as Toni eases the car to a stop.

“Yes,” Toni assures him. And she understands his skepticism. Her grandfather’s house does not look like much. It’s a humble, single story red brick home surrounded by colorful hedges and flowerbeds. The house is no exceptional structure in this little suburb, but Toni knows it is damn near a palace in comparison with the grinding poverty her grandfather grew up in.

The three step out of the car. Veronica runs her hands through her hair.

“My God. I haven’t gotten a good night’s sleep since Jarama,” she moans.

Toni pats her shoulder.

They rush up the cobblestone pathway to the front door. A simple, chest-high iron gate is the house’s only protection. Toni leans over, undoes the latch, and lets them in.

“What, no guards?” Joaquin asks.

“My grandfather? Guards?” Toni snorts. “He says you only need guards if the people hate you.”

Joaquin chuckles.

“God, I wish I’d thought to say that to Queipo de Llano’s face,” Veronica sighs.

“Who?” Joaquin asks.

“It—nobody,” Veronica says.

Toni jogs up to the front door. She knocks hard, three times. There’s no response. She shifts impatiently from one foot to the other.

The door swings open. Senator Topaz emerges from the darkness of the house, a broadly built man on the far side of sixty. His weathered face brightens at the sight of his granddaughter. The Senator pulls her into a hug with still-powerful arms.

“Toni! Sweetheart, it’s so good to see you!” he cheers, dark eyes twinkling.

Toni smiles and pats her grandfather on the shoulder.

“Just back from Spain. Sorry for the uh…unannounced visit.”

“No problem, no problem,” he assures her. Topaz steps aside and ushers her into the house, and
then confronts her two companions. “And your friends?”

“Joaquin DeSantos,” Joaquin says.

“Veronica Lodge,” Veronica introduces herself wearily.

The senator blanches at that. He scrutinizes the girl closely, suddenly thrown onto the defensive.

“Lodge? Like…”

“Like Hiram Lodge, yes,” Veronica admits.

“It’ll all make sense, grandpa,” Toni assures him. Her grandfather reluctantly nods, grants his visitors entry, and shuts the door behind them.

The inside of the house is humble as without. Toni leads her companions through a freshly polished foyer into a little parlor with three sitting chairs and a low, wide couch. A few ancient daguerreotypes smile down from the walls. A little bookshelf sits in the corner.

“You’ll have to tell me all about Spain—" the senator begins.

“No time,” Toni cuts him off, sinking into an armchair. “We have something important for you,” she says, reaching into her pocket and extracting the invaluable little tape she’s been entrusted with. Her grandfather watches her curiously.

Veronica and Joaquin collapse onto the couch.

“Important? Is that what’s important?” he asks, gesturing to the recording.

“It’s about Cliff Blossom,” Veronica says. The senator fixes his gaze on her. “And Hiram Lodge. My father. And a few bastards besides the two.”

At the name ‘Blossom’ most of the senator’s good humor drops away. His face becomes lean and hard and serious.

“What about Blossom?” he asks.

“Do you remember the Business Plot?” Toni asks, holding up the tape like a war trophy.

The senator scowls.

“Of course I remember.”

Toni sighs. She holds out the tape to her grandfather. He takes it and turns it over in his hands, like some alien object.

“What is this?” he asked.

“It’s what’s going to send Clifford Blossom, Hiram Lodge, Xander St. Claire, and a couple of other snakes to the gallows for high treason.”

The senator cocks his head, raises the tape up to his ear, and hits ‘play’.

Cheryl Blossom struggles not to crumble. The irrational, animal center of brain refuses to accept what Jughead and Veronica have told her. That Jason is dead. That just can’t be. But it is. It isn’t as
if they would lie. And perhaps in some hidden, metaphysical sense she knows it. She can feel the gap in the fabric of the world where he should be. Like she’s lost a limb. A loss and separation so sharp and brutal it’s almost physical. Worse than physical pain.

She feels numb more than anything. There’s a deep, boiling dread hidden beneath that quiet placidity. She knows that, soon, the reality will strike her head on, and that she will drown in grief and agony. She does not know that she will be able to keep on.

But that is not today. Because today there’s still something to do. Today she has to make certain that her brother’s death is meaningful. He struck the first blow at their bastard father, and now it’s up to her to deliver the coup de grace. And she plans to do so with aplomb.

Jughead and Cheryl left the stolen car behind at the side of the road, half a mile out of Midvale. They walk along the country lane shaded by oaks and poplars, looking for a little dirt pathway due east.

They’ve been trudging alongside the dusty road for near two hours now. Cheryl should be tired. She isn’t. She can hardly feel her legs. She is not even making a conscious decision to move them. They simply hurry her along with a singular, burning sense of purpose. Jughead moves just ahead of her. She keeps her eyes trained on his dark, messy mop of hair. It helps center her. Keep her in the moment. Where she needs to be.

“Good, God, are our forty years of wandering up yet?” she demands.

“Just hold tight,” Jughead sighs.

Just as she opens her mouth for a response, the sign leaps out into their path. It sits in a copse of trees, half obscured by vines and creeping ivy. The lettering is faded into the dull, beaten wood. But Cheryl can still read it.

*Fort Midvale—One Mile.*

Just beyond the sign, a dirt road shoots off from the main highway and strikes due east.

They take the turn and follow the path through the dense woods. The hard-packed earth is impressed with the patterns of men’s boots and truck tires. The route is in use.

“So, when we get there, what exactly is it you’re planning to do?” Cheryl asks.

“Rescue our friends?”

“With what, our moral superiority?”

They continue along the trail for another half hour, as it traces the crest of a hill, and then slopes back down into the bowl of a deep, narrow valley ensconced between two craggy ridges. And there, in the dip of the valley, is the camp.

Cheryl and Jughead drop to their stomachs and crawl to the lip of the valley’s drop-off. The camp is a standard-build US Military base. Two barracks sit up against the east side of the complex. A mess hall is situated at an angle off to the left. They share the space with a postmaster’s station a few other miscellaneous wood buildings, all centered on a grassy parade ground. From a lofty flagstaff floats a silver banner blazoned with a red ‘L’ in the upper-left canton. The entire base is ringed with a bristling, layered network of barbed wire.

Silver shirted militiamen throng the little base. They loiter in doorways, or relax atop boxes of
ammunitions, or drill on the parade ground.

Cheryl squints, wishing she had a pair of binoculars.

“I didn’t know we were infiltrating Andersonville, my God,” she sighs.

“I wish to hell they’d let me bring my rifle over from Spain,” Jughead adds.

They scope out the camp and commit its layout to memory. There is no sign of their friends.

Cheryl creeps closer. Jughead warns her to stay down. She waves him off and drags herself forward on her elbows.

“See that ugly little building, there?” she asks, pointing to a drab grey little structure at the far north of the camp.

“Yeah. Looks like a…quartermaster’s store, maybe.”

“Whatever the hell it is, it looks empty. There aren’t any silvershirts in a thirty-yard radius. And the barbed wire there is thinner than elsewhere. I say that’s our point of entry. Oui?” Cheryl rises to a crouch, and then creeps down the sloping valley wall towards the camp. She gets about twenty yards before realizing Jughead isn’t following. He wavers up on the ridge, watching her with lidded eyes. “Come on!” she hisses. “You’re the gallant soldier here, not me!” Jughead stands. He sighs and follows.

They creep around the barbed wire perimeter, keeping low to the ground and making use of the shrubbery and piled stones along the way. The chattering of the silvershirts in the camp carries on the breeze.

“I hear we’re moving out this evening.”

“This evening? No. We ain’t set to go for another two weeks.”

“Well, this evening. That’s what I hear.”

Jughead shudders at the word. The camp is alive with marching, stomping silvershirts and rumbling lorries. They’re preparing for something, and soon. Time is short.

Jughead and Cheryl continue down the sloping valley. There are guard towers built into the corners and angles of the camp fencing. They are thankfully unoccupied.

After ten minutes of grueling crawling, they reach the quartermaster’s store, and the ‘comparatively light’ barbed wire. Jughead steps forward gingerly, keeping his head low. He grabs a handful of barbed wire, careful to dodge the spikes, and slowly lifts it up. He motions for Cheryl to crawl through.

She dutifully slithers through the gap on her stomach. The barbed wire briefly catches her shoulder and draws a trickle of blood. She winces, but recovers and lurches the last foot or so through the fence. Cheryl springs up on the other side, and gingerly takes the wire from Jughead’s hand to allow him passage, too.

Soon, they’re both inside the camp. They right themselves and brush the dust from their clothes. A silvershirt patrol comes tramping down from the east. They secret themselves behind the quartermaster’s store.
“What now?” Jughead says, more to himself than to her.

“I say we ask one of them were your cherie and best friend are,” Cheryl replies.

“What one?”

Cheryl puts a finger to her lips. They peek out from behind the store. Another silvershirt comes sauntering down the way. He bobs his head and whistles ‘Oh Susanna’ as he goes. Cheryl flattens herself against the wall. She whistles along.

“What are you doing?” Jughead snaps. She ignores him and keeps on whistling. “Stop!” he nearly screams. She continues. He tries to cover her mouth. She pushes his hand away. The silvershirt stops walking. He wavers in his spot. He cranes his head towards the sound. He stops whistling. Cheryl stops, too. The silvershirt narrows his eyes. He starts whistling again. Cheryl does too. The man draws a pistol from his belt and creeps closer. He moves, crouched low, gun thrust forward. He stops whistling again, and so does Cheryl.

“Who’s there?” the silvershirt calls, sounding more than a little concerned. Neither of the infiltrators responds. The man comes closer. He picks up the tune again. He reaches the quartermaster’s store. He leaps around the corner, gun primed. The moment he does so, Cheryl lunges forward, slams her hands into his chest, and throws him to the ground. Jughead watches in shock. The silvershirt collapses, and the pistol falls from his hands. Cheryl dives and snatches it up.

Before the silvershirt can get to his feet, he’s flanked on both sides, with Cheryl pointing his own gun at his skull.


“Jesus, Cheryl—“ Jughead gasps.

“I said we were going to ask somebody, didn’t I?” she says, sweetly. She thrusts the gun into the man’s belly and forces him further behind the little building, far out of sight of his comrades.

“Who are y—“ the man tries.

“Shut up,” Cheryl repeats, putting the gun back to his head. “We’re looking for someone. Two someones. You kidnapped them and brought them here, like the cowardly, conniving fascist rats that you are. Now, where are they?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” the silvershirt sneers.

“Do you want to die?” Cheryl snaps, pressing the barrel of the gun into his forehead with such force the skin goes white. Color drains from the man’s face. Beads of sweat leak down his cheeks and brow.

“Look, we did bring some kids in,” the man begins. “Bu—“

“Where?” Jughead growls. “Take us to them!”

The silvershirt opens his mouth, but then a stern determination comes into his eyes, and he says nothing. He curls his mouth into a sneer.

“You won’t shoot me,” he says with a sort of laughing sigh. Like he’s relieved.
“No?” Cheryl tests.

“No. Every man in this camp will hear the gunshot and you’ll both be dead before you can make
the fence again.”

Cheryl’s lips twitch in rage. Because he’s right. He’s called their bluff. They really can’t shoot
him. He chuckles.

Then Jughead’s hand shoots out and plucks the knife from the silvershirt’s belt. The man lets out a
little gasp of disappointment and shock as the blade is pressed to his neck.

“You know where I was until about a week ago?” Jughead demands. He presses the knife into the
man’s throat. The skin gives, but doesn’t split. The terror in the silvershirt’s eyes returns.

“No.”

“Spain,” Jughead growls. “You know what we did to fascists like you in Spain?” He takes the
knife away and waves it in the man’s face. “We didn’t need bullets. In fact, they were a waste. A
knife or a bayonet worked fine.” He drags the knife down the man’s grey tunic. He brings the
blade back to their prisoner’s throbbing throat. “Now tell me where my friends are, or I will stick
you like a pig!”

A wicked smile comes over Cheryl’s face.

Jughead presses the knife deeper into the man’s neck. A few droplets of blood spring out and cling
to the blade.

The man’s breathing gets shallow and sharp. He winces and writhes in their grasp.

“Alright! Listen! Listen, do you see that old communications hut, there?” He points across the
parade ground to a low, squat building with a flat roof, built away from the rest. Thrust into the
shadows.

“Yes,” Cheryl says.

“They…God…stop!” He cries. Jughead relieves the pressure on his neck. “They should be there.
I…I think. Look, pal, I’m a goddamned captain, they tell me nothing.”

Jughead gestures to the building.

“In there?”

The man nods feverishly.

Jughead returns the nod.

“Thank you.”

“Alright, now cut his throat,” Cheryl oozes, half-mad with bloodlust.

“What? Cheryl, I—no!”

Cheryl rolls her eyes. Jughead has just said something eminently silly.

“What do you mean no? We can’t let him go!”
“I mean to say—I’m not going to slit a man’s throat while he lays here helpless.”

“Fine, give me the knife. I’ll do it.”

“No,” Jughead says firmly.

Cheryl shakes her head, utterly failing to comprehend.

“Why?”

“Because it’s not that I personally don’t want to cut his throat, it’s that I don’t want his throat slit in general!”

She throws a furtive glance over her shoulder. The camp gets smaller and smaller. She can hear the laughing and the chattering of the silvershirts everywhere.

“We don’t have time for this—give me that damn knife,” she reaches out for it. Jughead pulls it away.

“No!”

Cheryl huffs.

“Fine! Do you know how to tie a good knot?”

Jughead cocks his head and fixes her with a suspicious look.

“Yeah…pretty good.”

“Good.”

Cheryl turns to the stricken silvershirt.

“Alright, you fascist bastard; take off your clothes.”

The man, complaints preempted by the knife to his throat, hurriedly complies. He strips off his pants and his hateful silver shirt. Jughead duly hogties him with his own clothes, looping the sleeves of his shirt around his ankles and the legs of his pants around his wrists. With Cheryl’s help, he drags their victim out of sight behind the quartermaster’s store. Cheryl plucks the man’s hat from his head and jams the brim between his teeth. He answers with a look of evil, impotent hatred.

Cheryl smiles and pats him on the head.

She and Jughead leave the man to his humiliation and sneak towards the communications hut pointed out to them. They skirt around the perimeter of the camp, careful to avoid the concentrations of silvershirts on the parade ground and the barracks.

They slip around the back of the hut. It sports two doors, one prominent front entrance, and one smaller built into the back. They take up position on either side of the door. Jughead reaches out and knocks, then pulls back. They wait. There’s no response. Jughead leans back, and slams his shoulder full-tilt into the rickety plywood. It flies open with a crack like a gunshot. For a moment, he and Cheryl freeze. They wait. There’s no shouting. No one comes running.

The door hangs ajar, sagging on its hinges. Jughead carefully shoulders it aside and creeps inside, Cheryl on his heels.
The inside of the hut is dark and dank. There are no lights. The walls are bare. A heady, grim smell floats into Cheryl’s nostrils.

A dark shape lurks in the corner of the next room, near a shuttered window. They near it. A rusting iron bed frame emerges from the gloom. Cheryl peers into the darkness.

There’s something else.

A *someone* strapped to the bedframe.

Jughead draws the silvershirt’s pistol.

“Betty!”

Cheryl winces at the sight of the girl she’s known, as friend or enemy, all of her life. Betty’s arms are covered in small, wicked lacerations from shoulder to wrist. Her face is covered with a hideous mess of purple-brown bruises. Her nose is swollen. Cheryl brings a hand to her mouth.

Jughead reaches out, shaking.

“Betty! Betty!” he grips her by the shoulder and tries to shake her awake. “Betty, wake up!” he says, voice trembling.

Betty stirs on the bed. She forces her eyes open. Cheryl breathes a sigh of relief.

“Jughead?” she says, voice smoky and unsure. As if she fears it might be a dream.

Jughead showers kisses upon her brutalized face. She returns them with delirious glee. He and Cheryl quickly undo the bonds holding her to the bed frame and Jughead hugs her with all the strength left in his weary limbs, until she cries out for lack of air. They break, and then re-embrace. She leans in and kisses him. Their tears mingling together.

“I missed you so much,” Jughead says, voice trembling.

“Hi, Betty,” Cheryl says softly. “It’s…good to see you.”

“Archie!” Betty exclaims, suddenly.

“God, Betty…” Jughead breathes, running his fingers tenderly over the angry marks on her arms. “What did they do to you?”

“I didn’t tell them anything,” she assures him.

“I know you didn’t,” he replies, enveloping her in another hug.

“Archie,” Betty says again. “He’s here. Did you—“

“Where is he?” Jughead asks.

“Here…there’s a basement. I could hear them—“ Betty tries to sit up, and whimpers in pain. “Ah!”

Cheryl takes stock of the hut. There’s not much here. Three rooms, and the other two are empty. But she heads into the third chamber and finds a door set into the far well. She tests the knob and finds it locked.

Betty gets to her feet, slowly. Jughead offers his arm for support. She stumbles. Her hand shoots
out and grips the bed frame for support.

“Jughead, come here,” Cheryl hisses. Jughead wavers, reluctant to unlink his arm from Betty’s.

Betty pulls her arm from his.

“Go ahead.”

Jughead joins Cheryl at the door. Betty follows behind. Jughead produces the silvershirt’s knife and deftly springs the primitive lock. He pushes the door open slowly. A set of winding steps tumbles down into the darkness.

The basement is grim and dank. Cheryl can see a vague, flickering light bouncing across the walls somewhere below. Jughead hands the knife off to her and draws the gun they’d taken from the silvershirt. They push deeper into the darkness, Jughead sweeping the gun to cover every shadow and every crevice that might conceivably shelter a lurking foe. A Spanish lesson.

They take a turn and find the source of the bouncing light; a single bulb hanging by wires from the grimy ceiling. Cheryl follows the beam of light. Just below the bulb is a sagging wooden chair, and strapped tight to the chair, face forced up towards the light by a thick rope, is Archie Andrews.

Betty rushes over.

“Archie!” She covers his face, shielding him from the incessant light. His eyes are screwed shut tight, but they open, because someone is touching them and it isn’t in anger or violence. He tries, instinctively, to turn his head from the glowing bulb. The rope prevents that. Jughead cuts the cord. Archie is mercifully freed from the torment of the light. He blinks with incredible speed, and then rolls his blistered, weary face around to face his friends.

“Guys?” he asks, meekly. A weak, frightened smile catches his lips.

Jughead bends over and embraces his old friend, brushing aside sweaty, plastered hair and pressing a kiss to his forehead.

“Yeah, I’m here, Arch. We’re all here. Come on.” He absently hands the pistol off to Cheryl, then leans down and cuts Archie’s wrists and ankles free.

Cheryl watches the affair, fixated on the ugly lesions running down Archie’s neck and over the sides of his face. Hideous red-black splotches mar his skin, and she surmises he’s been tortured with a red-hot iron of some kind. Very 15th century.

“What did they do to you?” she asks, without really meaning to.

“Not enough,” Archie manages to croak. Jughead slaps him on the back.

“Good, good. You’re fine, you’re fine.”

Jughead gathers his old friend and his girlfriend in another embrace, and lets the tears come. The three of them stand together, crying into the grimy dark of the old basement, basking in their life and liberty. Cheryl hangs back, head low.

“We should get out of here,” she says. “Before someone finds that third-rate stormtrooper we trussed up?”

“What?” Betty asks.
“Nothing,” Cheryl assures her.

Jughead helps Archie stand. He fast rediscovers his balance and—for the moment, at least—suppresses the pain of his weeks-long torture.

“So what have they been feeding you two?” Cheryl asks, blithely.

Jughead shoots her a look.

She shrugs.

“The tape!” Betty exclaims. The fog clears from her head. She’s lucid again.

“Is safe—“ Cheryl assures her. She puts a hand on Betty’s arm. “It’ll be with Senator Topaz by now.”

“Bu—“

“Betty, I know you don’t have a world of reasons to do so, but trust me.”

Betty looks down at her feet and bites her lips. She nods.

“I do.”

“Then let’s get out of here,” Cheryl jerks her head towards the staircase.

The four storm out of the basement and onto the ground floor. They turn a corner, and then the door to the hut opens. They freeze. A silvershirt swaggers inside.

“Johnny, y—“

The silvershirt freezes. He stumbles back from the two freed prisoners and the two new arrivals. His fingers twitch. His lips move without sound. He reaches for the rifle slung across his back. His hands find the stock. He opens his mouth to cry out.

There’s little choice.

Jughead draws the pistol. He braces it against his left arm, draws a bead, and fires three short shots into the man’s chest. His words die in his throat. Blood dribbles out over the grey tunic. His fingers slacken. The rifle slips from his shoulder and clatters to the floor. The silvershirt crumples dead.

Cheryl dives forward, snatches up the rifle by the barrel, and shoulders it.

“Let’s go!” she cries.

“Wh—“ Archie starts.

“They’ll have heard the shots! Damn it!” He whips around to look at Cheryl. “You know how to fire that?” he points to the rifle in her hands.

“No?”

“Hand it over.”

He takes the rifle, shoulders it, mimes firing, mimes working the bolt action and mimes firing again.
“Helpful,” Cheryl drawls.

He ignores her.

“Got it?” he asks.

“I intend to be the next Annie Oakley.”

“Let’s go!”

Jughead storms out of the front door, his friends following behind in single file. The parade ground lies open before them. Shouts and cries of alarm erupt from every barrack and building in the camp. Jughead counts the rounds in his pistol. Cheryl grips her rifle in shaking hands. Her face is an eerie, blank sheet.

“How did you guys come in?” Betty asks.

“We—“

Three silvershirts charge around a corner. Cheryl fires from the hip. The bullet goes wide, but the crack sends the three men sprawling.

Jughead dashes onto the parade ground and takes cover behind a stack of ammunition crates. Betty and Archie huddle behind him. He checks the pistol’s ammunition. The silvershirts gather themselves, form up, and take aim.

“Throw down your weap—“

Jughead leans around the crates. He aims the pistol and fires. Two rounds go wide. The third strikes one of the silvershirts in the shoulder. He goes tumbling to the ground. His rifle clatters to the grounds. His two comrades stumble back in shock. The four infiltrators take the opportunity.

Betty jumps up.

“Come on!”

Her friends scramble to their feet and follow behind her. A volley of bullets sails in behind them. The four cram themselves behind a little munitions shed, just in time for the rain of bullets to bury itself in the building’s balsa wood wall. The camp comes alive with shouting and cursing and tramping boots. Archie lays his shoulder into the sheds door and cracks it open. They spill inside. Stacks of rifles line the walls. Jughead scours the room for bullets. He finds only a lone box of ammunition in the corner.

Cheryl peeks through the shed’s window. Every silvershirt in the camp storms out onto the parade ground, clutching rifles or pistols. A captain directs his men to cut off every possible avenue of escape from the shed and out of the camp. Cheryl hears a dozen men rush around the back of the shed to cover their rear. She swears under her breath.

Betty and Archie pick up rifles. They turn the weapons over in their hands as if they were fantastic alien instruments. Jughead picks up a gun of his own and gives another quick firing demonstration.

“Juggie—“ Betty croaks, face darkening, blue eyes watery and scared.

Before he can give any kind of response, a loudspeaker crackles.

“You’re surrounded! Every way out of that goddamned shed! Come out—and I mean without a one
of those rifles, or we’ll shoot you down where you stand!”

The four hesitate. Then Cheryl cups her mouth and thunder back: “Why don’t you come and drag us out you gutless, traitorous, fascist sons of bitches?”

“Jughead,” Betty begins again. “If we don’t get out of here, I want you to know th—“

“We’re going to get out of here,” he assures her.

“But if we don’t.” She cups his face in her hand. “I’m so, so proud of you, Jughead. This past year…for everything you’ve done. You’ve done what’s right. Even when it was hard…or painful…”

He leans down and kisses her. For a brief moment, they forget the shack of rifles and the guns of the fascists and the world crashing down around them. They allow themselves, for a brief moment, to be the kids they’re supposed to be. For that second, it’s okay. The kiss breaks.

“It would have all been worthless, Betty,” Jughead says, voice breaking. “Without you and…and Cheryl and Joaquin. Without you, everything I did would have been meaningless. I love you, Betty Cooper.”

They kiss again.

“Hey! Hey!” Archie calls.

On the parade ground, the silvershirts wheel a light machine gun into place. An old Great War Browning.

“Hit the ground!” Jughead cries.

They strike the floor just as the first torrent of bullets rips through the feeble balsa wood walls of the shed. The sound is deafening. The air whines and sizzles as the rounds buzz over their heads and smash straight through the far wall. They feel the force of the bullets, the sheer pressure and power, passing mere inches above them. The barrage lasts for near a full minute, and then stops. Jughead rolls over on his back. The shed’s singular window has been pounded into crystalline dust. Pinpricks of sunlight stream through the holes in the perforated walls.

“Are they dead?” a silvershirt asks.

Jughead takes stock of the situation. A few of the holes opened up in the walls are big enough to see and fire through. A godsend. It means they can shoot back without being forced into the window. He grips his rifle, jams in a clip, and crawls over to an opening in the wall.

“I don’t know,” another silvershirt responds to the inquiry of the first. “Go check!”

Jughead shoulders his rifle and takes aim through the hole. He tracks the sights over the assembled silvershirts. He lands upon one standing off to the left. The chevrons on his left arm identify him as an officer. He takes aim at the man’s chest. Fires. A burst of red from his chest, and the officer crumples over and sags to the ground. His stunned comrades watch his clean, sudden death with a detached awe. Then they fire back.

“Stay down,” Jughead says.

The silvershirts return fire. A new hail of bullets—rifles this time—bore into the shed.
“God, how many *are* there?” Archie asks.

“Too many,” Cheryl growls.

Jughead’s heart contracts in his chest. There *are* too many silvershirts. Hundreds in the camp—a hundred on the field, alone. This is not a fight they can win. He closes his eyes. Toni, Joaquin, and Veronica will be with Senator Topaz by now. Even if the fascists kill them here, their plot will be exposed to the world. Their bid for power will fail, and they will be called to answer for their crimes. They can kill him and his friends, but they will still lose. A strange peace grips him.

“Fire through the bullet holes in the walls,” Jughead says. “Stay away from the window,” He sets his jaw and looks each of his companions in the eyes. “I love you fellas.”

“I—we love you too, Jug,” Archie assures him.

Jughead smiles. A line from the *Internationale* comes to him. Jason must have sung it a hundred times.

*So then, comrades, come rally, and the last fight let us face.*

*The last fight let us face.*

And the last fight is on.

The silvershirts unleash another storm of bullets. Jughead and his three untrained friends answer with irregular, desultory potshots from the shed. They score few hits. He sees three silvershirts collapse. None dead. Just struck in the legs or the shoulders. But the fascists miss, too. They don’t realize their enemies are lying prone inside the shed. They shoot high.

“Come on, come closer, fascist pigs,” Cheryl snarls. She fires two shots. “You can’t shoot worth a damn! *Il Duce* would be proud!”

Archie tries to stand for a better shot. Jughead yanks him back down, just in time for a round to pierce the air where he’d been. Betty quickly gets the hang of her rifle and forces herself into a corner of the shed, firing wild, aimless shots through the window.

The mass of silvershirts advances, firing.

“Give up!”

“No pasaran!” Jughead shouts on instinct.

Their ammunition runs low.

“I’m getting low!” Archie says.

Jughead stuffs his hand into the one box of bullets and hands a clip to his friend.

But soon his fingers scrape the wood at the bottom of the box.

“Make your shots count!” he cries over the shattering din of shouts and rifle fire.

Their firing slows, and the fascists’ intensifies. The silvershirts close around the shed like a ring of steel, a wave of grey.

“You want to spare me a few more rounds?” Cheryl asks.
Jughead dives back into the box and then realizes they’re dry. There is one more clip. Five rounds. He closes his eyes and swears. He passes one bullet to each of his friends.

“Is this—“ Cheryl tries.

“That’s it,” Jughead says.

Each one picks their last shot carefully.

“Burn,” Cheryl hisses, and fires.

Neither Archie nor Betty says anything as they discharge their final rounds.

Jughead sighs, draws a bead on a single advancing fascist, and shoots. The man goes down. Dead or wounded, he cannot know. And that’s it.

The camp goes silent.

The silvershirts hang back for a moment, fearing a ruse of some sort. In a few minutes time, it becomes clear their antagonists have simply run out of bullets. The fascists descend on the shed like a flood.

Jughead is silent. His friends are silent. A few wet, singular tears mark the moment. The door, already riddled with machine gun and rifle bullets, splinters inwards. The silvershirts charge inside. Jughead instinctively thrusts his rifle forward, as if to strike with his bayonet. But he has no bayonet. A silvershirt grabs his weapon by the barrel and yanks it out of his hand.

Archie punches and yells as the silvershirts wrestle him to the ground. Cheryl hisses and strikes and swears.

Jughead and Betty go slack.

In seconds, the four are disarmed and forced to their knees, arms behind their backs, and guns to their necks. Jughead’s assailant cracks him in the back of the head with a pistol. A sharp pain explodes into his skull. He doesn’t scream. He hardly feels it.

Betty catches his eye. His heart freezes up. He cannot bring himself to speak. To say anything. It will not be okay. But it will. Because they have not died for nothing. And that is something. What else could he ask for?

He mouths, “I love you.”

Betty chokes back tears.

A silvershirt captain swaggered into the shed. The one he and Cheryl had terrorized and hog-tied. His eyes gleam with a wicked fury.

“You kids put up a hell of a good fight,” he says. His gaze swings to Jughead. “You…yeah, I know you. Hey! Yeah, I knew you were familiar! Jones, right? Mr. uh…Mr. Blossom’s nemesis,” he chuckles. “You’ve been fucking with us across two continents. The boy Franco couldn’t kill.” He laughs and grabs a handful of Jughead’s hair. He yanks, hard. Jughead grimaces. He doesn’t cry out.

“Leave him be!” Betty cries.

A silvershirt jabs her between the shoulder blades with his rifle. “Shut up!”
“Well, you’re done, here,” the captain assures Jughead. He unholsters his pistol and pushes it into Jughead’s neck, just below his ear. The cold steel bites into his skin. “Little bastard.” He lays a boot into Jughead’s stomach. The boy wheezes in agony. “Fucker. Thought you were so goddamned smart and brave, didn’t you? You’re a real fucking hero, aren’t you?” He jabs the barrel of the gun deeper into Jughead’s throat.

“Goddamn you,” Jughead gasps.

“Well, let the last thought through your head before I blow your brains out be that you failed. And we won.”

“No,” Jughead rattles. It isn’t a desperate, hopeful pronouncement. It’s an assured, confident one. And that infuriates his would-be executioner.

“No?” The silvershirt steps back. “Which one of you first?” He grabs Archie by the hair and puts the gun to his temple. Archie’s terrified face whitens. His lips tremble, but he says nothing. Jughead, still doubled over from the kick to his stomach, wheezes again. The silvershirt lets Archie go. Both boys sigh in relief. He walks over to Betty and takes a fistful of blonde hair. He lowers the gun to her neck.

Jughead manages to pull himself upright.

“Stop! Y—“

“Oh?”

Jughead opens his mouth. The captain sneers. He fires. The bullet explodes into her neck. Betty’s eyes flash and then darken. A spurt of blood sprays her plain cotton shirt. Her lips part. A few droplets of red-tinged saliva fall from her mouth. Her head droops. Jughead doesn’t make a sound. His heart stops. The strength slips out of him. His head droops, too. A silvershirt reaches forward and yanks him upright by the hair again. He closes his eyes. Betty goes slack. The captain releases her, and she slumps to the floor. Jughead cannot even force out the pained wail building in his chest. He hears someone scream. Maybe it’s Archie.

He opens his eyes again. The captain, gripping his smoking gun, swaggers over to Cheryl, who spits up at him. She’s spent so much of her life afraid. But she’s never shown it. And she won’t start now.

“Rot in hell,” she snarls.

The captain levels the pistol at her. She curls her lips back in an ugly, wolfish sneer of defiance.

Gunfire chatters outside. Jughead stirs. Shouts and screams burst onto the parade ground. The thunder of marching boots cracks the midday silence. The snap of rifles fills the air once more. Truck engines roar. The silvershirt captain lowers his gun. He squints out of the window.

A round cracks through the afternoon breeze and smashes into his left eye. A gout of blood and brain matter gushes out of the back of his head. He takes two weak steps back. Then he sinks to the ground, a perfect corpse. The other silvershirts blink in helpless awe.

“Throw down your guns and surrender! You men are under arrest!” Someone shouts.

The silvershirts abandon their young victims and rush out of the shed to confront the new threat. Jughead cannot bring himself to rise from his knees. He stays, hunched over, wheezing and coughing. His eyes bore into the cheap plywood floor. Anything to keep from looking at Betty,
lying still a few feet away.

The gunfight outside rages, loud but short. In less than a minute the cracking rifles fall silent.

The next man to enter the shed isn’t a silvershirt.

He’s a soldier, in an olive tunic and steel helmet, with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

“Good Lord!” he exclaims.

The soldier kneels down at Betty’s side and checks for a pulse. Jughead still does not lift his head. Cheryl struggles to her feet. She looks from Archie to Jughead and then to Betty. She looks the soldier in the eye. The man looks up.

“She’s still alive!” he exclaims. Then he dashes to the door and calls: “Medic! Medic!”

“Who are you?” Cheryl asks, voice tired and wavering.

“Corporal Frederick Lane,” the soldier says. “New York Army National Guard.”

Cheryl nods.

“Who sent you here?” she asks.

“What?”

“How did you know to find us, here?”

The young National Guardsman cocks his head, a little confused.

“We weren’t looking for—we got orders. It’s surely all over the news now. Every member of the Silver Legion is subject to arrest for uh...’conspiring domestic insurrection’. That was it.”

Cheryl nods again. She giggles, and then cackles. She embraces the guardsman briefly.

Two National Guard medics rush into the shed. They kneel at Betty’s side and busy themselves staunching the gory flow from her ravaged throat. Her friends watch, faces waxen and tear-striken. Betty doesn’t make a noise. The two medics hold her fast, and with great care, lift her from the ground and carry her outside.

Cheryl steps past Corporal Lane, out of the shed.

On the parade ground outside, several dozen National Guardsmen round up the camp’s silvershirts. The fascist militiamen come streaming out of barracks and mess halls, hands in the air. The soldiers force them into neat, narrow lines at gunpoint.

Within a few minutes, the camp is pacified.

Cheryl stumbles past the batches of subdued fascists and indifferent soldiers. She trudges over the corpses of the few silvershirts killed in the gunfight. She reaches the camp commander’s office. The door is ajar. She steps inside.

There’s a guardsman already there.

“Miss, what are you—“ She ignores him and brushes past. He doesn’t stop her. The office is bedecked in American flags and the banners of the Silver Legion. Framed pictures of Hitler and
Mussolini decorate the walls. She picks up the telephone on the desk. She enters in the number she needs. It rings once. Twice. Three times. “Miss, you can’t—“ the guardsman starts again.

“Hello?” comes her father’s voice on the other end of the line, cutting the soldier short.

“Hi, daddy,” she manages in a voice of blank, chipper enthusiasm.

“Cheryl? Cheryl, where are you? Listen to me—“

“Can I ask you a question, Clifford?” She doesn’t wait for his answer. “How did it feel to put out an order for your son’s death? Did you feel anything? Did you feel a goddamned thing when you spilled my brother’s blood?”

“I did…I did what was necessary,” he says firmly. She almost laughs at the sheer shamelessness of the man.

“You’ve done some bad things, father. And now, everyone knows. What is it they do to traitors, again? I forget. Do they hang them or shoot them?”

“Chery—“

She hangs up.

Three trucks filled with National Guardsmen trundle to a stop outside Thornhill mansion. The silvershirts in the courtyard and in the house do not put up a fight. They come out, throw down their rifles, throw up their hands, and surrender. The guardsmen round up the fascist militiamen and then proceed through the heavy iron gates onto Blossom’s grounds proper.

Twelve soldiers burst through the front door.

“Up the stairs."

The men storm up the stairwell. They reach the landing, their muddy boots tracking filth across the old manor’s polished floors.

Then they hear the report of a single, sharp gunshot.

The guardsmen slow their pace. They shoulder their rifles and creep down the hallway, expertly tracing the shot behind a pair of ponderous oaken doors. Blossom’s study. The sergeant directs his men to take up positions on either side of the doors.

“Who’s got the paper?” the sergeant asks.

A corporal hands it over.

“Aunder arrest on charges of uh…levying war against the United States,” the sergeant reads. “Alright, who wants to read it out?” No one offers. “Fine, I’ll do it myself.” The sergeant pounds on the doors. “Clifford Thomas Blossom?” he shouts. No response from the study. “You are hereby placed under arrest on charges of levying war against the United States with the assistance of foreign powers!” Again, there’s no response. The sergeant nods to his soldiers. “Ready, boys?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Break it down.”
The squad bursts through the formidable doors. They crack open in a shower of splinters and chipping paint.

The study is fine and lovely. The well-thumbed, yellowing, leather-bound volumes on the shelves speak to a sharp and often-exercised intellect. A bust of the Sun King faces down the guardsmen from a gargantuan mahogany desk, daring them closer. A globe sits just to the left, tottering in its frame. It must have been touched only seconds ago.

Cliff Blossom still grips the revolver in his right hand. His sits slumped over his desk, face flat against the lacquered surface. Blood pools around his head. Smoke pours from the gun’s barrel.

The soldiers lower their rifles.

“Well, boys,” the sergeant says.

He doesn’t finish his sentence.

And it was over. Within a few hours of Senator Topaz presenting the tape to the United States Congress, the various Silver Legion cells and the rebellious military units prepared to rise up in support of the conspirators were overcome and disarmed. Shortly after that, the members of the Fraternity who had not chosen Cliff Blossom’s avenue of escape were were apprehended. Xander St. Claire, and a number of high ranking officers of Hearst and Morgan, among others, found themselves in shackles before the day was out. Hiram Lodge would never leave his cell again, unless it was for a date with a firing squad. So we'd won. It was over. Except it was not.

Betty was wounded, grievously if not mortally. We watched in anxious horror as she lingered in the haze between life and death. A bewildered nation turned its attention on us. Could it really be that we had come so near the brink of dictatorship by the machinations of a handful of industrialists and financiers? Surely not, said some. It was all a hoax, surely. And so they called us liars and red dupes. But we were heroes, said their opposite number. We had saved the Republic.

So even as we grieved and healed and rebuilt, and waited to see if we would lose yet another friend, we found ourselves beneath the sharpest of scrutiny from every pair of eyes in the land. A congressional committee was quickly formed to investigate the plot of the so-called Fraternity. Naturally, when they compiled a list of persons of interest, we were at the very top.
Denouement

Chapter Notes

Note: Hal Cooper isn't dead. In an earlier chapter, there was initially a line which implied that he'd died. It left over from an earlier draft in which he dies when the silvershirts attack the Cooper house, and I failed to cut it out because I can't proof-read. I've since removed it, but in case you saw it before I did, he's fine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Please answer the question, Mr. Jones.”

Jughead closes his eyes and counts to five. A camera bulb flashes. A sea of spectators watches him with big, prying stares.

“Yes…sir…we did unlawfully commandeer two cars that night, but considering we were attempting to forestall a coup d’etat against the legally constituted government of the United States, I think maybe we can be forgiven that one transgression!”

The room bursts into applause. Jughead breathes a sigh of relief. He adjusts his the collar of his scratchy three piece suit.

“Thank you, Mr. Jones,” the congressman mutters.

Cheryl mouths something at him from the gallery. He mouths ‘I can’t hear you’, back, to which she mouths her initial words more forcefully.

“Mr. Jones, please pay attention.”

“I am—“

“Why didn’t you alert the—“

Another senator cuts in. He’s an older man, with the wasting build of a one-time laborer and a worn, but unbroken face. He stands from his seat, leathery, lined hands gripping the arms of his chair.

“I think that’s enough questions for this young man,” says Senator Thomas Topaz. “Mr. Jones, I think I can speak for myself along with the great majority of this republic when I say that our gratitude to you and your friends, and our admiration for the extreme courage and resolve you’ve exhibited, is endless. You may take your seat.”

Another round of deep applause. Toni nods and smiles from her seat.

Jughead, mouth dry, hands shaking, and eyes almost watery, nods. He steps down from the stand, passing a gauntlet of onlookers and reporters as he returns to his seat. His congressional hearing is over.

Cheryl stands.
“Miss Cheryl Marjorie Blosson?”

Cheryl does an about-face, blows a kiss to the spellbound crowd, and curtsies, before stalking up to the stand. Jughead sinks into a seat. Veronica leans in from the seat behind him, and pats him on the shoulder. Her own day before the Select Committee to Investigate Conspiracy Against the Government of the United States isn’t for another week. Kevin, who is to testify tomorrow, sits next to her. Archie has been subpoenaed, though the moment finds him still recovering from the scars—more mental than physical—left by his time in the silvershirts’ camp.

Up at the head of the room, Cheryl stands, crosses her arms, and says: “alright, lovelies, what do you want to know?”

A congressman sighs.

“Hey, sweetheart. Baby? Baby, oh my god. Oh Good Lord, you’re okay!”

Betty’s tired, bleary blue eyes crack open. Her fingers twitch. The world blurs and then comes back into focus. She sees a vague figure, roughly human. Blonde hair, then a pair of big, tearful eyes.

Betty tries to call out for her mother. She finds she can’t. The words won’t form.

“Betty, darling,” Alice coos, smoothing her daughter’s hair. “Don’t try to talk—don’t…doctor! Doctor!” she calls. “Doctor!”

Betty tries to speak again. There’s only a stabbing, grainy agony in her throat. She stops trying.

A figure in a white coat stumbles into the room.

“Miss Coop—oh, thank God!” the doctor exclaims. Her father tumbles in right on his heels.

Betty falls back into the cold, blurry haze of unconsciousness as the doctors fuss over her and her mother’s joyful, relieved weeping fills the room.

When she wakes up again, she isn’t sure how much time has passed. The sun is creeping in through the shuttered window. She feels grimy and wants a bath. That probably isn’t going to be happening just now.

Voices buzz in the hall outside her room. She recognizes her mother’s. The other seems familiar, but she cannot place it. It’s soft and concerned, but firm. It’s painfully familiar.

Then it hits her. She very nearly tumbles out of bed to go greet Jughead, but finds she doesn’t have the strength. She lies back in defeat, head swimming. Betty turns her ear to the side and listens in.

“Yes, you can go in,” Alice is saying. “But…”

“What do the doctors say? Is she—?"

“She’s going to live,” Alice says, sniffling. “But they don’t know if her voice…it will ever…you’ve got to keep her from talking, alright? It could make things worse.”

“Of course,” Jughead is saying.

“And Jughead?”

“Yes, Mrs. Cooper?”
“Thank you.”

A moment later, the door creaks open. Jughead steps inside Betty and wordlessly cracks a great, blinding smile.

“Woah,” Jughead grins back. She can see it’s part genuine and part affected for her sake. “Someone’s wide awake.”

She broadens her smile.

“I know you hate one-sided conversations but…I’m supposed to keep you from talking. For now, anyway. Don’t worry, once your voice is back we’ll have a three-hour conversation about the color of the wallpaper in here.”

Betty blinks furiously. She knows Jughead’s vaguely familiar with morse code, and she wishes she was. She thinks for a moment. Then she furiously mimes writing in the air. Jughead’s eyes light up. He snatches a pen from a night table, and then hunts the room for a little slip of paper. Then he hands them over to her.

With a weak, shaking hand, she scribbles out a message.

Is everything and everyone ok?

Jughead bows his head. A few tears drip from his eyes. He walks timidly to her bedside. Then he leans down and kisses her, just as timidly. She feels another wave of exhaustion wash over her, but this time, it’s mingled with relief.

“Yes,” Jughead says softly. “Everyone’s fine, Betty. Everyone’s okay. I’m okay. You’re okay.” He looks out of the window, where the morning sun is bright and brilliant overhead. “It’s over.”

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The Business Plot was foiled. The designs of fascism on this country were, for the moment at least, thwarted. Hiram Lodge, St. Clair, and a number of others received sentences of death, though there was much talk of commutation. Wealth, it seemed, could smooth over even treason.

In the end, the entire affair found itself for better or for worse swept under the rug. It was an embarrassment to admit the scheming of a gang of wealthy industrialists and merchants had nearly brought the country into fascist slavery. My father was quietly released from prison, in view of his accuser’s far greater crimes. Blossom Maple Farms was just as quietly broken up, in part seized by the federal government and in part distributed among disparate shareholders and family members. So was the fate of Lodge Industries. Across the sea, Hiram’s wife, Hermione Lodge, languished in one of Franco’s prisons, paying a grievous price for her sudden fit of conscience and the escape of her daughter.

Many had the temerity to claim there had never been any conspiracy at all—that the entire thing was some left-wing plot to drum up support for Roosevelt and inch the country nearer to bolshevism.

We hardly heard any of it.

The flash and fire of war were passed.

Now we would mourn.

I watched Cheryl Blossom weep for her brother, grey and tattered and without a foe to bear the
brunt of her wrath. I wondered if I looked the same way.

_The greater scheme of things, it did not really matter how I looked._

_Across the sea, Mussolini and Hitler rattled their gleaming sabers. The Empire of Japan continued its bloody march across Asia. The League of Nations bowed and scraped and appeased._

_But Spain still waged her brutal, bloody war against the fascist onslaught. In Italy’s newly acquired empire, the first flames of resistance flickered to life. The Chinese people, bloodied and bruised, still offered unceasing battle to the Japanese invaders._

_Here, men and women still went out in the tens of thousands with their work-worn hands and their tireless voices to cry out for freedom and justice and a living wage._

What mattered was that good people fought and continued to fight.

_I suppose both Betty and Jason would tell me that._

Jason’s funeral is held a few weeks later.

With Penelope Blossom under federal investigation for potential involvement in her husband’s high treason, organization mercifully falls to his sister.

Cheryl insists that her beloved brother not be laid to rest in Thornhill’s family cemetery. She does not want him buried in ‘that poisonous place’.

Of course in reality he cannot be buried at all. His body lies forever beneath the olive trees of that lonely, windswept Spanish valley where he fell.

The ceremony is a symbolic one. And a subdued one.

Cheryl stands next to the empty plot of grave soil. She leans on the nearest tombstone. Perhaps that’s disrespectful, but she’s too tired to give it much thought.

_’I have some ideas, if you’d like’._

Cheryl nods, forcing down the lump in her throat.

_‘Of course. I just—I need to decide what it’s going to say.’_

Jughead smiles and wrings his hands.

_‘I think maybe: ‘that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth’’_

She nods at him. They both chuckle lightly.

_‘You know, I actually like that. It’s just the right amount of sentimental.’_

Two great red flags flutter lazily behind Cheryl, planted deep in the soft soil overlooking the
vacant grave.

“Where did you get the flags?”

Cheryl shrugs, sadly.

“Two 3x6 cuts of scarlet cloth aren’t too hard to get a hold of. Even in this economy.” She pauses for a moment, then she says: “Betty?”

“Betty…” Jughead says softly. “Betty’s okay. She…her voice is…they don’t know if it’ll ever come back fully. The damage was…there…it was really bad. But she can talk again. Just a bit. I think… I bet that she’ll get better. You know how strong she is.”

“Is that an optimistic word out of your mouth?” Cheryl quirks her head and smiles thinly.

“I need a little optimism right now.”

Cheryl squeezes his hand, gently.

Archie and Veronica arrive together, her arm around his shoulder. Archie’s face is still marred by the silvershirts’ ‘interrogation’. He puts up a pleasant, agreeable smile nonetheless. Veronica produces a little Spanish Republican flag. The type you might wave at a parade. She kneels down and plants it in the empty grave soil.

Cheryl smiles.

Toni arrives a few minutes later.

“I didn’t…well, I didn’t know your brother very well. I didn’t have time. But he was a good man. A brave man. I’m sorry.”

Cheryl sighs.

“Thank you, Miss Topaz.”

“Please. Toni is fine.”

The mourners are few. Riverdale, it seems, damns Jason either for his birth or his politics, and celebrates neither.

Reggie Mantle shows up, to some surprise.

Jughead half expects him to ask him if fighting in Spain was really fucking aces or something along those lines.

He has the self-awareness not to.

“Is this everyone?” Cheryl asks.

Jughead opens his mouth to answer. He notices his friends staring past him, and turns around.

A mass of people meanders through the cemetery towards them. There are thirty or so, at least. The figure out in front holds aloft a crude red flag, so washed out it’s almost pink. The group moves closer. Jughead picks out the moth-eaten wool coats. The tattered trousers. The leather jackets.
The figure bearing the red banner salutes Jughead with the clenched fist.

“Joaquin?”

Among Joaquin’s crowd Jughead recognizes a number of faces. Men and women from Cliff Blossom’s factory. Southside Serpents. Some smile, some hold grim expressions beneath their natty flat caps and fedoras.

“We come to pay our respects,” Joaquin says. And he plants the red flag into the ground.

Archie settles his guitar into his shoulder.

Jughead had asked him ahead of time if he might play something. Archie had, of course, said ‘sure’ and asked what. Jughead had made a suggestion. In a few nights, Archie had the song memorized.

Cheryl moves to address what has swelled to a crowd of forty mourners. Archie strikes his opening chords.

“Not a lot of folks knew my brother,” Cheryl begins. “Not really.”

“I dreamt I saw Joe Hill last night, alive as you and me. Says I ‘but Joe, but you’re ten years dead’. ‘I never died’, says he,” Archie’s soft, firm voice pours out the melting words.

“Sometimes I felt that I didn’t even know him. But I do know that he was a good person. I didn’t— excuse me,” she chokes down a batch of tears. “He was better than most. Better than me.”

“‘The copper bosses killed you, Joe, they shot you, Joe’, says I. ‘Takes more than guns to kill a man,’ says Joe. ‘I didn’t die’.”

Jughead closes his eyes. The music and Cheryl’s words sway him. He lets the tears come again. He feels the chilly breeze of Jarama on his cheeks. He can feel Jason’s blood on his hands again. Drying under his fingernails. Soaking into his jacket. But then its gone. In its place is the firm, human presence that kept him sane and alive in the fires of Madrid and Toledo. He can feel his dead comrade by his side. He smiles.

“I don’t know where he got his heart,” Cheryl goes on. “Where he ever learned to care the way he did. It wasn’t from our mother or father,” she wipes away a few tears. “But he did. Because he was happy to give up everything to do what was right.”

“And standing there as big as life, and smiling with his eyes, says Joe: ‘what they could never kill, went on to organize...’”

“I’m proud of him. I’m so, so proud.” Cheryl locks eyes with Jughead. “I would give anything to have my brother back. But since I can’t...I can say that I’m proud of him.” She closes her eyes and mutters something to herself. “Jason died for freedom. I believe that.”

“‘From San Diego up to Maine, in every mine and mill, where workers strike and organize, it’s there you’ll find Joe Hill!’”

“Long live the Lincoln Battalion!” someone cries.

“Death to fascism!”

Then the thundering, trembling shout: “No pasaran! No pasaran!”

Cheryl stands up, straighter, her shoulders even. She manages a weak, fearful smile.
Archie strikes up a new song. Jughead had taught him this one, too.

Jughead closes his eyes and leans into the old, well-worn tune.

“Arise, ye pris’ners of starvation! Arise, ye damned of the earth!”

And they all sang the Internationale.

Chapter End Notes

Well, a little over a year after it begun, I'm both pleased and sad to say; that's all, folks!

I've really enjoyed writing this, and I'm absolutely relieved that I finally finished it. It was great fun, and really an experience I learned a lot from. Even if it was a little stressful sometimes.

I want to thank the people who supported me while I wrote this. First up is the amazing and talented village-skeptic, who ever since I started has been leaving me encouraging comments and giving me the boost I needed to write the next chapter. There's no way I would have finished this without her. She's funny, smart, a great writer, one of the coolest people in this fandom, and you should definitely check out her writing.

There's also satelliteinasupernova who started reading recently and has been leaving me lots of nice comments all the while. She confirmed that this story CAN be enjoyed by people who aren't as obsessed with this time period as I am, so that's a relief.

Also, alicecooperrehab has been reading recently, with impressive speed. If you're reading this, I really appreciate people who can read my stuff that fast, and I hope you enjoyed it to the end.

There's also cooperjones2020. I don't know if she's around anymore, because I remember her being really busy about a year ago, but during the early parts of the story, she left me lots of really in-depth, detailed comments that I found super encouraging and helped me build the confidence to even try expanding this story to the size I ultimately did. If you happen to be reading this, thank you so much.

Also thanks to everyone, anonymous or not, who's read this and enjoyed it. If you're out there, consider leaving a comment!

Looking back over this story, I think it's kind of interesting. Despite the fact that there's a whole lot of violence and death, it's probably one of the most upbeat, idealistic things I've ever written. It's a very clear cut, traditional adventure story with gallant heroes and wicked villains. Very black and white. That wasn't my intention when I first started writing, but I think it's kind of cool in retrospect. There's a place for cynicism, but it's not always the order of the day. Honestly, this could probably pass for a novel written by a Popular Front propagandist c.1943 or so.

I'm writing a short coda to this (short by the standards of this fic, so probably about 8000 words or so). Hint: WWII is going to break out in a few years, and the gang—Jughead and Cheryl in particular—are really eager for another crack at the fascists.
Especially after Franco wins in Spain, which is going to be pretty emotionally ruinous for them.

Until then: thank you, and goodnight.
Okay, so I finished the coda. In true Interbellum fashion, it's way longer than intended. So looks like there are about three more chapters coming. Sorry.

It's totally unnecessary to read it though. The real story is finished at chapter 73.

A few weeks after the smashing of the Fraternity’s plot, Jughead takes the train into Toledo.

He’s been following the story closely, even if it’s quietly fallen out of the public eye. St. Claire, Lodge, and a number of their compatriots are facing the death penalty for high treason. Even if they cheat the hangman, they’ll spend the rest of their lives behind bars.

That’s something, at least.

The train pulls into Toledo a few hours after nightfall. Jughead hops off in a scrap yard. The tramps that rode with him from New York clamber out, clutching tight their meager sacks of food and clothes.

“That’s a hell of a story, kid,” says a wiry man with a frizzy beard and a pair of twinkling grey eyes. He reaches out a dry, calloused hand. Jughead shakes it.

“Thanks,” he says.

“It’d make a good book,” another hobo says.

“It just might.”

They part ways.

Jughead walks into Toledo. His chest is still tight with pain and his heart is still shattered. But he’s alive.

And he feels free.

He walks for hours before he finds the house.

It’s an apartment, really. A ground-floor tenement crammed into a dingy little working class quarter in the city’s west corner. The front door is cracked and weather-beaten, white paint long faded away. The rusty numbers read: 819. Jughead checks his slip of paper. This is the right place.

Jughead ambles up to the doors and knocks.

The door swings open.

His mother stands there. She stares back at him, tired and sad. Her dark eyes give nothing. He notices one of her hands wrapped in a bloody white rag.

“What happened to your hand?”
“Accident at the cannery,” Gladys Jones says bitterly.

Jughead nods.

“Sorry about that.”

It feels natural that there’s no proper greeting.

“Do you want to come in?”

“I think I do, yeah.”

He steps inside.

There are two rooms to the apartment. One is a living room and a kitchen folded into one. The other is the bedroom. Jughead flings himself down into a tattered little couch.

“We don’t have anything to eat,” Gladys says.

“I know,” Jughead replies.

She stands across the room from him. She wrings her hands. She sighs.

“Where have you been?”


“I saw you in the paper.”

“Plenty of people did.”

“Is that all true?”

“Most of it.” Jughead looks around. There are no electric lights. A few extinguished candles sit sadly on the windowsills or the kitchen counter. “This place isn’t too bad.”

“Not too bad, no,” Gladys says. She chews her lip. “Landlord came by the other day.”

“And? Are you gonna make this month?”

“I’m not sure, yet.”

Jughead sighs. “I’ll see if I can do anything.” He pauses, and then comes out with it. “They’re letting dad out of jail. Considering the man who put him there tried to take over the country and all.”

Gladys nods again.

“Good. That’s good.”

The door to the bedroom creaks open. A slight little shape creeps out. Jughead recognizes the dark hair and bright blue eyes in an instant. And she recognizes him.

“Jughead!” Jellybean ‘JB’ Jones exclaims. Clearly she was asleep until now. But with the sight of her long-lost brother, she is not in the least bit tired.

A great smile breaks on Jughead’s face. He spreads his arms.
JB rushes in for the hug. He lifts her off of her feet and spins her around.

“Where have you been?” she asks.

“Lots of places, JB. You want to hear about it?”

“Yes!”

“Jughead, she’s tired. She was just asleep an—“

“I’m not tired!” the indefatigable ten year old cries out. She clings to her brother’s waist. “I wanna see Juggie.”

Gladys purses her lips in defeat.

“Don’t keep her up too late.” With that, she disappears into the bedroom, leaving her two children alone. JB hops up onto the couch next to Jughead. He smiles. Some of the pressure lifts from his heart. He looks into his little sister’s twinkling eyes and feels a flash of peace.

“You know, the last time I was in Toledo, I blew up a fascist fortress.”

“Wow!” JB exclaims, face big and round. “Really? Eh…what’s a fascist?” she asks, a bit embarrassed at having to ask. Jughead laughs and tousles her hair.


“But that wasn’t in this Toledo,” JB asserts. “Or I would have heard about it. So it was in the other one. The one in Spain?”

Jughead laughs again.

“Yes! Did they teach you that in school?”

“Nah. I have a book. I had to save up to get it. It’s about the countries of the world. It’s got all the cities and everything. It’s great! Want me to show it to you?”

“Absolutely.”

She nods, excited.

“But first, you have to tell me your story. What were you doing in Spain?”

He sighed.

“We went to Spain…to help the Spanish people. Because they were fighting to be free.”

“Free from what?”

“So that they wouldn’t have to go around with the landlords and generals telling them what to do for the rest of their lives. So their kids would have food on the table and schools to go to.”

JB looks down at her feet. She nods. That resonates with her.

“Okay. So you fought. Tell me.”

Jughead launches into the story. It feels good to tell it. And it feels good to have someone receive it the way his little sister does. She takes it as a heroic epic, like a story of knights and dragons and
castles. It’s not a grim news story. It’s a fairy tale. Good against evil.

She listens, enraptured, devouring each word.

The story winds on. The night grows longer. Nearly three hours have passed by the time he gets to the Battle for Madrid.

“…Cannon and rifles roared around us! The fascists swept forward in the thousands, their bayonets glittering! We fought on with reckless daring, mowing down scores of the enemy even as our own comrades fell by the hundreds at our side. We fought with every bit of strength and every last breath. We knew that if we lost, it meant slavery for the Spanish people.” JB squirms. The story must have a happy ending, surely.

“And then?”

“We fought as hard as we could. We fought until our arms wouldn’t work and our legs wouldn’t move. But there were just too many of them. I was sure we couldn’t hold. Then, when all was lost —our tanks came roaring in from the rear.” JB leans forward, in awe. “The fascists saw those machines and reeled. We charged forward, heartened. We struggled for every inch of ground. When we ran out of bullets we slashed them with our bayonets. When our bayonets bent, we smashed them with the stocks of our guns. When the guns shattered, we fought them hand to hand. For the first time, they realized they were not invincible. The battle lasted days. Thousands died. But at last, in blood and death, we drove that tyrant Franco back.”


Jughead lifts up his pant leg. He runs a finger along the ugly scar the fascist bullet had left him at Jarama. His little sister’s eyes go wider.

“Every word,” he says, raising a hand as if taking an oath.

“You’re brave, Juggie,” she says, breathless.

He smiles sadly.

“I guess I was.”
"Men of my generation have had Spain in our hearts. It was there that they learned … that one can be right and yet be beaten, that force can vanquish spirit, and that there are times when courage is not rewarded."

~Albert Camus

"We have passed."

~General Franco

Life slowly falls back together.

In the early fall of 1937, FP Jones is released from prison. He rides the rails back to Riverdale, and receives a raucous greeting at the Wyrm.

He embraces his weary, battle-worn son.

“How did you find it?”

Jughead pours himself a glass of tepid water, and one for his father.

“How did I find what?”

“Spain. War.”

“Well, you were in France, dad,” Jughead says. “How was it there?”

FP thinks for a moment. He leans his head back.

“Bloody, sad, and pointless.”

Jughead’s eyes slide closed.

“It was bloody. And sad.”

FP’s face takes on a weird expression.

“And?”

“And, what?”

“Was it pointless?”

Jughead answers without hesitation. “No.”

“You did good, Jug. You all did.”
Betty begins to acclimate to life without a voice. She writes and types in the back room of the *Register*, and even manages to get a few columns published in national papers.

She slides in a new typeface and runs her fingers over drying ink. She can still speak, even if it’s silently.

She’s hammering out a short piece on the fishing industry off of Montauk, when Alice comes up from behind and hugs her. She kisses her daughter on the cheek.

“Even if you never say another word, Elizabeth, they can *never* shut you up.”

Betty pats her mother’s hand and smiles.

Jughead finishes his book. The publishers he seeks out roundly reject it. The apologetic letters suggest ‘a bit of polishing’, but he harbors the suspicion that its subject matter is a greater hindrance than his command of the English language.

He’s just about prepared to send it in again, when Veronica informs him she’s written a short book, too. A true account of her time in Queipo de Llano’s Seville. *Five Months in Fascist Spain*. Jughead warmly suggests they merge the two books into one.

This new compendium receives the same gentle, firm rejections.

This is when Cheryl comes in.

She offers to pay for the book’s first edition. She also asks if she might join it to her own memoirs, regarding her and Betty’s struggle against her father and his cohorts. Jughead and Veronica readily agree.

The book is published in the winter of 1937, under the title: *Which Side Are You On?*

The first page boasts three dedications.

*To my brother, Jason, who believed in freedom, and died for it.*

~C. Blossom

*To my friend, Nicolas, who dreamt of learning to read, and died for it.*

~V. Lodge

*To the Spanish people*

~J. Jones

The book undersells. In this age of appeasement and isolation, America is not hungry for tales of foreign wars or fascist aggression.

Jughead broods at the sale figures the publisher sends him. They haven’t even sold the entire first printed batch.

_Which Side Are You On?_

And his name, right there, beneath the title, embossed in shiny silver lettering. It’s something he’s written. And it’s got a cover and a copyright and everything. And it’s _his_. That’s something, isn’t it?

“That’s something,” Betty says.

“Yeah,” Jughead agrees. She lays her hand on his shoulder and he covers it with his own. “It’s something.”

In the first quarter of 1938, they say a half-goodbye to Riverdale and get themselves a small apartment in the city.

As for Cheryl, she picks up the flag her brother dropped at Jarama.

Jughead balks when she shows at his doorstep and asks that he come along to a demonstration in support of Republican Spain and against German-Italian violation of their professed neutrality.

“Sorry, Cheryl. I’m busy. There’s a magazine that says they’ll buy an article on—“

“Oh, don’t give me that. Look, you’ll be back in three or four hours, at the very most. Toni will be there!”

“Could get ugly?” Betty forces out, rubbing her throat. She hacks and coughs.

Cheryl rolls her eyes.

“Betty, love, ‘ugly’ isn’t my middle name, but nevertheless, I can assure you I can handle whatever may come.”

So he goes.

They meet Toni Topaz at the German Consulate, another few hundred demonstrators in tow. Waving Spanish and American flags, they swamp the swastika bedecked building, chanting: “_no more arms for Franco’s thugs!_”

Cheryl hoists up a big placard stamped with a ghoulish photo of children slain in a fascist bombing raid on Barcelona. The words running across the bottom of the sign read: _if you tolerate this, your children will be next._

Toni gets up on the bed of a truck with a loudspeaker.

Then the other side arrives.

A near equal number of counter protestors, toting flags blazoned with swastikas and fasces and shouting ‘_viva Franco_’ in atrocious Spanish, marches down the thoroughfare four abreast to give these reds what for.

“Get down, you red bitch!” one of them shouts at Toni.

Before she can respond, Cheryl snatches away her bullhorn and roars: “go back to Rome, you servile fascist pigs!”
Passersby stop to watch as the two opposing mobs square off.

Jughead steps up to a big, burly man on the fascists’ side.

“What are you sizing me up for, you little shrimp?” the man sneers.

What Jughead says next does little to deescalate things.

“I’ve killed bigger fascists than you.”

The other man throws the first punch. Jughead, war-honed reflexes serving him well, parries and sends his opponent sprawling to the pavement.

The ‘demonstration’ devolves into a brawl.

In the heat of ‘battle’, Cheryl scales the first floor of the German consulate and plucks down a big swastika banner from its flagstaff. She holds it high over her head like a trophy, and then with the help of Jughead and another man, tears it clean in half to the roaring acclamation of their side and the seething shouts of the fascists.

Ten minutes and not a few cracked skulls later, the police arrive.

Jughead spends the night in a jail cell with Cheryl Blossom and a half a dozen other brawlers from both sides.

“Why is it any time a Blossom invites me anywhere I wind up going hand to hand with fascists?”

She waves him off, and then demands he teach her some pertinent songs for the ‘next time’ they find themselves in such a situation.

He demurs, makes a token assertion that there will be no ‘next time’, and then as usual, gives in.

“This one’s called ‘Should I Ever Be A Soldier’. Ready?”

Cheryl nods excitedly.

“Do go on.”

“Should I ever be a soldier, ‘neath the red flag I would fight! Should a gun I ever shoulder; it’s to crush the tyrant’s might!”

“Hey, keep it down!” shouts the tired deputy on guard duty.

“Wage slaves of the world, arouse! Do your duty for the cause, for land and liberty!”

It’s a little surreal to see Cheryl sing such words, but Jughead supposes everything is a little surreal these days.

The next morning, Betty arrives at the police station, livid.

These two idiots are lucky her voice is still shot.

She glares. Cheryl crosses her arms. Jughead shuffles his feet.

All arrested are released shortly, and Betty drags Jughead home, still fuming.

They stumble into the apartment. “You could have gotten yourself killed, you moron!” she snarls.
Then they both fall silent.

It’s the first full sentence she’s managed since the bullet. Tears spring to her eyes. They fall into each other’s arms, sobbing.

“Red sails on the sunset, way out on the sea. Oh, carry my loved one, safely home to me…”

Archie picks the tune out on his guitar. He sings along, soft and quiet.

If music was his love before, it’s his life, now.

He has nightmares. Sometimes he wakes up straining at the silvershirts’ ropes or flinching at their smoldering irons.

The music helps.

And things are looking up. With the invaluable assistance of Josephine McCoy and her up-and-coming Jazz trio, he’s secured a gig in Midvale.

That’s something.

His father is greatly proud of him.

Even as he’s still basking in the anticipation of his first real performance, he receives the phone call from Betty. And she’s speaking. Her voice is scratchy and halting and weak, but it’s coming back.

He sniffs a little bit.

Maybe things really are looking up.

He still has nightmares, but now he’s got a gig in Midvale, too.

“Miss Lodge! Miss Lodge! What do you think about the commutation of your father’s sentence? Do you think he deserves—“

“I think he deserves whatever sentence is meted out by the justice system. Justly,” she sniffs.

Veronica brushes by the flustered reporter. She’s always been a target of newsmen, and lately there’s another upsurge in attention with the news that Hiram Lodge’s death sentence for treason has been commuted to life imprisonment. So goes it for the other parties to the conspiracy.

She simply tries not to think of it. It’s well enough. The news that Betty’s voice is returning is welcome. It’s emblematic of their moving past that dark drama.

Their short-lived status as celebrities, whether vilified or lionized, in the aftermath of the coup’s failure, is over, thank God. Veronica is glad to sink into normalcy.

And with so much of her father’s money seized by the feds, she’s left with just enough to live a normal, if affluent, life.

One evening, her newfound normalcy receives a sudden, rude jolt.

There’s a knock at the door of her New York penthouse.
She opens it, disinterested.

“Mija…”

She looks into her mother’s deep, tired eyes.

The first words out of Veronica’s mouth are colder than she means for them to be.

“Franco let you out of jail?”

Hermione shakes her head sadly.

“Two months ago.”

“How long have you been back in the States?”

“A week,” Hermione says, chewing her lips. “Ronnie—“

“I—I can’t,” Veronica cuts her off, choking back tears. “Not right now. Maybe some day. But not right now.”

Hermione nods, turns, and leaves.

Veronica hears her sob once.

Cheryl’s stunt with the Nazi flag at the consulate makes her an overnight hero of the American left.

A livid German government demands that this insult to national honor be answered. Masses of supporters flood the courthouse when she’s arraigned for her desecration of foreign state property, chanting: “¡No pasarán! ¡No pasarán!” She winks and blows them kisses.

The charges are thrown out.

“You really are a lucky girl, aren’t you, Blossom?” Toni teases her.

“Fortuna is my handmaiden.”

Cheryl becomes a fixture at galas and rallies held by the American League Against War and Fascism or the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.

She becomes a favorite speaker for her sharp, scathing, and most of all, amusing, invective.

The network of Popular Front committees and congresses are more than delighted to have a beautiful, sharp-tongued daughter of privilege bring their message to the masses. If folks won’t listen to a real, dyed-in-the-wool American aristocrat, whom will they heed?

When she isn’t inveighing against the farce of non-intervention or raising money for Spanish widows and orphans, she’s cooling off in a jail cell for illegally diverting charity donations to purchase rifles and tanks for the Republican People’s Army.

The Spanish War becomes her war. It was her brother’s war, after all.

Triumphs for Republican arms buoy her spirits, while news of fascist victories send her into depressive spirals that last weeks.

“I know how you feel. Of course I care about what happens in Spain!” Toni says. “But it’s not
good to attach yourself so firmly to…anything. It can hurt you. Even…well…what if the Republic
loses?"

“They won’t lose,” she spits, seething.

And she has to believe that.

Jughead understands. He soaked his hands in Jason’s blood as he died.

He doesn’t mind when Cheryl rings at mad hours with excited news of a new Republican offensive
or sobbing because of the fascists have retaken Teruel.

They meet up a cafes or restaurants to discuss the war and the ever-shifting political sands.

“Is the world blind?” Cheryl wants to know. “Don’t those stupid, spineless scoundrels at the
League see what’s happening?”

In early 1938, Hitler annexes Austria. In Asia, the Japanese Empire cuts a bloody swathe through
the peoples of China, Korea, and the South Pacific. Mussolini’s Italy continues her brutal
suppression of Abyssinia, and reaches out with ravening claws towards the Balkans.

The march of fascism is everywhere unblocked. Except Spain.

So they cannot lose.

“This could be the one that turns it around,” Jughead assures Cheryl, when the news breaks that
the Spanish Republic has launched a great, desperate offensive over the River Ebro.

She excitedly agrees, but neither of them really believes it.

Across the continent, new winds are blowing. Hitler, ever hungry, demands the Sudeten
borderlands of Czechoslovakia. The Wehrmacht masses on the frontier. The world watches,
breathless, in anticipation. France and Britain mobilize. War threatens.

“They’ll have to help Spain, now!” Cheryl says. “Hitler’s gotten too bold.”

But as Republican troops die by the thousands on the banks of the Ebro, Daladier and Chamberlain
sell Czechoslovakia to Hitler.

And then it all becomes clear. Nothing is too far. The fascists have a free hand to do as they please.
There is no bridge too far. Neither the League of Nations, nor any great power, will move a single
battalion to aid Spain.

The Ebro offensive fails.

In the winter of 1938, Franco takes Catalonia. Republican territory shrinks to a little chunk in the
southeast of Spain. The fascists turn their sights on Madrid once more.

The war nears its grim conclusion.

In March of 1939, Nazi troops seize the rest of Bohemia. In April, Italian armies march on
Albania, and swiftly incorporate her into the ever-expanding fascist empire.

Next to the night she learned of her brother’s death, the day Franco enters Madrid is the worst day
of Cheryl Blossom’s life.
Betty finds him sobbing. He sits next to the old radio, beneath the grimy window on the apartment’s east face. Tears drip and run over his fingers, spill down his cheeks onto his bare shoulder and onto the bullet wound he sustained when he took his bayonet in hand and drove the fascist army back across the Manzanares River.

“Jughead…”

“No…no…”

“What happened?” she asks, softly.

A scattered manuscript lies on a chair nearby. Rejected. Again.

“Juggie…is it your book? I—“

The radio crackles.

“General Franco proclaims the end of the war, and the unconditional surrender of the government forces to his National Army. Spain’s new Caudillo declares…”

“Oh…” Betty sighs. Her breath hitches. Her throat burns. She means to say, ‘I’m sorry, Juggie’, but the pain in her throat is back.

She puts a hand on his shoulder while he weeps.

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That night, he meets Cheryl Blossom at a theater a few blocks away. Her fair cheeks are stained with tears. He wipes away his own.

They sit together in the front row, and watch as the old projector sputters and crackles and pours out the latest Universal Newsreel onto the screen.

The images are a cavalcade of horrors. The columns of refugees trudging towards the French border or the overflowing ports of southern Spain. Hoping to escape the brutal ‘justice’ of the victors. Children weep in their parents’ arms, feet swollen to uselessness by weeks of marching. The soldiers of the Republic march with them, uniforms tattered, eyes dark and empty. People drop dead from exhaustion by the sides of the road.

There is a panning shot of Barcelona. Trade union and party identification cards litter the street, torn up into unrecognizable shreds. To be found with such damning documents when the fascists arrive will mean death. The camera moves down the tree-lined La Rambla. The Barcelonans shuffle along the sidewalks, heads low, faces lined and sad.

“In the fall of 1938,” the announcer proclaims. “The government of the Republic ordered the recall of the International Brigades, in hopes that such a gesture would prompt Franco to renounce the Italo-German troops and engineers fighting on his side. It proved to be a vain hope.”

The next shot is of a train station. The men of the International Brigades pile into the waiting locomotive, bandaged and bloodied. Crowds of Spaniards swell around them, cheering and weeping, offering them gifts and well-wishes. The train pulls out of the station, whistling. The Internationals lean out of the train carriage windows, offering clenched fists salutes as they leave Spain for the last time.
Tears roll down Jughead’s cheeks. He finds himself clutching Cheryl’s hand. He feels her pulse quicken along with his. His chest feels tight and his heart feels ready to burst.

The final shot is the worst.

Thousands of fascist troops march ten abreast down the Gran Via in Franco’s victory parade. A quick shot of the general himself, overseeing the ceremony from a raised dais, hand lifted in a salute, a placid smile on his face. The thunder of the soldiers’ boots pours from the speakers and pounds at Jughead’s ears. He shakes his head to clear it away and fails.

He’s watching a desecration. A defiling.

How could it only have been three years ago that he and Jason marched down the Gran Via themselves? How could it have been only three years ago that they paraded past those cheering crowds of Spaniards, guns in their hands and songs on their lips, and went out to face the fascists in the name of liberty?

The fifth column of Franco supporters, hidden in Madrid for so long, finally emerges into the open. They line the street and cheer wildly as the insurgent troops march by. The cries, even across the ocean and filtered through the theater’s tinny speakers, are deafening.

“FRANCO! FRANCO! FRANCO! FRANCO! ARRIBA ESPAÑA!”

Hundreds of planes mass overhead, formations flying in the shapes of swastikas or spelling out the names of Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini in the sky.

“FRAN-CO! FRAN-CO! FRAN-CO!”

“I can’t…” Cheryl chokes up. “The fascists won,” she says, tears spilling down onto her lips as she speaks.

“God,” Jughead lowers his head, letting the tears splash down onto his lap.

They sit there, watching in helpless horror as the conquering legions of fascism march on over the corpse of Spain.

“FRAN-CO! FRAN-CO! FRAN-CO!”

The shouts crash down like artillery shells. Jughead wants to hide. He feels the chilly wind of Jarama strike him head on. The tears transform into hard, hitched sobs. Cheryl tries to hug him. He pulls back on himself. The sense of defeat, of failure, is crushing.

“It can’t end like this. It can’t.”

But it has.

A scant five months later, Hitler’s troops march into Poland.

Chapter End Notes

Theater scene kinda-sorta ripped off from okay-ish TV movie ‘Hemingway and Gellhorn’. Credit where credit is due I guess.
Jughead reads the papers and tunes into the radio with the same mercurial disappointment.

This was what they had always said in Spain, wasn’t it? That if fascism was not checked at the gates of Madrid, it would surge forward and engulf the whole world in war?

And here he sits, powerless and broken. And vindicated.

The German army crashes through the brittle Polish border defenses. The Poles put up a spirited fight, even as Hitler’s panzers sweep them from the field. Nazi airmen, their skills honed in the skies over Spain, reduce Warsaw and Lodz to simmering dust. The Polish army retreats in disarray towards the Soviet border.

And then something unimaginable happens.

The Red Army spills into Poland from the east. Soviet troops roll up the shattered remnants of the Polish military, and march into the heart of the country, where they meet the Germans just beyond Warsaw.

The world watches in awe as Stalin and Hitler, the two implacable foes of the century, partition Poland down the middle, in an uneasy truce.

“Cheryl isn’t taking it well,” Toni tells Jughead over coffee one morning.

“What, the war, or the USSR making nice with the Nazis?”

“I mean—neither. She hardly eats anymore. She…spends most of her waking hours pacing and muttering that the fascists are going to rule the world.”

Jughead shakes his head. He isn’t much better.

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything…” Toni says slowly. “Just…maybe talk to her?”

When he does speak to Cheryl, he finds her just as distraught as Toni had warned.

“How can the Soviet Union do this?” she demands. “How can they…ally themselves with the
fascists? Break bread with them? After Spain? After everything?"

Jughead spreads his hands, helpless.

“It’s treason,” Cheryl rants on. “Black, filthy treason. Jason would never have stood for that.”

“No,” Jughead says. “You’re right. He wouldn’t have.”

The world grows ever darker.

Britain and France declare war on Germany.

“Do you get a scorching, painful, itching sense of déjà vu?” Jughead asks his father in one of his intermittent letters home.

For some months, the opposing nations fall into an uneasy stalemate. The Allies make no move to march on Germany. The Nazi empire consolidates its hold on Poland. There is no shooting. Only a grim, sure anticipation.

In the spring of 1940, the war roars to life again. Hitler’s troops breezily occupy Norway and Denmark, brushing aside the scant resistance. Within 24 hours, German troops are in Oslo, Copenhagen, and Narvik, beating back the feeble expeditionary forces sent by the Anglo-French enemy.

Then the Wehrmacht comes crashing through the Ardennes and the Low Countries. The speed and ferocity of the Nazi attack stuns the Allies into impotent lethargy. Marshals and generals watch in a useless stupor as Runstedt’s armored columns drive to the sea and von Bock’s soldiers thunder down from Belgium towards Paris.

France falls in a matter of weeks. The world looks on, spellbound, as the proud Landsers of the German Reich swagger through the Arc de Triomphe, capturing in days that shining city that vexed their fathers for four years.

Wooed by her crushing victories, Italy, Romania, and Hungary eagerly fall into the Nazi camp.

In early 1941, the German armies pour into Yugoslavia. Greece falls, next. Bulgaria slips under Axis suzerainty.

By summer, the entire continent is under Nazi dominion. Populations from the Pyrenees to the Carpathians feel the cruel lash of fascist rule and the dividing scalpel of National Socialist race theory. Britain stands alone. Bombs fall upon London and Hamburg. The Soviet Union watches, careful, from behind its uneasy curtain of peace.

In Spain, Franco greedily scopes out the African empires of Britain and France. He hopes to join the Axis and win in exchange great swathes of colonial territory from a grateful Hitler. If Spain enters the war, she can lock the Allied navies out of the Mediterranean, and transform the entire sea into an Axis lake.

Cheryl falls into ever-blacker depression.

“How long before they get here, do you think? Shall I start practicing my goose step now?”

“A little premature, no?” Jughead tries.

“Hitler’s conquered all of Europe in a year.”
“Not Britain.”

“And I’m certain they’ll retake the continent *all* by their lonesome,” Cheryl sighs.

Then, fortunes turn even direr.

On June 22, 1941, the uneasy peace along the Curzon Line in Eastern Europe is shattered by a thundering cannonade unmatched in martial history.

The Nazi invasion of the USSR has begun.

Millions of Axis troops pour over the Soviet border. The Red Army, caught on the back-foot, totters in paralytic helplessness as the Wehrmacht’s battle hardened columns sweep them up.

Countless millions of prisoners are taken in the first few days. Entire Soviet armies are encircled and destroyed. Within days, Marshal Fedor Von Bock’s panzer spearheads are racing for Moscow. In the great swaths of land fallen under Nazi control, the German dictatorship puts its brutal theories and wild dreams into operation. Thousands of uniformed men tramp through the bogs of Byelorussia and the wheat fields of Ukraine, toting rifles and bullets meant not for soldiers, but for those the Reich has marked for elimination. The ‘racial and social elements’ slated as unacceptable to the new order in the east. Soon, great graves filled to bursting scar the land from Tallinn to Bessarabia.

The Soviet Union, every military analyst worth the name predicts, has weeks to live.

“This is it, then,” Cheryl tells Jughead over the phone, voice quavering. “They’ve won. Jason died for nothing.”

“Cheryl—“

“They’re saying the Nazis will be in Moscow by Halloween.”

Jughead sets his jaw.

“That’s what they said about Madrid.”

But even he despairs.

Field Marshal Von Bock sights the spires of the Kremlin through his field glasses.

It is not even about Moscow. It is about the last capable military resistance to Nazi power collapsing. Britain cannot hold back the leviathan alone. None can.

Hitler is one more successful military campaign from complete mastery of Europe.

Then what? Will the Nazis meet the Japanese flooding in from the east? How long before the fascists have brought the entire old world under their sway? He thinks of Spain, where the firing squads work tirelessly under Franco’s grim auspices. He thinks of the fascist legionaries in Toledo, bayoneting wounded militiamen in their sickbeds.

And then he sees it all inflicted not upon thousands, but upon countless billions.

He can’t write anymore. His mind won’t work. He reaches out his hand, and the words seem to freeze and crack at his fingertips. He’s got nothing. He just wants to cry.

“Jughead…” Betty says. “Write *something*. An article, for that one magazine that buys your—try
your book again. That short story?"

“What the fuck does it matter? No one wants my stuff. No one ever did. I just—” tears spring to his eyes again. “What does it matter? When the world is going to hell?”

Veronica’s relationship with her mother is brittle.

But months ago, it was non-existent.

“‘Russia will soon be beaten, Nazis boast,’” Veronica reads out the headline.

Her mother shrugs.

“What does it concern us, here?”

"Don’t play dumb, mom.”

"A long silence.

“Have you spoken with your father?”

Veronica snorts.

“Since when?”

“Since…”

“I haven’t been to see him, no. And I don’t think I will.”

“Maybe you should.”

“For what? To forgive him?”

“No. Just to see him.”

A few weeks later, Archie invites her to a gig in San Francisco. It’ll be his biggest yet, he says. They’re expecting a turnout in the low thousands.

He’s picking up quite the following.

So of course she says ‘yes.’

On the drive into the city, she trundles over the bridge across the bay. Veronica peers into the murk of the night and sees Alcatraz sitting silent on its stony island. It stands out against the cold Pacific gloom, glowing dully, like a beacon.

The night before Archie’s big performance, heralded by big blue banners reading ‘TONIGHT ONLY: ARCHIE ANDREWS, AMERICA’S FAVORITE SON”, Veronica makes a detour to the Rock.

The ferry ride across the San Francisco Bay is frozen. Veronica disappears into the ruffled furs of her big, drooping coat. Fog swallows up the Golden Gate and the sparkling ocean beyond.

“Thirty minutes,” the guard says.

“You came to see me,” her father says.
And for a moment, Veronica almost feels bad. He looks so much older.

He’s still handsome, and solid of body. But his eyes are washed out. He doesn’t look as firm in his gait. Streaks of grey cut through his raven hair. His uniform looks big on him.

“I did,” she says, firmly.

“Six years? Is that long enough?”

“Maybe.”

Hiram ambles towards her.

“My father’s father was a lieutenant in Don Carlos’ army. In the mountains of Vasconia he and forty of his soldiers held off two battalions of the Isabeline Army for seven days. And they died to the last man. Primo de Rivera…Lodge. Our family knows loyalty.”

“Is that why you think I’m here? Out of some loyalty to you?”

“You’re my daughter.”

“So it is. Unfortunately.”

He scratches his stubble. His dark, ever-scheming eyes gleam in his head.

“Do you ever feel guilty for condemning your father to die?”

Veronica rolls her eyes.

“Please. They lifted your death sentence. Even if you…richly deserved it.”

“So the answer is no, then?” Hiram lifts an eyebrow, almost comically.

“No, father. I don’t feel guilty that I helped stop your…bid for dictatorship of the United States.” For a second she is frightened. She’s never spoken to him in such a way. Not to his face. But then she remembers that he has no power over her. Not anymore. “In fact, I’m proud.”

Hiram nods.

“Do you keep up with the news, mija?”

“What’s your point?”

Hiram pounds his fist against the heavy limestone wall. It almost trembles. He’s still strong. He laughs.

“This war is even greater than the last.”He smiles, in the way only a man like him can smile at war. "And this one will decide the order of the world to come.”

“Oh, god,” Veronica rolls her eyes. “Don’t get theatrical with me. I don’t think I can stomach it tonight.”

“Hitler’s armies are at the gates of Moscow. And on the English Channel. How do you think this war is going to shake out?”

Hiram creeps forward. The shadows of the austere little cell release him.
“I guess that remains to be seen,” Veronica shoots back, crossing her arms.

“In Spain, we saw how effete democrats handle on the field against real men. The new men. Soon, the Germans will be in Red Square. And then? Trafalgar Square. The new world will be built on their victory, Veronica.”

Veronica finally catches his drift. She snorts. But in truth, in her gut, she feels a chill.

“So that’s your gamble? You’re hoping this war terminates in some…” she waves her hand dismissively. “Some fascist world order, that this country will follow suit, and then you’ll be out of this cell.”

“You always had a talent for stripping things down to the bare bones.”

“I developed a talent for cutting through your bullshit, eventually.”

Hiram leans back up against the wall. He clenches and unclenches a fist. Veronica can see that he’s restless. He’s trapped. Perhaps the commutation of his death sentence had not been a mercy.

“When the gun smoke’s cleared. We’ll see whose flag is still flying, then.”

“Yes. We’ll see.”

And then she goes to Archie’s performance.

Jughead can’t write. Not anymore.

His hands shake. His head swims. His stomach churns.

Nothing helps.

He jolts awake from nightmares, hands encrusted in blood or in the dusty Spanish earth. He sees Jason’s face fading into the darkness.

Everything is burning.

Betty tries to get him to keep on. She holds her throat and pleads him, with her hands if her voice is not working, to survive. Even in this darkness, he must keep on. For the both of them. For everyone.

“It’ll be alright, Jug,” Archie tells him, with a guitar in one hand. “We’ll get through this.”

“Come on, Jughead,” Veronica soothes. “We need poets more than ever, now.”

Only Cheryl seems to share his bottomless despair.

Maybe everyone else is just better at occulting.

Archie tugs his collar and Jughead sees the scars left by the silvershirts’ ministrations. His eyes fall to Betty’s throat and he sees the scarred flesh and skin there. He looks at Veronica and sees that dank Seville cell.

He wonders if they have the nightmares, too.

But he writes again, more for his friends than for him.
Then it happens.

On November 29th of 1941, Jughead sends in a compendium of just-finished short stories for publication.

On the evening of December 6th, he receives a rejection letter.

“You’ll get there, Juggie,” Betty assures him. He answers with a grunt.

He doubts it.

He drinks a lot that night.

And then he sleeps late. A sleep tossed and shredded by drink-soaked nightmares. He hears the bullets whip by his head. He sees his comrades die. He watches his friends suffer in helpless bondage. He bleeds in the shade of an olive tree.

And on December 7th, 1941, Jughead wakes up to his phone ringing off of the hook.

“Jug…wha…” Betty mumbles from the other side of the bed.

“Go back to sleep, Betty,” he sighs. “I’m sure it’s nothing.” He gropes around for the receiver, knocking over a lamp in the process. “Shit.” It keeps ringing. Pale sunlight melts in through the natty curtains of their New York apartment. Cars hum by in the street below. Someone shouts. He hears a siren somewhere. His fingers finally close around the phone. “Hello?”

He recognizes Cheryl’s breathless, gasping voice immediately.

“Jughead! Grab your gun! We’re off to fight those fascist pigs across the sea!”

“Wha—Cheryl what are you talking about? God, what time is it?” He checks the clock. “Hell, it’s almost 1:00 in th—“

“Turn on the radio, you goon!”

Jughead stumbles across the room, very slowly waking up. He runs his hands through his mussed hair. He blinks furiously, eyes grimy. Betty sits up behind him, blonde hair falling in tangles over her face.

He switches on the radio.

“Oh my God.”

Hours pass by. The radio crackles. The war has come to their shores at last.

The Japanese planes had struck and gone, in a matter of two or three hours leaving hundreds of American seamen dead, and an entire country thirsting for vengeance.

The war is truly global, now.

Betty paces the apartment, wringing her hands.

“God, this is…what are we going to do?” she turns to her boyfriend, who sits on the edge of the bed, pensive and silent. “Jughead?”

He doesn’t respond.
“We’re at war,” he mumbles. “We’re at war.”

Less than twenty-four hours after the attack at Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt reads out a declaration of war on the Empire of Japan, to the roaring acclamation of a wounded, terrified American people.

Three days later, in solidarity with their Asian Ally, Hitler’s Germany and Fascist Italy declare war upon the United States.

“Jughead…” Betty tries, voice snapping.

“I’m going,” he says.

At the gates of Moscow, Hitler’s invincible troops find themselves stalled.

Just as the fascists failed before Madrid five years before, the iron legions of the Wehrmacht are stopped short of victory, shaken by the ferocious resistance of the Red Army and the unyielding Russian climate.

Across the sea, the industrial might of the United States throws itself onto the scales of fate.

On her grey island, Britain takes heart.

The war is far from over.

And once again, swift victory has slipped through the claws of the fascist dictators.

War fervor sweeps the land.

On January 20th, 1942, rising folk sensation Archie Andrews interrupts his Boston concert, and surrounded by fluttering American flags, announces to a cheering crowd of nine thousand his enlistment in the US Army. Then he leads his audience in a rather maudlin rendition of the Star Spangled Banner.

“Why are you going, Archie?” Jughead demands over lunch in the Village one frosty morning.

“What?” Archie balks. “What kind of guy would I be if I didn’t go?”

“A living one, for starters,” Jughead says, chewing a bite of eggs.

“Yeah, well you’ll excuse me if I don’t appreciate the hypocrisy, Jug. You’re enlisting, too.”

“It’s…” Jughead’s voice trails off. “It’s different for me, Arch. It’s—“

“It’s what? Personal? Because of Spain?”

“Well…” Jughead pauses. It sounds a little bit silly when laid out like that. But he has to rid himself of his nightmares. He has to avenge Jarama Valley. He has to make good on all the sacrifice. He has to see this through to the end. “Yes.”

“Those silvershirts bastards hurt me, too,” Archie asserts.

And Jughead can’t really argue with that.
It’s just about that time, a few weeks after Pearl Harbor, that Jughead finally gets a break.

He receives a note from the publisher Cheryl had cajoled into putting out ‘Which Side Are You On?’ To his surprise, the letter is a breathless rambling thing, asking if he wouldn’t like to print a new edition immediately.

With the coming of the war, it seems Americans are suddenly starved for tales of fascist perfidy and martial glory.

20,000 copies are promptly put into circulation. They fly off the shelves. The next order is five times that size.

Soon, it wins a spot on countless lists of ‘books every American should read!’.

“Look, Jughead!” Betty urges him, as he hammers out a new preface for the latest edition. “You don’t have to go anywhere.” She coughs and holds her throat. It happens often when she gets excited. “You…you can stay here—“

“I can’t stay here,” he says, pulling away from his typewriter.

“Look how well your book is selling!” she exclaims. “If you need to help with the war, you could work for the government. Write for the OWI and—“

“I can’t.” He sounds a little snappier than he intended, and he calms himself. “I…I have to…” He closes his eyes. “If I ever want to get a good night’s sleep again, I have to go.”

And she can’t really argue with that.

FP says little to his son when he tells him of his intention to enlist.

“If you end up in France, maybe you’ll see some of my old stomping grounds?”

Jughead smiles.

“Maybe.”

Fred Andrews embraces both his son and the boy who has been like another son to him.

“I’ll take care of Archie, Mr. Andrews,” Jughead promises. “I’ll get him home in one piece, don’t worry.”

Fred pats his cheek, tears brimming in his eyes.

“I know you will, Jug. And he’ll get you home, too. Stick by each other.”

In early March of 1942, he and Archie Andrews ride off for basic training.

Jughead finds boot camp easier than most. The fare is hearty, when matched against the endless garbanzo beans of Spain. The rifles are sleek, modern weapons, and not the clacking, rusty old arms of Jarama and Madrid. Least of all broomsticks.

“So you fought in Spain, huh?” demands a curious young man, slurping down a thin beef soup in the mess hall one evening. “What was that like?”
“You’ll see,” he says, grimly. It wasn’t meant as joke, but the guys take it as such. Everyone laughs.

The drill sergeants can’t have much fun with him. It’s hard to shake a young man who already knows what it feels like to have your comrade’s blood dry and congeal under your fingernails.

Maybe that’s why he’s selected to clean latrines or giggled for non-existent infractions on a suspiciously regular basis. Maybe that’s why he’s singled out for verbal and physical harassment at a rate that far and away exceeds anything suffered by more deserving incompetents.

“Little Bolshie scribbler,” one of the sergeants likes to call him.

“They’re just trying to get your goat, Jug,” Archie assures him.

But he suspects there’s more to it.

One day, Archie sidles up to a young clerk with a question about his file (and particularly a few peculiarities in his last physical). The clerk pulls open a drawer’s worth of dossiers. Archie catches a glimpse of Jughead’s.

Sticking out of his friend’s folder is a little pink slip stamped ‘PA’.

“Hey,” Archie asks the clerk. “What’s that, there? On my buddy’s file? The little designation?”

The clerk checks it and cross-references the tag.

“Oh,” he says, innocently. “PA—‘Premature antifascist’.”

When Archie recounts the story to his friend later that night in barracks, Jughead just smiles.

The nastiest shock yet doesn’t come until training is finished, and Jughead has become a private in the US Army.

Archie is posted with the 16th regiment of the 1st Infantry Division, pending departure overseas, whether for the steaming jungles of the South Pacific or the blazing sands of North Africa.

Jughead, on the other hand, is promptly plucked from the line and dropped into a freezing little installation in northern Minnesota called Camp Ripley.

His unit is a quartermaster’s company, driving trucks, loading crates, and shoveling dirt for the war effort.

He very quickly realizes that this posting is the army’s peculiar reward for his ‘premature antifascism’.

The company is a dumping ground for ‘unreliable elements’.

German and Italian nationals still fiercely devoted to their fatherlands. American-bred fascists and reactionaries. Fervent pacifists and isolationists.

All those not trusted to hold a gun.

His record is speaking against him. To have fought in Spain, in the eyes of the State Department at
least, qualifies a man as a howling red. And that makes him potentially disloyal. And that’s enough to land him here.

Relegation to what amounts to cleanup duty would be bad enough. Denying him another opportunity to fight the fascists would be bad enough.

It would all be bad enough, except for the face he finds himself staring into on his fourth day at Camp Ripley, as he lugs a heavy crate of soap out to a waiting truck.

“Well, if it isn’t Comrade Jones.”

Jughead drops the crate.

He tries to find words that won’t come out an inhuman snarl of rage. He sees the old scars crisscrossing the bastard’s face, and that calms him enough that he can speak like a man and not a beast.

“Top of the morning, St. Clair.”

“Fancy meeting you, here, eh?”

“I don’t know why I’m here, St. Clair,” he spits. “But you? That’s obvious enough.”

“Is it?”

“I guess the brass is smart enough to see that you’d turn your gun around and go over to Hitler the second they put you in a uniform.”

“Hey! Get that fucking box on the truck!” a sergeant snaps.

Jughead swallows his fury and resumes his duty.

“Watch your back, Jones.”

“Watch yours, you piece of shit.”

Jughead slowly goes mad, held up in this camp surrounded by Nazis, rabid isolationists, and half-mad idealists. The nightmares get worse. Sometimes, he really wakes up screaming, certain he can hear the whine of Nazi warplane engines, or the crackling treads of Italian tanks. The rattle of fascist bullets shakes the cold Minnesota air.

Spain is with him, and it will not release him.

“Stalin kaput! Moskau kaput! England kaput!” bellows a young Rhineland immigrant and devoted National Socialist named Karl one morning at breakfast, punctuating his chants with a meaty fist pounded on the mess hall table.

“’England kaput’, huh?” Jughead asks, dryly. “Just pass me the salt, Karl”

Karl passes the salt.

Nick sits a few seats down, and Jughead struggles to concentrate on his meager meal so that he won’t slit the man’s throat with his spoon.

“The way I see it,” Nick is saying to an old Debs-style socialist banished to Camp Ripley for his impassioned and unconditional pacifism. “There’s no way the Axis loses this war. The German
Army is *unstoppable*. We—sorry, *they* can’t lose.”

“They should have cut your tongue out in Spain, St. Clair,” Jughead seethes, before he can stop himself.

“Oh, don’t mind him,” St. Clair goes on, loudly. “He’s an old buddy of mine. Just a little bitter over some silliness five years and a couple thousand miles away.”

“You belong on a gallows with your traitor father, you sniveling little fascist worm.”

As the mess hall falls silent to watch, St. Clair stands and stalks over to his nemesis, a mocking little smile on his lips.

“You belong in the ground with all your friends at Jarama,” he sneers.

Jughead beats him bloody. Again.

The little indiscretion lands him in the camp’s jail for a week.

Rumors are that the first US forces will be shipping out to join the British in Egypt and Tunisia within months. They’re taking the fight to the fascists at last. And he’s stuck here digging ditches and fixing engines with a bunch of Nazis and madmen.

Jughead growls and paces his little cell.

He writes a desperate, last-ditch letter.

Dear Cheryl,

*Having so nobly volunteered to fight fascism in the service of my country, I find that my illustrious history of having done just that manifests, instead of as a boon, as a mark against me.*

*I fought in Spain, and consequently the government seems to think I’m some ravening Bolshevik plotting another Red October.*

*So I sit here on what amounts to eternal guard duty alongside out-and-out Axis partisans. The only tolerable ones here are the isolatonists and the pacifists. The rest are rabid fascists.*

*Worst of all, I find myself working shoulder to shoulder with you-simply-will-not-believe-who: that rat, Nicholas St. Clair (a bastard who actually deserves to be here).*

*I know your family has quite the military history. I’m hoping (perhaps against hope) that you could repeat the favor you did me when you swung the publication of our book, and perhaps snag me a juicier post. If for no other reason, than because I will certainly murder St. Clair with my bare hands should I have to endure another day of him.*

*Love and regards, J. Jones*

Almost immediately, he receives his response.

*My good Mr. Jones,*

*The Blossom family name has not escaped the shadow of my father’s treachery with its prestige intact.*

*Nevertheless, my fathers have marched beneath the star-spangled red white and blue since*
Lexington, and that still counts for something in certain uniformed circles.

By the finish of the week, at the latest, you should receive notification of your new posting.

Be ready to trade out your shovel for a rifle.

Love, regards, and no pasaran!

Cheryl Blossom

PS, I think you will appreciate the men in your unit, too. To an extent.

Cheryl works quickly.

Within the week, he’s rescued from the oblivion of Camp Ripley, and sent off to his new posting: 16th regiment, 1st Infantry Division. ‘The Big Red One’.

“Jug!” Archie exclaims when his friend arrives, two days into a training maneuver in the sweltering Louisiana heat. “I had no idea they were gonna transfer you!”

“Called in a favor,” Jughead jokes.

“Holy shit,” Private Reggie Mantle snickers, strutting up to his old schoolmates. “What the hell are you doing here, Jones? Aren’t you some big shot writer, now?”

“I can see this is going to be a lovely war,” says Jughead, wryly.

They finish their training exercises summarily.

They're to ship out in January of 1943.

“Man, wait til I get my hands on Hirohito,” Reggie says, long after lights out, when he’s supposed to be asleep. He flicks and closes a switchblade methodically.

“Reggie…shut up, god’s sake,” Jughead begs.

Anyway, he hopes to himself they aren’t going to the Pacific.

He hopes go to Europe. So that he can repay the Nazi-Fascists who dropped bombs on him in Madrid and sold Franco the bullets that killed his friends at Jarama.

Two weeks before shipping out, the US Army gives them a weekend pass.

Jughead, accompanied by his good-friend Archie and sometimes-acquaintance Reggie Mantle, meander back towards New York City.

One day into their leave, Jughead gets a call from—who else—Cheryl.

“Are you with Archie?”

Jughead looks over his shoulder.

“Sure am. Reggie, too, unfortunately.”

“I’ve got a proposition.”
“This ought to be good."

In fact, it’s a fairly decent proposition.

Cheryl, caught up in war fervor, wants to take advantage of Archie’s rising stardom to record an album. Specifically, an album of songs she says, with usual bombast, would be ‘conducive towards final victory over the fascist darkness’.

Archie complies.

Cheryl then asks Jughead if he doesn’t have any rousing tunes picked up in Spain?

Jughead shrugs and says ‘sure’.

He produces a slip of paper and wracks his brain. He remembers the songs they sang around the fire in the chilly nights before the duel for Madrid. He remembers the songs that spilled from the lips of the Lincolns on the march and in their trenches. He remembers German, Polish, Italian, English, and Spanish.

*Viva la Quince Brigada*

*El Quinto Regimiento*

*Arbeiter Von Wien*

*‘The Song of Warsaw’*

And of course, *Jarama Valley*.

Archie writes a few originals, folksy tunes full of airy patriotism and sappy appeals to fight. The top number there is called *‘Mr. Hitler’s Final Curtain’*.

So one cold January night in Manhattan, they sit around in a recording studio, Cheryl watching intently and Reggie dozing in a corner while Archie and Jughead pour out a dozen songs of war and struggle in English, butchered German, and shattered Spanish.

“Oh, we’re proud of our Lincoln Battalion and the fight for Madrid that we made! There we fought like true sons of the people, as part of the XV Brigade!”

Archie suggests the title ‘Twelve Songs for Liberty and Peace’. Both Cheryl and Jughead hate it. There are only a few days before they ship out for North Africa, and precious little time to argue.

Two weeks after Jones, Andrews, and Mantle embark on a troopship to Casablanca, ‘Twelve Songs for Liberty and Peace’ is released across the USA.

Chapter End Notes

There’s little evidence that veterans of the Spanish Civil War were ever officially referred to as 'premature antifascists' in official government documents, and it seems to be a label the Lincolns adopted for themselves (though the sentiment was certainly there, if not the precise wording) but as I’ve mentioned before this is really more an idealized caricature of the time period and events it depicts than any attempt at a truly
grounded treatment (that'd be a lot more depressing a a whole lot less heroic).

'Twelve Songs for Liberty' is of course a rather transparent reference to 'Six Songs for Democracy' by Ernst Busch, recorded in Barcelona in 1938 by him and other members of the XII International Brigade. One of the more popular records of the 30s. Fun fact: when listening to that particular album, you can hear imperfections because the production was hampered by intermittent electrical shortages thanks to Franco's planes bombing the city during the recording.

Spanish Civil War songs became kind of a standby for Lefty American folk singers in the decades following the war. Pete Seeger, Phil Ochs, and Woody Guthrie all did their share. As Tom Lehrer put it: "remember the war against Franco? That's the kind where each of us belongs! Though he may have won all the battles, we had all the good songs!"
Coda IV: Once More Unto the Breach

Chapter Notes

Here's where we just straight up tell realism to go fuck itself and dive into unabashed 'Saving Private Ryan' level heroics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So I thank the Soviets

and the mighty Chinese vets;

Allies the whole wide world around!

To the battling British: 'thanks!

You can have ten million Yanks

if it takes them to tear the fascists down!’’”

~'Tear the Fascists Down,’ Woody Guthrie

"Now, I don't know about y'all, but I sure as hell didn't come down from the goddamn Smoky Mountains, cross five thousand miles of water, fight my way through half of Sicily and jump out of a fuckin' air-o-plane to teach the Nazis lessons in humanity. Nazi ain't got no humanity!"

~Lt. Aldo Raine

October 3rd, 1943

Dear Cheryl,

As I’m sure the radio back home has been only too happy to report, things are going as swimmingly as can be expected ‘over here’.

Sicily fell as quickly as could be. Turns out blackshirt bragging and bluster doesn’t count for much in the way of soldiering. The second our boots hit the beach, just about every fascist soldier on the island came out of their positions waving white flags and shouting: ‘Viva Churchill! Viva Stalin! Viva Roosevelt!’ So much for ‘me ne frego’, huh?

Reggie and Archie had a good laugh at that one. I told them the Germans would be a whole lot tougher, and they didn’t believe me.

Well, they sure believed me in a few days time.

The Hermann Goering Division in particular gave us a real good fight. Not good enough, though. We swept them into the mountains. Then we raced Monty’s boys to Messina, chasing the Nazis all the way. And we won!
Now we’re getting ready to hop over to the Italian mainland and see just what Il Duce and Der Führer have got in store. Between the two of us, I think Benito will give up the ghost long before Adolf does. My prediction: old Mussolini will buckle once we start marching up towards Rome. Then Hitler will shunt him aside and take responsibility for the Italian campaign himself. It’s his style. Not that he’ll succeed.

Not that this isn’t hard going, but the fascists are on borrowed time. We’re squeezing them in from two sides. Soon it’ll be three. The Red Army is battering the vast majority of the Wehrmacht out east. They’re already talking about the big landing in France next year. Once that’s done, it’ll be ‘Hitler kaput’ for real.

Some guys are optimistic enough to say the whole thing will be over sometime next year. I think we’re smart enough to doubt such predictions. The Wehrmacht’s got some fight left in it yet.

I know as a writer I’m meant to lament the horror and waste of war, but in truth I’m feeling a real sense of completion and finality. If that makes me a warmonger, so be it. At Jarama we were slaughtered because we had no planes and tanks, and the fascists had scores. I remember the way the Nazis hit Madrid every day, like clockwork. All those corpses in the streets.

Now we’ve got the planes. And we’ve got the tanks. Am I allowed to take satisfaction in that?

Remember in 1942, when the Nazis were at the gates of Moscow, the Japanese in Corregidor, and it looked like they’d rule the whole world?

What a difference a year or two make, eh?

The swastika and the fasces are coming down. Jason and all of the boys left in the olive groves of Spain can rest a little easier.

I hope this letter doesn’t make you too jealous. I know you want to be over here more than anything. But rest assured, I’ll tell you stories for hours when I get home.

Salud,

Technical Sergeant J. Jones

Cheryl folds up the letter and grumbles. She doesn’t want to feel jealous. She is glad to know that Jughead’s okay, and that they’re giving the fascists what for over there.

But goddamned if she doesn’t want more than anything to be over there herself.

Oh, how she wishes they’d give her a gun.

Especially now that the AP’s sent Toni off to the South Pacific.

So Cheryl’s stuck here holding down the home front by herself.

Well, Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge are still here. But that’s a cold comfort.

She writes a return letter.

October 14th, 1943

Dear Technical Sergeant Jughead Jones,

I’d be lying if I said I felt not a twinge of envy.
You know they’ve sent Toni off to Burma? Those photos she bartered off of that Russian correspondent of Red Troops storming Nazi positions at Prokhorovka (God knows I didn’t spell that right), and the story she wrote up to go along with them, really put her name in lights. Now she’s the woman of the hour in the cutthroat world of war journalism. Fancy that, eh?

Your girlfriend’s fine, by the way. I’ve calculated that her latest letter will reach you before mine, so I don’t think I’ll be the first one to break the news to you that she finally snagged that spot at the Times. Alice Cooper cried tears of vicarious joy.

‘Twelve Songs for Liberty’ (I still hate the name) is selling like hotcakes. I’m actually getting positively sick of hearing ‘Viva La Quince Brigada’ on the radio. But I’m sure the royalties will tickle dear Archibald pink.

You see? Every last one of you saps is on top of the world, and here I am operating switchboards.

At the very least the WAC (dare I call them the Women’s Army Bore?) could let me operate them over there!

I shall make one more bid for a transfer to Europe (I suppose I could settle for the Pacific), and should I fail, intend to stow away on the next troop ship bound for France (for the benefit of the military censors reading this letter—that’s a joke).

Preferably, I’d like to get over there before it’s all wrapped up. We’ve got the Red Army barreling on towards Poland, and you boys rolling up Kesselring and what’s left of Mussolini’s forces in Italy (I almost feel bad for the poor old bastard). The wisdom of ‘home by Christmas’ optimism aside, I feel safe in my prediction that Fascist Germany and Italy are not long for this world. With a little bit of luck, Fascist Spain will follow them onto the ash heap of history.

But God forbid you finish it all up too soon.

Salud,

WAC Technician 4th Grade Cheryl Blossom

October 3rd, 1943

Dear Betty Cooper,

I think about you a lot. Sorry, I just felt the need to get that out of the way.

I hope you aren’t worrying too much.

Well, perhaps you should worry a bit. There is a war on, after all. But that taken into account, things over here aren’t quite so bad. The food is much better than anything we ate in Spain. Archie’s bearing up so well that I’m not sure he even knows we’re in the army half the time. Even Reggie can be kept in check for the most part. It helps that I outrank him and could have him court martialed and shot for insubordination in the field (don’t worry—I’ll refrain from that course of action. No matter how tempting it might be).

But it’s not fun to sleep alone (not exactly alone, since there are usually two or three guys crammed in on either side of me. But I digress). I miss waking up next to you, and waking up to the cabs buzzing down in the street and folks clicking by on the sidewalk. I miss cups of coffee next to that stupid window we can never quite seem to get unjammed.
C’est la vie. C’est la guerre.

I’ve written reams while I’m over here. Over the months, I’ve gotten to the used to my ‘superiors’ cursing me for a feckless poet. At the end of the day, I’ve got a book on the New York Times bestseller’s list, and they don’t (excuse the vanity). Stories here and there, but more poetry than usual. I suppose getting back into the fight has made me sentimental. It’s hard not to be sometimes. You should have seen the way the Sicilians greeted us when we rolled in. Cheering and shouting and clogging up the treads of our M4s with flowers. They were almost as happy as the Spaniards in Madrid. Almost. And they’re supposed to be our enemies! I guess they’ve had their fill of Mussolini.

I swear I didn’t let any of those girls from Messina kiss me when we marched in. God knows they tried, though.

Without getting into the details of advances, retreats, and pitched battles (I save those for Cheryl because she loves them), I think we’ll be done here sooner than later. Than maybe I can take a (permit me to say, hard-earned) rest.

I’ll read every bit of everything I wrote to you when I get home.

With much love, an embrace, and a kiss,

Jughead Jones.

Betty smiles. It’s always a great, flooding rush of relief when she gets a letter. A feeling she first felt that morning in Riverdale, when she received that rumpled, yellowing little missive posted from Madrid.

Every morning the newspapers are splashed all over with fire and gore. The Japanese fleet is broken at Midway. The Germans have been expelled from Africa, at the costs of thousands of allied lives. The Red Army has driven the Nazis out of Stalingrad, with millions dead.

Every day hundreds of thousands and then millions spill their blood in the snows of Ukraine, or the humid jungles of the Pacific, or the villas of Sicily, or on the rolling seas.

But Jughead is okay. And he will be okay. Archie is okay. Hell, even Reggie is okay.

Everything will be alright.

And it’ll be better in the end.

October 14th, 1943

Dear Jughead,

I’m deeply relieved, to know you’re still alive and kicking! And I expect you to remain that way! I’d be lying if I said I was glad to have you over there, but I know that you would never have forgiven yourself if you did not go. And that being so, perhaps it's right that you did.

I look forward eagerly to reading everything you've written. And I'll bet your readership over here does, too, because it's growing by the day. It seems like I can't go a day without some paper mentioning you, the book, and wondering when you're going to 'give us another marvelous work like that one'. I've even heard rumblings of interest in a motion picture adaptation (God forbid!)

As for my part, I think I'm doing a commendable job holding down the home front.
And guess what? I've got a new job! At the Times of all places! My mother, as you might imagine, was delighted. So was dad, even if he was less explosive about it. They've published a thing or two that I've written before, but this is real, steady employment! Who knows? Maybe someday I'll run the place. Right now all they want is articles about the war, so that tends to occupy my time. When it's all over, maybe I'll get to write about things don't involve gunfire or bloodletting in the slightest. Ah, well! We'll see.

Cheryl is busy as a bee over here. I'm sure she's let you know through her letters just how frustrating she finds it to be 'stuck on this side of the Atlantic while you're off on your gallant crusade against the fascist hordes!' Those are her words, by the way, not mine. Just a few days ago she invited (you may read 'dragged') me to some sort of fellow-traveler function at which she was slated to speak. I watched her shake her fist on stage and hurl every insult ever conceived by man (and a few as yet unheard) at Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, in front of a giant banner reading: "THE RED ARMY SHALL SWEEP THE FASCIST BARBARIANS FROM THE FACE OF THE EARTH!" It was really something to see. Then she cornered me and forced me to buy more war bonds than I thought possible.

Veronica is a little glum, so I've been trying to keep her cheered up. There are some fibrillations going involving her mother and father, and it's got her blue. But I think she'll be okay. She's thinking about applying to the nurse corps, just to have something to do.

Kevin just sent me a letter from Burma, too. Apparently, he's fine (even if he got a Japanese bullet in the thigh). It came along with a couple desiccated tropical plants and insects he thought I might find fascinating. Oh! Kevin.

Eagerly and always awaiting your return, and with love,

Betty Cooper

The roiling Atlantic tosses and growls. Sheets of foam splash up over the sides of the boats.

The sky overhead hisses and mutters with the promise of a storm. Grey clouds bunch up and then spill out over the horizon, casting the land and sea in shades of slate and black.

A light drizzle peppers the roaring green waves. The droplets plink and dribble down the curves of steel helmets and over pitted rifle stocks. Weary, nervous muscles bunch up beneath soaked green uniforms.

The beach ahead is long, smooth, and sloping until it reaches the jagged little cliff face stretching east and west all along the coast. Redoubtable networks of iron bars and barbed wire jut out at wild angles from the crashing surf.

The landing crafts, numbering now in the hundreds, and each holding tight forty fighting men in their bellies, rush at the washed out shore.

Crouching in the hold of a Higgins boat, Technical Sergeant Forsythe Jones clutches his Thompson gun tight to his chest. He kisses the barrel, dripping with rainwater and sea foam.

Corporate Archibald Andrews shivers with cold and anticipation beside him. Corporal Reginald Mantle pats his chest. Squints into the quickening rain and mist.

“About damn time we get another real good fight,” Reggie grins.

The rest of the thirty-eight men in the boat say nothing.
“It’ll be just like Sicily, right, guys?” Archie asks, hopeful.

“The Italians gave up the moment we set foot on the beach,” Jughead reminds him, grim and focused.

“Well, maybe the Germans will do the same?”

Jughead checks his gun again.

“I don’t think so.” He sighs. “No, not like Sicily.”

“This is it,” someone gasps.

The grey-white grime of the beach looms up out of the fog at them. Jughead picks out the ragged shapes of bunkers set into the cliff walls.

Then it’s on.

The doors to the landing crafts pop open. The US soldiers rush out.

And then the German gunners open up.

Legions of olive-clad boys collapse into the surf, mashed into gore by a rain of bullets. The chattering machine guns mingle with the thundering rain. The entrenched defenders enfilade their besiegers with a devilish, almost preternatural accuracy.

Men stumble up through the breakers onto the wet sand and fall pierced through a hundred ways by interlocking fire. Corpses fall in stacks of twos, then threes, then sixes. Rivulets of blood pour down the muggy sand back into the ocean and wash down the currents in a red, thick tide.

Jughead lurches out of the boat. He can feel Archie’s familiar, warm, burly presence at his back. And Reggie, cold and eager, splashing through the waves to his left.

The water all around splashes up in little spouts as German bullets rake the line. The two men immediately to Jughead’s right snap backwards as Nazi rounds shatter their helmets and their skulls. They pitch forward into the knee-deep water.

Artillery shells spiral through the stormy air and slam down into the massed American ranks.

“Go! Go!” Jughead shrieks at his platoon. “Spread out! Spread out! Get up on the sand and hit the fucking ground!”

Gouts of fire consume dozens of soldiers in singular, sunlight bright blasts. The heady summer air sizzles with the smells of thick copper and sizzling flesh and hair.

“Schweinhunden! Heil Hitler!”

A string of fresh corpses curls along the length of the beach, mingled with the armless, legless living and screaming.

They charge up out of the water, uniforms and packs dripping. Jughead jams himself behind a big iron tank trap. Barbed wire catches his sleeve and he yanks it away. Nazi bullets pound the sand into mush.

As the first wave of GIs is shredded at the surf line, tens of thousands of their comrades spill onto the beach behind them.
A formidable web of barbed wire, twisted metal, and repurposed debris cuts off the American landing force from the bluffs packed full of Nazi machine gun nests.

Jughead crouches on his knees.

Reggie creeps up on his belly alongside him, smiling. Bullets hum inches over their heads. The sand beneath them clumps with blood and water.

“Whew! These fucking krauts have really got a stiffy for us, huh?”

Jughead pats his shoulder.

“Wait ’til we meet the SS.” Then to the entire platoon scattered out behind him up to the edge of the water, screaming as loud as he can over the hissing guns and the lashing waves. “Come on! Every second we stay here is another second those machine guns are still working! Up! Up!”

And the advance is on.

A few hundred meters of rocky, rain-swept beach without so much as a tree or a ditch for cover.

They rush on, falling, crawling, stumbling, and shooting.

Resistance stiffens as they reach the foot of the bluffs and the machine gun nests.

Jughead’s platoon presses itself up against the foot of the little cliff face, squeezing against low flat rocks or mounds of sand as the Nazis pour down fire from above.

They’ve come this far and can come no further. To Jughead’s left, a man peeks out from behind a stone to take a shot. Immediately, a German round pierces his head.

“Jughead!” Archie gestures.

“What?”

Archie shouts something. Jughead can’t hear.

“What?”

Archie repeats. Still, he can’t hear.

To their right, a medic struggles to help three men shot through the guts and hips, writhing in bloody agony on the cold sand.

Reggie crawls over and shouts into Jughead’s ear.

“He said ‘bangalores!’”

“We don’t have any fucking bangalores!” Jughead shouts back. The German machinegunner pauses for a moment, reloads, and then resumes his fire. Behind them, the next wave of landing crafts tosses and rolls in the surf. “They’re still—damn it!” A bullet comes much too near for comfort. “They’re still back in the—“

The ocean and the beach are red.

Jughead swings to the left.
“Thatcher!” he demands. A young soldier tending to a fallen comrade lifts his head.

“What?”

Jughead gestures to said fallen comrade.

“Is Hartman dead?”

“What?”

“Is Hartman dead?”

Thatcher checks Hartman’s pulse with shaking, wet fingers. He nods and licks his lips.

“Yes, sir!”

“Give me his pack!”

“What?”

“Give me his pack!”

Thatcher reluctantly strips off Hartman’s pack and hands it off to Jughead. Jughead empties it of sundries and rations and demands grenades of his platoon. He’s soon got it packed full of Mk2s.

“When I say ‘go!’ we rush that nest, got it?” He jabs a finger towards the machine gunner in the bluffs above them, still firing his steady, angry bursts.

“We’ll all fucking die!” Reggie shouts.

“Got it?”

“Do you want to kill us all?”

“Corporal Mantle, that’s an order!”

“Fuck!”

Jughead bets on the gunner being tired, agitated, and paranoid. Anything louder or faster than the battle at large, anything that sticks out at all, will draw his attention.

He pulls the pin on a single grenade and drops it back into the pack of explosives. Then he hoists it up by a strip, swings it over his head like a lasso, and sends it flying twenty feet.

Just as he anticipated, the machine gunner immediately focuses his attentions on the blur of movement. The pack strikes the sand. It explodes, sending up a spray of dirt forty feet high. The Nazi gunner lets loose a stream of fire in that direction.

Their path is cleared. For the moment.

“Go! Go!”

The platoon leaps to its feet and charges, rushing around the side of the bunker single file.

The machine gunner realizes he’s been tricked just in time to whip his gun back around and cut down the last two men in the line.
But it’s too late.

The Americans storm down the back of the bunker. They pull knives and smash into brutal, animal combat with the Nazi troopers.

Jughead jams his knife into a Landser’s ribcage and drives him backwards into the bunker, to catch the first few bullets of his comrades inside. Then he swings his Tommy gun around the side of his human shield and puts a round of bullets into the Germans around the machine gun.

Archie moves in behind him, shrieking at the top of his lungs as he fires, something he’s done regularly since Kasserine Pass.

In thirty seconds, the firefight is over.

The surviving machine gunner and his comrade whip their helmets off and toss them to the ground. Throw their hands up.

“Nicht schiessen! Nicht schiessen!”

The Americans move cautiously forward and disarm their opponents. This bunker, and consequently this little strip of beach, for what it’s worth, is taken.

The two Landsers sink to their knees.

The US troops relax. Adrenaline washes away and the first wave of exhaustion hits.

“You’re right,” Archie says, broad shoulders shaking. He reaches out to squeeze Jughead’s hand. “This is tougher than Sicily.”

The ‘defeated’ German machine gunner’s hand slides down his waist. It closes around the hilt of his knife. Jughead’s eye catches the flash of movement.

In a split second, the German pulls his knife free and springs forward. Jughead is faster. He kicks the Landser back and brings his boot down onto his hand. The Nazi trooper’s fingers spring open and he cries out in pain, dropping the knife.

Jughead steps over his back and presses the barrel of his Tommy gun to the back of the man’s head.

The Landser groans with humiliated, impotent rage. He tries to pull himself up to his knees. Jughead plants his boot on the back of the soldier’s head and forces him down again.

“Yeah, you fascist pricks,” Jughead sneers. “I’m back.”

From the beaches of Normandy, it is relatively easy going. The fight to dislodge the German army from its fortresses on the coast and along the rivers is fierce and bloody. Countless towns are pounded into rubble by Allied warplanes and Nazi artillery.

But in the end, Hitler’s mighty Wehrmacht is humbled.

The Allied armies lurch across France, brushing aside scattered German resistance and driving on towards the Rhine. The Nazis abandon Paris without a fight, and Free French troops march into the city to the wild acclamation of the populace.

The full industrial and military might of the Allies is brought to bear on Fascist Germany. Her
Italian comrade in arms has long since folded. The Red Army is on the border of East Prussia. US troops push up into Belgium. Hitler’s marshals gather what’s left of the Reich’s forces for a great, apocalyptic defense of the fatherland’s borders. But it reeks of desperation. The veterans who crushed Poland, France, and Yugoslavia in weeks rot in the snows of Stalingrad or on the plains of Kursk. Germany’s mighty tanks vanish from the field. Reichsmarschall Goering’s vaunted Luftwaffe has shrunk to near irrelevance. Sorties of five Nazi planes are answered by fifty American.

Massing on the outskirts of Aachen, Technical Sergeant Jughead Jones leaps out from behind while German bullets whip around him. He shakes his fist at the foe as a fleet of US aircraft swoops in to strafe Nazi positions on the horizon.

“You like that? It’s not so fun when you’re on the other end is it? You fucking Nazi bastards! You like being bombed? You like a couple hundred pounds of ordnance on your heads? How’s that for payback? Toledo 1936! Madrid 1936, you servile fascist motherfuckers! Fuck y—“

Corporal Andrews grips him by the belt and yanks him back down.

“Jughead. God’s sake, calm down!”

He licks his lips, nods, and shoves his shaking hands into his pockets.

“Right. Sorry.”

“Aw, the sarge’s just letting off a little steam,” Corporal Mantle teases. “Right?”

“Shut up, Reggie.”

The 1st Infantry Division gets no rest, flung again and again into the thick of the hottest battles.

Maneuvering in the southeast of France, on the German border, Jughead’s 3rd platoon of Company V is sent to rendezvous with a band of French resistance fighters in the nearby forest.

The maquisards emerge like ghosts from the thick, green woods. They melt out from behind trees and through vine-choked shrubbery. Their rifles are crumbling and ancient. Their faces are filthy. Their clothes slough off of their torn, harried bodies. For years, they’ve been fighting the occupier. Liberation is here at last.

The US soldiers step forward to meet their weary allies.

Jughead commiserates with the leader of the band; a hatchet faced young man named Michel.

As Michel thumps his chest and recounts for the fifth time the glorious story of the time his maquisards blew up the German troop train heading for Russia, Jughead feels someone tap him on the shoulder.

He spins around and finds himself looking into a woman’s face. She’s dark-haired, with olive skin, sharp, intelligent eyes, and a happy little smile on her lips. There’s a nasty scar wrapping its way around her forehead and down to her right cheek and ear. One of her eyes looks clouded over and milky. Jughead’s eyes track down to the revolver in her belt.

Something is familiar.

She looks him in the eyes, smile never faltering.
“Yes?” he asks, cautiously.

“Que pasa? O no me reconoces, Torombolo?”

Then it hits him.

Toledo. Madrid.

“Isidora?”

She laughs, then lunges forward and embraces him.

And she tells her story. How she’d fled over the Pyrenees into France with half a million other Republican Spaniards as Franco’s troops marched on to victory. How she had taken up arms again against the fascists when the Nazis swept into France. How she’d spent the past five years struggling and bleeding with the resistance in the woods of Alsace and the Occitan.

“And Mariano?” Jughead asks.

Isidora droops her head.

“May he rest well. He came with me into France, and he was with our band for two years. The Milice thugs caught him.” She spits. “They tortured him to give up our names and the names of our friends in the towns. He wouldn’t give them shit, and they shot him.”

“He was a good man,” Jughead says.

“A brave man.” She raises an invisible glass in his honor.

Archie and Reggie amble over.

“Who’s your friend?” Archie asks, and Jughead makes introductions.

“So this time, you’ve brought a whole lot of your countrymen with you, eh, Torombolo?”

“More than last time,” he smiles.

“Now we’ll pound those fascist pricks into the dust. And when we’re done with Hitler and Mussolini, then Franco, yes?”

“Goddamned right,” Jughead says. And he’s sure it’s the truth. Surely, the Allies will not allow Franco to remain in power in Madrid once they’ve dealt with his friends in Rome and Berlin. When the principals are defeated, the Liberation of Spain must be next on the agenda. And he looks forward to it.

Isidora claps him on the shoulder.

“You and me, comrade. We’ll be on the first tank back into Madrid.”

“You can count on it.”

“No pasarán!”

“Nosotros pasaremos!”

Two weeks later, they make another unexpected reacquaintance.
After days and weeks of bloody, fruitless fighting in the muggy, freezing Hürtgen Forest, Company V is pulled out from the lines for a much-needed rest.

It’s in a Paris bar, in transit to their new posting in the north of France that they run into her.

“Stand at attention, soldiers!”

Jughead spins around and his eyes blow wide with shock as Cheryl Blossom flies towards him.

“Uh…Cher—“

She pulls him into a fierce, near-lethal hug. She offers another to Archie, and then nods briskly at Reggie, who responds by crossing his arms.

“Happy to see me, sweethearts? I come to add a bit of color to the European Theater of Operations.” She fluffs her hair.

“How’d you swing this?” Jughead asks. “Did you stow away on a troop ship, after all?”

“God, no,” she sneers. “I very simply gave the brass a choice between sending me off across the stormy sea, and dealing with me for the rest of the war.”

“How’re things back home?” Archie asks.

“Fine and dandy. Your fans are clamoring for your return. Take care when handling grenades—I shudder to think of what might happen should you lose those precious fingers.”

“So, they’ve still got you switching boards?” Jughead jokes.

Cheryl scowls.

“Sunup to sundown.”

Reggie whistles and looks her over.

“Damn. What a waste.”

Cheryl bares her teeth.

“Watch your mouth, Mantle. No one is going to notice one more corpse in this mess.”

Jughead snickers.

She turns to him.

“So you boys enjoying your leave?”

“I’d enjoy hell itself if it was nothing like the Hürtgen Forest,” he says.

“I’d gladly take your place in the line, if they’d let me.”

“Oh, I know.”

“Especially now?” she exults. “Now that we’re getting ready to punch through the Siegfried Line and take the fight into Germany? Leaving me out of it is criminal. I will kill one fascist before this war is over. What’s your number, now, Jones?”
Jughead shrugs.

“I try to be just respectful enough of the dead that I don't tally the people I've killed.”

“I don’t think Hitler’s got much fight left,” Archie says. He turns to Cheryl. “You know, they’re deploying us up to some little village in northern France. It sounds great. A farming town. Peaceful. Maybe they’ll just let us wait out the end of the war, there.”

“Amen,” Reggie says. “The krauts are done. We just gotta wait a few weeks for them to implode.”

“And, man, did you see that French girl?”

“She was Flemish, you idiot,” Jughead says. He flips a franc into the air, catches it, and slips it back into his pocket.

“Whatever, Jones,” Reggie sniffs.

“I have no idea how you’ve stayed alive this long, Corporal Mantle,” Jughead replies.

“Balls,” Reggie asserts, thumping his chest.

“Not yours.”

The door swings open. Corporal Andrews spills inside and slams it shut behind him again. He leaves a trail of melting snow across the ancient floors.

“You’re screwing up the carpet, Arch. Come on, now.”

“Carpet’s like a century old. Come on, Jug,” Archie protests.

Jughead shrugs.

The snow coats the ground about a foot deep outside. At least it isn’t falling anymore. It could be a lot worse.

Villiers-le-Bois is a little village situated in a yawning stretch of rolling fields carved out of the Ardennes forest, just where the French border meets Germany to the east and Luxemburg and Belgium to the northwest.

The population of the town numbers about 400. Owing to the settlement’s frontier situation, Germans, French, and Flemish live side by side, if sometimes uneasily.

Fourth platoon of Company V of the 16th regiment, 1st US Infantry Division has been billeted here for three days, now. Only a few weeks before that, the last of the Wehrmacht rear guard had abandoned Villiers-le-Bois, taking the town’s collaborationist mayor and officials with them.

When the US troops rolled in on their M4 tanks and Ford halftracks, every last man, woman, and child turned out to greet them. But Jughead knows that sometimes enthusiasm only runs so deep. Just weeks ago, they hailed their Nazi overlords just the same.

It’s a relaxing post, at least. A quiet little Franco-German country village. No fighting here. As far as Allied command is aware, any Nazi forces in the vicinity are scattered leftovers incapable of anything but a single-minded retreat back into Germany.

Most of the platoon is billeted in the vacant town hall. There’s more than enough space in its
vaulted corridors and old gothic chambers. Ancient busts of French thinkers and statesmen peer out from little alcoves and mantelpieces. French tricolors hang side by side from the walls with Nazi swastikas. Jughead is going to take them down someday, when he works up the energy.

The GIs—a little over forty in all—sit in scattered bunches through the old hall.

Five men play poker in a corner, beneath a portrait of Pierre Laval with a knife stuck between its eyes.

The platoon lieutenant, Dalton, shares a cigarette with a corporal across the room.

Four more GIs engage in a heated argument over the respective merits of RKO and Universal Pictures.

Reggie continues bragging about the Flemish girl he was (not) able to entice into bed with him.

Archie picks at an invisible guitar hovering somewhere in the air.

Jughead’s eyelids droop as he struggles to get through the latest issue of *Stars and Stripes* in the dim candlelight. The snow begins to fall again outside.

Then the town hall door flies open. A flurry of snow and ice whirls in. The GIs leap to their feet. More than one snatches up his gun on instinct. The lieutenant topples out of his chair. Jughead’s eyes snap wide open.

A figure swaddled in a heavy US Army standard-issue winter coat stomps in over the threshold, shaking off snow as it comes. It raises its left hand in greeting.

“Oh, good lord,” Jughead sighs.

“Good evening to the noble liberators of Europe!” Cheryl Blossom cries. “*Vive les allies!*”

“Cheryl…how did you even get here?” an exhausted Jughead asks, as she saunters over.

“I stole a jeep.”

He cracks a tired smile.

“From who?”

“SHAEF. Well, more like borrowed. Let’s just say it blurred the lines.”

“Why?” Archie asks, abandoning his invisible guitar.

“I was bored.”

“Well you won’t find much to stymie your boredom, here,” Jughead warns.

“Except me,” Reggie coos.

“I really wish we’d ‘lost you’ in the Hürtgen,” Jughead says.

“Sergeant Jones,” Lieutenant Dalton lays a calloused hand on the young sergeant’s shoulder. “I don’t recall giving you permission to put up your girlfriend here, too.”

“I’m not his girlfriend, lieutenant,” Cheryl clarifies. “But we do share an unbreakable comradeship
born on the altar of liberty and refined in the fires of martial sacrifice.” She purses her lips.

Dalton peers at her, eyes lidded and heavy. He sighs.

“Excuse me, miss…what?”


Dalton shrugs, too. He walks off.

“So.” Cheryl rubs her hands. “What’s there around here in the way of diversions?”

“There…I went pinecone picking with some kids from the village yesterday,” Archie says. “I’m still trying to find a guitar.”

“We’re in the middle of a French forest in a snow-drift. What exactly do you think there is to do around here?” Jughead inquires.

Cheryl leans in, smiling mischievously.

“Have you boys been down into the cellar, yet?”

“Uh…no?”

“No? For the love of God, Jones! It’s a French cellar!”

She nods, stands, and rushes off to the cellar of the old building. She slips in through the heavy, ancient door. Jughead peers into the darkness of the basement, seeing nothing. He kind of wants to go to sleep.

Cheryl reappears two or three minutes later, carrying a bottle of old Rhineland wine in each hand.

“There’s plenty more where I found these, comrades!” she cheers.

Given an hour and a half, most every soldier in the building is thoroughly, flatly drunk.

Reggie has stripped off his shirt and climbed up onto a table, where he’s doing what might be charitably described as a dance. Archie belts out a horrifically off-key rendition of ‘Jeepers Creepers’.

Jughead takes a swig from a bottle of wine.

Cheryl sets down her own drink and slips behind the mayor’s abandoned desk. She digs around in his cabinet. After a few seconds of rummaging, she produces a tattered SS cap, slips it onto her head, and clambers on top of the desk.

“Look at me!” she giggles. “I’m Eva Braun! Come, let us celebrate the Third Reich, that it should last a thousand more day—nein, thousand years! Thousand years!”

Jughead doubles over with laughter because he’s drunk enough that it’s just about the funniest thing he’s ever heard.

“Ach, Fraulein!” he answers, doing his very best Hitler pastiche. “Wir sind in ein very bad posizion. Zis is no time for revelry or jesting. Come, ve must valiantly take flight before ze cowardly bolshevist hordes.”
The other soldiers cheer and whoop in delight.

“Nein, mein fuhrer,” she responds, in a high-pitched, squealing tone. Peals of laughter and applause. “Ve shall be fine! The Bolsheviks have von every battle since Stalingrad! Zat streak can’t last forever!”

“Dear Eva, if ve do not leave schnell, I fear zat our good generals may make another attempt on my life!”

“Vat? Again?”

“I bel—“

The first shell hits sharp and fast.

The town hall shudders. Dust and chips of stone shake loose from the old walls. GIs tumble to the ground with the force of the impact. The blast of artillery howls through the dark, snow-choked woods.

Jughead is thrown five feet and bowls over Reggie. His head strikes the corner of a table. He groans in pain.

Another six shells come in short order. Jughead drags himself to his feet and watches one score a direct hit on Villiers-le-Bois’ old church. The steeple crumples inward like a matchstick house. The venerable walls of medieval brick disintegrate and wash away like sand on a beach.

“What the he—“

The next shell strikes the town hall dead on. The roof buckles in. Jughead throws up a hand in a brittle defense as stone and shattered wood and dust shower down. Smoke and debris puff into the air. He rolls over, and half-blind, crawls away from the epicenter of the damage.

He hears someone scream. Then another scream. One more.

He rights himself again, and pulls his pistol from his belt, as if he might shoot back at the shells.

Cheryl sticks her head out from behind the mayor’s desk, hair frizzy and threaded through with debris.

Archie gets to his feet, woozy.

“What the living hell is this?” Cheryl demands.

“I thought they said the Germans were on the defensive,” Archie croaks. “I thought—“

“Evidently, you thought wrong,” Jughad says.

Half of the room implodes in the artillery strike. Some fifteen men have been buried in the rubble. Including Lieutenant Dalton.

“Fuckin’ great,” Reggie drawls, clutching a shrapnel-shredded arm. “Now Jones is in charge.”

A private grabs for the radio. It crackles to life. Someone shouts, and then it fades back into static.

“This is third platoon, Company V, 16th regiment, 1st infantry,” the private cries into the radio. “German guns jus—“
“They’re everywhere!” the radio shrieks. “We’re looking at Nazi artillery opening up all along the fucking line! We’ve already got panzer spearheads and paratroopers in…” Another surge of static drowns out their panicked contact.

“Come in! Come in!” the private shouts. “Can you hear me?”

Jughead snatches the radio away.

“Come in! Come in! Shit!” he smacks it to the ground.

“Hey, what the fuck is happening?” Reggie demands.

“What do you think, you idiot?” Jughead spits. “They’re counterattacking! Son of a bitch!”

In the streets of Villiers-le-Bois, the townsfolk rush out of their houses. They pour through the cobblestone main street and pile into the town hall, seeking the protection of the old cellar.

“Les boches! Les boches!”

The platoon, reduced to some twenty-five (plus Cheryl) huddles on the ground floor, while Nazi artillery rumbles in the distance and snow flits through the air outside.

“Their infantry won’t be far behind,” Jughead says.

The soldiers’ eyes gleam with terror.

“So we retreat,” one man says.

“Retreat?” Cheryl demands.

“Sister, there are about twenty of us and god knows how many krauts.”

“He’s right,” Jughead says. “We fall back west. God willing, this thing is contained and the Nazis don’t cut right back to Paris.”

“I’ll get the trucks warmed up,” Archie says, springing to his feet. “And load up the BARs.”

“Fucking hope to God the oil isn’t frozen,” Reggie adds.

“Wait!” Jughead orders. “For all we know, they’ve already cut the road. We need to be sure won’t be rolling into a Nazi ambush blind.” He looks from one soldier to the other, then back again. Naked terror. Trembling lips and hands. “We’ll send a few guys to scout ahead, and make sure the road out of here is clear,” he says.

Two volunteers, boys by the names of Rook and Jennings are saddled with the task. Jughead shakes their hands and sends them off.

“Good luck.”

“Thanks, sarge.”

The platoon waits in the smoldering town hall. In the cellar, half the denizens in Villiers-le-Bois huddle in terror or anticipation. Jughead knows well many of the German villagers eagerly await the return of the Wehrmacht. He can hear the mass of humanity scraping around beneath his feet.

They wait minutes, and then a half an hour for Rook and Jennings to return.
“Jesus Christ. What’s happened?” Archie asks, breathing heavy.

Jughead stands and grips his pistol.

“I’m going to go find out.”

“I’m coming,” Cheryl quickly pledges.

“Ch—“ He thinks better of arguing. “Forget it. Come on.”

They slip out of the town hall into the crackling winter night. The snow seeps and freezes in their boots. They squint against the shrieking wind. Jughead identifies the way west out of Villiers-le-Bois.

They travel parallel to the road, picking through tangled branches and briar bushes, shaking snow from the trees in their wake.

“Does this feel familiar to you?” Cheryl asks.

“What? Like the silvershirt camp? Of course it does.”

About five minutes out of town, they see it.

A great, black, gargantuan shape squats in the center of the crude dirt highway. Heavy armor gleams dimly in the moonlight. The big gun juts up proudly towards heaven. The purring heat of the big engine melts the snow around the treads.

“A hell of a tank,” Cheryl concedes.

“It’s a goddamned Tiger,” Jughead moans. “I didn’t think they had any left.”

A line of lorries winds down the road behind it. German soldiers mill around the convoy, up to their ankles in the snow, cigarettes between their lips and submachine guns cradled in their arms. The two Americans conceal themselves behind a snowy maple tree.

“How many, would you say?” Cheryl asks.

“150? 200? Half-strength battalion, maybe. They’re SS, too. I can see the cut of the jackets.”

Cheryl shivers, and not only from the cold. Jughead squeezes his eyes shut and says a quick prayer.

“Hey!” Cheryl points something out. Jughead squints. “Look. It’s your guys!”

The platoon’s two missing soldiers kneel by the Tiger’s treads, hands bound firmly with lengths of cord.

Rook and Jennings cower in the snow, heads dropped, chins touching their chests. Occasionally, Jughead sees one of them stir.

Two SS men move towards them, talking animatedly.

“Can you pick any of that up?” Cheryl asks.

Jughead wracks his brain for half-remembered German learned from Arno Reisman in Spain.
“He’s saying something about Bastogne,” Jughead shakes his head. “Something about prisoners.”

The SS men stop short of their American captives. One of them, a Hauptsturmführer, shouts something. He pulls a pistol and levels it at Jennings’ head.

Cheryl leaps up as if to intervene. Jughead pulls her back down.

“They’re going to kill h—”

“And they’ll kill us, too, if we try to help. How do you like our odds against two-hundreds of them?”

Cheryl sucks her teeth.

The Hauptsturmführer fires. Jenning’s head jerks back in a spray of red gore. Then he topples over into the snow. Steam curls up from the warm blood and chunks of brain and skull.

The executioner swings his pistol to Rook and fires before the boy can shout or beg.

The American soldiers lay corpses in the snow. Jughead closes his eyes and lowers his head for a moment. He says another quick prayer.

“Let’s get back to the village,” Cheryl hisses.

The burst into the town hall, winter spilling in behind them, and spill the news to a terrified fourth platoon.

“The road’s cut,” Cheryl announces without a thought to sugarcoating. “We’re not getting out of here.”

“We’re surrounded,” Jughead adds.

“How many of them?” Reggie demands.


“Tanks?” asks another man.

“A Tiger.”

Exclamations of horror and dismay.

Archie gets to his feet. “For all we know, they’ve already taken out every unit to our left and right, and are heading for Paris. We can’t fight that.”

“Like hell you can’t!” Cheryl snaps.

“Fuck! Andrews is right!” Someone agrees.

“We ought to surrender,” Reggie says. “I’m not dying in this shithole town.”

“They shot Rook and Jennings,” Jughead says, coldly.

“Here’s what they’re trying to do,” Cheryl explains. “They’re racing to cross the Meuse and reach Bastogne within a day or two. They’ve got no time to spare. They’re not going to take any prisoners.”
“We could try to sneak out through the woods,” Archie suggests.

“No,” Jughead shoots that one down. “They’ll have patrols strung out all around the town by now. And anyway—if we surrender or back down, we’re leaving this section of the front wide open for them. We’ll be rolling over and letting them breeze through to Bastogne and then to Antwerp. Is that what you boys want to do?”

“What, then?”

“Fight. Not much of a choice.”

“Look, sir, with all due respect, you’re out of your fucking mind!” Reggie charges. He stands and swaggers over. “If we try to fight them, we’re all going to die. If we don’t, we might—“

“Corporal Mantle! I did not fight fascist legionaries hand to hand in the trenches of Madrid, sail across the Atlantic twice, shoot my way through half of Sicily, storm Omaha beach, and slog through those fucking hedgerows, just so some SS thug could shoot me in the back of the head while I kneel in the snow!”

The soldiers fall silent.

“Alright. Fine. Got any ideas, then, sergeant?” Reggie demands.

“We might have one or two,” Cheryl says.

We had thought the Nazis beaten.

We had swept them from France and Belgium. We were preparing to drive over the Rhine. On the other side of the continent, the Nazi legions crumpled before the merciless onslaught of the Red Army.

The planes of the Luftwaffe and the tanks of the Heer disappeared one by one, victims of shortages as often as our guns. Meat and butter vanished from German dinner tables. Morale sagged.

They simply did not have it in them anymore.

But we weren’t looking at it from Hitler’s point of view.

The gangsters in Berlin knew their days were short. And they knew that we would call them to account for what they had done. They had nothing more to lose. They were desperate.

The Nazis had exactly one chance, miserably unlikely as it was.

If they could smash through the Anglo-American forces in northern France, sweep us back into the sea, and dissolve the Western Front, then maybe Stalin could be brought to the peace table in the east.

It was a long shot, but it was the only shot they had.

So in that freezing December of 1944, Hitler gathered up his finest troops and set them to push through the snowy Ardennes in a final gamble for the fate of Europe and his quick-vanishing empire.

Once more, the invincible German army would march.
Jughead watches, not breathing. He opens the slat in the little window a little wider with his thumb. He pokes his head out. The streets of Villiers-le-Bois are still empty.

He and Archie crouch in the second floor of a little tavern a few buildings down from the town hall. Waiting for the foe.

He scans the principal road into the little hamlet. It’s just wide enough for a big tank, and terminates in a crumbling old fountain (now frozen) in the village square. That will surely be the Nazis’ main axis of advance.

“Jug…I’m scared,” Archie whispers from beside him.

Jughead reaches out and squeezes his friend’s hand. He smiles awkwardly.

“You weren’t scared at Kasserine Pass. Not in Sicily. Not at Omaha.”

“Yes I was!”

“Oh…well…those all turned out just fine, didn’t they?”

Archie smiles weakly.

Jughead stares at him in profile, at his sharp, classical features and red hair capturing the slivers of moonlight.

And suddenly, it’s not Archie Andrews beside him, and this isn’t snowy France in the winter of 1944.

It’s Jason Blossom and this is sunny Spain in the spring of 1937.

His heart skips. He swallows. He stumbles back, and then reorients himself.

“You okay, Jug?”

“I’m fine.”

He pushes it down.

His and Cheryl’s plan was crude and simple. She’d had the platoon bury two improvised explosives on the north and west sides of the village square. Likely, the advancing Nazi column would pause there to consolidate the town. With luck, the blast would reduce their effective strength by maybe a third.

Of course, the Americans would then still be outnumbered three to one.

Jughead whips his head around.

The unmistakable sound of a Tiger engine hums through the snow-thick air. The heavy sound of machinery and growling trucks. Men chattering and shouting.

A lorry filled with SS men trundles over the bridge at the east edge of the town and roars up the main street. Another four trucks follow behind it. Pools of light bounce along the snowy road before them.
The *kampfgruppe* slows as it makes a hairpin turn in the road.

A single civilian, one of the few not hiding, steps out onto the curb.

The column grinds to a halt.

The SS *Hauptsturmführer* stands in the bed of the truck. He leans down at the man in the road.

“*Sprichst du Deutsch?*” he demands.

“*Ja,*” the man replies.

“*Wo sind die Amis?*”

Jughead holds his breath. Likely the man has seen them slip into their positions. If he says anything—

The man thinks for a moment. Then he shrugs and smiles knowingly.

The frustrated *Hauptsturmführer* draws his pistol and shoots him down in one fluid motion.

Jughead flinches.

“*God!*” Archie exclaims. His friend punches him in the shoulder.

“*Shut up!*”

The *kampfgruppe* moves on. The trucks rumble further into the town. The massive Tiger brings up the rear of the train. Jughead watches the monstrous tank navigate the narrow little medieval streets, moving with the deliberation of some ancient, lumbering old beast. Cobblestones and chunks of snow crunch beneath its treads.

US troops lurk in the buildings all along the road. In a bakery across the way, Reggie Mantle and ten other GIs wait for the signal to set off the charges. Cheryl and another handful of soldiers hold down the town hall.

The Nazis move into the village square. The column fans out. Jughead watches six Nazi troopers crowd around the broken old fountain, just a few yards from one of their buried bombs.

He shoulders his rifle. He draws a bead on one of the SS men, passing a cigarette back and forth between himself and a comrade. He tracks the sights up the man’s stomach to his chest. He holds his breath, closes his left eye, and squeezes the M1-Garand’s trigger.

The round is the loudest he’s ever fired. It explodes through the crackling winter air. Snowflakes melt as it sizzles by. It punctures the man’s grey coat and mottled tunic. The German totters for a moment, and then collapses dead into the fountain. His comrade watches, still holding the burning cigarette.

That’s the signal.

The charges go off.

Jughead throws himself to the ground and covers his ears.

The explosion lifts Villiers-le-Bois off of its foundations. Stone, snow, and dust spiral a hundred feet up into the dark air. A Nazi truck crumples like an aluminum can. The bodies of its occupants
go sailing and crack against walls and flagstones and lampposts. The SS men closest to the blasts fly apart like ragdolls. Legs and heads separate from trunks and scatter over the snow, trailing red.

Then the US soldiers open up with their rifles.

The terrified, shocked, furious SS troopers can hardly marshal their scattered forces in time to meet the ambush. They rush up and down the street and across the square, firing wildly into darkened windows.

“Scheisse! Scheisse! Wo sind sie? Wo sind sie? Gerhard!”

“Ich habe keinen Kugeln! Wo ist der Hauptsturmführer?”

The Americans let loose a murderous barrage of gunfire from their windows and balconies. A fine layer of Nazi corpses soon covers the plaza of Villiers-le-Bois.

Jughead watches the Hauptsturmführer, so far unscathed, crawl to his feet.

“Wo gehen sie? Feiglinge!”

The Tiger tank creeps forward another few feet. Its gun tracks around.

“Shit,” Jughead breathes. He fires a useless shot at the massive tank, and watches it plink pathetically off of the heavy armored flanks.

The Tiger trains its 88 cannon on the town hall.

“Cheryl!” Jughead hisses.

The Tiger fires.

The shell explodes into the building and brings an entire section of its façade crumbling down in a flurry of pulverized brick and wood.

“Shit!” he shakes his head. He can’t help her now. If she made it, she made it. He grits his teeth.

The SS men, heartened by the tank’s action, collect themselves. They split into little sections of four or five, dig themselves in behind trucks or half-shattered walls, and fire back.

The ambush becomes a straight firefight.

Jughead and Archie race from one window to the next. What’s important is to stay mobile. To be pinned down is to die.

Stick their heads up, fire, then move to the next window.

German bullets slam into the walls of the tavern, and a few slip in through the windows. A round nicks Jughead’s shoulder. He brushes it off.

In the bakery across the road, Reggie and his ten GIs keep up a withering interlocking fire from the first and second floors.

But they only have so much ammunition.

And then the Tiger swings its machine gun around and lays a chattering round of fire into the bakery’s ground floor. Jughead watches a section of tottering brick wall cave in. Three GIs inside
stumble back, and then fall in bloody heaps as the machine gun cuts them apart.

“Reggie!” Archie shouts across the road. “Get away from the windows!”

The tank pulls up its 88 and sends another shell spiraling into the bakery. The ensuing blast of smoke and dust sweeps across the street and pours in through the tavern’s windows. Jughead falls back, coughing and hacking.

“Mantle! Mantle! Reggie! Shit!”

“Are they dead?” Archie demands. “Are—“

“I don’t know!” The Tiger sizes up its next target. Jughead peeks out and is staring right down the barrel of the tank’s cannon. “But we have to go!”

He grabs Archie by the hand and pulls him away from the windows. They thunder down the stairs to the first floor, just as the cannon pulverizes their erstwhile positions just behind them.

Archie checks his M1.

“I’ve got ten shots left.”

“I’ve got eight,” Jughead responds, grimly.

Most everyone has got to be out of ammunition by now. Even assuming every man in the town hall and in the bakery survived the tank’s guns there are still some ninety Germans in action, at least.

They’re gruesomely outnumbered.

They creep out the tavern’s back door in a dark side street.

“Attention! Attention!” A loudspeaker blares.

“Ignore it, Archie,” Jughead says.

“You are outnumbered. You are beaten!” the Hauptsturmführer cries through the loudspeaker. “Surrender your arms, and you have my word as an officer you will be unharmed. Now, or suffer extinction!”

Jughead looks into his friend’s wide, terrified eyes. His dust-caked lips and cheeks and hair.

“Don’t believe it, Arch. We give ourselves up and they’ll shoot us on the spot.”

The two GIs dive into a dark alleyway as three Nazi troopers storm by. Jughead impulsively checks his rifle again. As if more ammunition might appear by magic.

Then he feels a hand on his shoulder.

He spins around, brings up his rifle, and swears. Archie tumbles backwards in terror.

“Shut up!” Cheryl hisses. “It’s me!”

Jughead half-croaks, half-laughs, and pulls her into a tight hug, still gripping his rifle by the barrel.

“Thank God.”

Four soldiers follow behind her, uniforms tattered and dusty and bloody. One holds his dented
helmet in his hands. Only two have their weapons.

“And the other guys?” Archie asks. “In the town hall?”

Cheryl purses her lips and shakes her head.

“I don’t know. Dead, probably.”

Jughead hears the Tiger’s machine gun rattle on the main street.

“Have you seen Reggie?”

“No.”

Jughead nods.

“We’re all fucked unless we can get rid of that tank. And even then, we’ll still have some eighty pissed off Nazis to contend with.”

“How do you propose getting rid of the tank, sergeant?” a GI asks, bordering on sarcasm. Jughead decides to let it slide, all things considered.

“Come with me,” he says.

He leads his band back into the crumbling tavern, keeping everyone low to the ground. Through the big window opening on Main Street, he can see that the SS column has regrouped in the square, forming loose, concentric circles around the Tiger. The Hauptsturmführer stands at the foot of the tank, one hand on his hip, the other gesticulating wildly towards what’s left of the town hall. Then to the bakery across the street.

Two SS men salute their commander, and then storm off and through the bakery’s sagging front door. The entire building, crippled by the tank’s 88 gun, looks on the verge of collapse.

The SS men reemerge just a few moments later, driving before them at gunpoint Corporal Reggie Mantle and his five men.

“Oh, holy hell,” Cheryl sighs.

“Son of a bitch!” Jughead spits. Then he ducks down as an SS trooper strolls by the window.

“We’ve gotta help them,” Archie says.

The SS men herd Reggie and the others towards the fountain.

“We couldn’t help your other two boys,” Cheryl reminds him.

“Which is exactly why I’m going to help them!” Jughead strips off his belt. He hands Cheryl his M1911 pistol. “Take this.”

The Germans force their prisoners into a line. Reggie spits in the nearest trooper’s face, and earns a rifle butt to the gut for his troubles.

The Hauptsturmführer storms out into the middle of the square.

"Hey! Americans! I know you boys are out there! One minute to lay down your arms and come out, or else your comrades will die!"
The troopers level their rifles at the American prisoners.

“Listen,” Jughead goes on. “I’m going to go out there and I’m going to…distract them. You five are going to go around, you’re going to take out those Nazis guarding our guys, and then you’re going to pull them out and make a run for it.”

“Distract them? Ho—“

“Doesn’t matter!”

“I’ll help you,” Archie says.

“No, you won’t.”

“Yes, I will.”

“No, you’re going to go around and save Reggie Mantle, is what you’re going to do.”

“Jug—“

“Archie, goddammit! I told your father I’d get you home in one piece and that’s exactly what I intend to do! Now go!”

Cheryl nods. She grabs Archie by the hand and pulls him along. The other four GIs follow close behind. Jughead nods.

“Wait—if I…tell everyone—well, you know.”

“Jug—“ Archie tries again.

“Of course,” Cheryl says.

Then they’re gone.

Jughead swallows. He peeks out the window into the square. He grips his rifle. He says another quick prayer.

He’s never been religious. It’s more the poetry of it. “As I walk through the shadow of the valley…” The Valley of Death. The Valley of Jarama. “No pasarán.”

He storms out through the tavern’s front door, a battle cry tearing from his lips. Snow swirls around him, catching in his hair and the folds of his coat.

A Nazi trooper stands and whirls around. Jughead fires his M1 through the soldier’s head and he falls down. He snatches up the SS man’s MP40 submachine gun and drops his rifle.

Every SS trooper in the square turns on him. He charges through their ranks, firing the MP40 in spurts. The Germans reel, then they fire back.

Jughead crouches behind a mangled truck. He pops his head out and drops an SS man. A hail of bullets whips by him. A round glances off of his helmet.

On the other side of the square, Reggie and the other prisoners watch, awestruck. The Nazi troopers tasked with guarding them raise their rifles. They won’t risk the liberation of their captives.
An SS man levels his gun at Corporal Mantle’s face. He blinks.

Then Cheryl springs out from an adjacent alley, holding Jughead’s M1911, and shoots the would-be executioner through the head.

So she kills her first fascist of the war.

Archie and his four GIs explode onto the field behind her and cut down the other executioners in a quick blast of rifle fire.

The square erupts into pandemonium.

“Maintain your positions!” the Hauptsturmführer cries as his troopers scurry in mad fury across the battlefield. “Goddamn you, men!”

Jughead cuts his way across the plaza, ducking, and shooting, and running. Blood trickles down the side of his head. SS men crumple around him. The tank is twenty feet away.

He springs up and charges, roaring. He drops the gun, braces himself on the Tiger’s treads, and leapfrogs up onto its hull. Jughead dives behind the big 88 cannon. The tank’s hatch opens up and the tank commander pokes his confused head out. Jughead shoots him, then plucks a grenade from his belt, pulls the pin, and bowls it into the hatch. He presses himself to the Tiger’s armor. The blast shakes the tank from inside.

He scrambles through the hatch, the troopers in the square chasing him all the way with submachine gun fire.

Inside, he finds the Tiger was undermanned. There are only three men to its crew. The commander lies with a bullet through his head. The gunner and the loader sit slumped over their stations, killed by the grenade’s concussive force.

He shoves the gunner aside and takes up the machine gun.

A moment of inaction passes.

The SS men in the square watch the tank in an odd, silent sort of trance. As if they’re reluctant to damage their great machine. Even now that it’s been turned against them.

Then Jughead opens up.

Twelve Nazi troopers collapse like marionettes. The SS men shake out of their stupor and fire back. But the great tank’s armor gives nothing. Rifles and submachine guns glance helplessly off of the Tiger.

He cuts straight through trucks and half-tracks with hideous ease. SS men collapse in bloody heaps, lying across and over each other like bales of hay.

The Hauptsturmführer shouts something and gestures to the tank.

“Come on!” he shouts. “You fascist milksops! Then in shattered German: “ihr war Feiglinge in Spanien, ihr seid Feiglinge hier!”

Three SS troopers charge the tank, gripping grenades. He brings the machine gun low and blasts them all back onto the flagstones, dead.

Jughead sweeps the gun around towards the fountain and sees that Reggie and the other prisoners
are gone. So Cheryl and Archie and the others have spirited them away in the commotion.

Good.

He keeps firing.

The Germans’ numbers plummet.

Jughead estimates the Nazis have lost fifty or more men since entering the town.

“Bringt um!” the Hauptsturmführer yells. “Bringt um!”

Ammunition runs low. More SS men charge the tank. He releases the gun, snatches up the Tiger commander’s Luger, and springs back up out of the hatch. Lying near prone over the tank’s turret, he fires quick, steady shots as the enemy troopers advance on him.

A bullet screams by and nicks his ribcage. Jughead winces. He ignores the pain and keeps shooting.

*Pop. Pop. Pop.* Three bullets left.

Two SS men scramble up onto the tank. Jughead cracks the first one over the head with the grip of the Luger, and he tumbles back into the street.

The other, a scharführer, grabs Jughead by the shoulders and throws him back over the tank’s turret. Jughead punches him in the face. The German grabs the straps of his helmet and yanks him closer. He kicks his American foe in the thigh. Jughead curls his fingers around the man’s collar and head butts him.

The scharführer’s head snaps back, but then he rights himself and pulls a knife from his belt.

The other SS men watch, captivated, as their comrade and the GI struggle mightily atop the tank.

The Nazi trooper swings the blade towards Jughead’s throat. He brings up his arm to block. The knife slices through the wool of his coat and his tunic, and opens up a cut from his elbow to his wrist.

With his free hand, he grabs the German’s knife-hand and holds it back, long enough for him to deliver three hard hammer strikes to the man’s solar plexus.

The scharführer recovers. He pulls his knife back, and then slides it into Jughead’s gut, just below his ribs.

The other SS men cheer.

Jughead cries out in agony. He feels bile rise in his throat. The scharführers stands over his foe, triumphant.

Jughead cranes his head around. A wave of some twenty troopers moves in on the tank.

Then the air ripples and they fall in a sprawling, gory row as a fusillade of BAR bullets rips into them.

The SS man standing over him reels in shock. In the moment, Jughead throws him off, snatches his dagger away, and plunges it deep above the man’s collarbones. He gurgles, reaches out towards nothing, and dies.
Across the square, Archie, Reggie, and what’s left of the platoon keep up a murderous stream of bullets from the unit’s reliable old M1918 BAR.

Then, from the windows of the destroyed town hall, something red and yellow and burning spirals down through the air.

The Hauptsturmführer squeezes himself behind a half-track.

The bottle of petrol slams onto the cobblestones and engulfs two SS men in flame. Their comrades stumble away. Horrified.

Another bottle tumbles down onto the square. Another blast of fire. The Nazi troopers fall back.

Jughead pushes aside the scharführer’s corpse and scrambles off of the tank in the commotion.

He snatches up another MP40, and along with Reggie and Archie with their BAR, catches the SS men in a crossfire. Another dozen fall, and then yet more.

Another fiery bottle spirals down from the town hall.

“Enough! Enough!” someone cries.

They keep firing.

“Gott im Himmel! Nicht! Enough!”

The SS men throw down their rifles and submachine guns. They lift their hands into the air. Those holed up in buildings along the way spill out, tossing their weapons through the windows.

What’s left of the SS battalion marshals in the square, hands raised in surrender, faces haggard, dusty, and humiliated.

Cheryl emerges from the town hall, carrying one more unlit petrol bottle. She lets it smash to the ground.

“God sakes, man!” cries an untersturmführer, ripping off his helmet. “We surrender!”

Jughead does a quick headcount.

There are perhaps fifty Germans left.

And he has perhaps ten men of his platoon still alive. And Cheryl.

So they’ve captured a force five times their size.

The Hauptsturmführer crawls out from hiding. He very slowly lifts his hands into the air, face twisted into a vicious scowl.

Jughead tries to stand. He buckles over, the knife-wound in his gut bleeding profusely. Archie helps him to his feet. He moans in pain.

Reggie stalks forward. The SS men step aside to let him through.

He presses his rifle into the Hauptsturmführer’s chest.

“Don’t point that weapon at me!” the man spits. “I’m a captain, and I—“
“Shut the fuck up.”

“I’m accorded every right of a prisoner of war—“

“Just like Rook and Jennings were prisoners of war, you piece of shit?”

“Reggie, stop!” Archie shouts.

“But—“


Reggie steps away, still pointing the weapon at the Hauptsturmführer.

“Why shouldn’t we shoot him?” Cheryl demands. “He’d have done the same to us.”

“We can’t just shoot prisoners of war!” Archie asserts. “Or else we’re no better than—“

“Shoot the fucker!” hisses a corporal from Albany.

Cheryl waves Jughead’s M1911 in the air.

“No argument here! Archie, you soft-hearted—“

“Sergeant!” the Hauptsturmführer barks at Jughead. “Get your men and this girl in hand!”

Jughead drags himself to his full height, bracing against the wheel of a German truck.

The SS men turned captives watch in silence as the Americans haggle over the life of their commander. None seem particularly affected.

“He’s unarmed,” Archie says, softly. “Rules of war s—“

“He shot your guys!” Cheryl reminds them. “He shot that man on the street corner! All less than an two hours ago! Were any of them armed?”

“Enough of this!” the Hauptsturmführer shouts. “I demand to speak to an equal rank!” He whirls around to face Cheryl. “You! You stupid damned—“ He reaches out at her in blind rage. She steps back, and deftly dodges his clawing hand.

Cheryl levels the pistol at the SS man, and shoots him through the chest. The Hauptsturmführer falls over, writhes for a moment, grips at his bleeding wound, and then dies.

His men take involuntary steps back.

“Well I guess that fixes it,” Reggie spits. Then, to Cheryl: “damn, I think I’m in love with you.”

Archie, furious, steps forward.

“You people ar—“

“Goddammit!” Jughead howls, pressing a hand to the knife wound in his side. “Would one of you help me before I bleed to death?”

Chapter End Notes
Couldn't resist Inglourious Basterds or Band of Brothers references.
Several hours later, an American relief force arrives and takes the SS prisoners off of their hands.

“Where’d you learn to make matatanques?” Jughead demands of Cheryl.

“The bottles with the burning wicks? Jason described them once. In a letter from Spain. Not so hard.” She presses a clump of rags to his bleeding knife wound.

Jughead, face screwed up with pain, chuckles.

“Hey, Jug,” Archie says, patting his friend’s shoulder. “You’re going home, huh?”

“Unfortunately!”

Jughead, bleeding staunched by a crude first aid job, is carted off to the nearest hospital. It’s cabled home to his mother and father (and thence to Betty, Veronica, and all of their friends) that he is wounded but safe.

Two weeks later, he crosses the Atlantic on a troopship.

The Ardennes Offensive, for all the vitality and ruthlessness of the Nazi armies, collapses. The Wehrmact at last loses all offensive capabilities. All that can be done now is forestall the inevitable.

Red troops roar over the Oder River and storm on towards Berlin.

Anglo-American troops ford the Rhine and plunge into the German heartland.

The death-knell of fascism sounds.

Jughead stumbles home in late January of 1945.

“Jug! Oh my God!” Betty throws her arms around him. He sinks into her embrace and allows her to shower him with warm kisses and trickling, salty tears of relief. “Good Lord, are you okay? I know they said—“

He kisses her.

“I’ve been shot about ten times since September of 1936. I’m just fine. Anyway, I got to see Cheryl Blossom shoot a Nazi trooper point blank in the head. That very nearly made it the whole thing worthwhile.”

“What?”

“Oh, God. Do you really want to hear the story?”

She giggles, and pulls him down onto the couch for another kiss.

“You know, Juggie, I hear some Hollywood big shots want to make a movie out of Which Side Are You On?”
He leans his head back and chuckles.

“That so?”

“Mhmm. Who do you want to play you?” she teases.

Jughead shakes his head, smiling.

“Is that Gregory Peck kid busy?”

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Spring of 1945 brings the obliteration of the Axis powers.

In April, partisans capture Benito Mussolini as he flees the ruins of Fascist Italy for the Swiss border. The great Duce is summarily shot and then strung up like a side of meat to the jeers of a roaring crowd.

Mere days later, Adolf Hitler, who would have remade the world in his image, puts a pistol to his head and pulls the trigger, as Red troops swarm over the rubble of Berlin.

Hours later, a scarlet banner is raised over the Reichstag.

Veronica steps into the cell.

Her father doesn’t turn around.

“Take a look, padre.”

Very slowly, Hiram turns to face his daughter. His eyes seem even shallower than before. His hair is grayer. His hands shake.

She hands him the paper.

He reads aloud.

“May 7th, 1945. The War in Europe is Ended! Surrender Is Unconditional!”

Hiram nods.

“So much for your ‘new men’ whipping the ‘effete democrats’. Whose flag is flying?”

“Well, that’s it, then, isn’t it?” Hiram mutters. He sets his jaw. It looks to Veronica like he’s keeping himself together only just.

“I guess it is.”

“Then you’ve all won. Go and rest on your laurels.”

“Are you sad?”

He steps back. The San Francisco Bay rolls and tosses outside his window. A blast of chilly wind strikes them both.

“There can be honor in defeat.”

Veronica flinches.
She steps forward and embraces him. She leaves the paper on his cot, and then turns to go.

“Will you be coming back?”

Veronica gives him one more look. Her eyes brim with tears. She wrings her hands.

“I don’t think so.”

And then he’s alone, with the crashing of the frozen waves and the shadow of his cell.

Jughead, having stopped short and captured an entire SS battalion with only some twenty-five men (and one woman), is duly awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for his exploits.

An editorial in the Times (not written by Betty, as it goes) describes him as ‘war hero and author’ Forsythe Jones.

‘Which Side Are You On?’ keeps the royalties rolling in.

He keeps writing. He writes more fiction, and a bit of reality here and there. He publishes a book of poetry.

*New Republic* describes him as ‘the young Hemingway’, much to his embarrassment, and to the chagrin of the man himself.

He meets the man himself at a function in Cape Cod in the first half of 1946. They make peace over flowing wine and fond stories of the Spanish War.

Archie’s star rises, too.

“Fortunately, my fingers are fine,” he jokes at his first concert since coming home from Europe.

He can’t get through a show without the crowd clamoring for ‘Jarama Valley’ or ‘Ay, Manuela!’

Cheryl leverages what’s left of her family’s fortune into opening a small printing house, with Toni’s help. In late 1946, she’s the target of a convoluted lawsuit after churning out a couple hundred pamphlets in support of a Furrier’s Union strike.

Toni Topaz comes home from the Pacific with laurels round her brow and her name forever fixed in the annals of print journalism. Kevin Keller comes back from Burma, too, with a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.

Betty becomes a regular columnist for the Times, specializing of course in literature, crime, and political fibrillations as they relate to such.

“This is an outrage!” Cheryl seethes. She tosses the paper onto the table.

Jughead scans the headline.

Something about the US ‘normalizing’ relations with Franco’s Spain.

Jughead looks to Toni, who shrugs.

“Well—” he tries.
“Normalizing? Normalizing? So we’re going to be friends with that butcher, now? We took care of the fascists in Germany and Italy and Japan, but we’re happy to have Franco and his gang sitting in Madrid? This is—”

“Cheryl…” Toni says, softly. “This is…kind of out of our hands.”

“Out of our—that bastard Truman!” Cheryl snarls.

“I uh…” Jughead pipes up. “You know, I have something that may cheer you up, a little bit. That’s what I came over to tell you, actually.”

“What?”

“Come along and find out.”

That evening he, Cheryl, Betty, and Toni drive to a convention hall in downtown Manhattan.

“Jughead, what the hell is this?” Cheryl demands. “Are we going to see a play or something? Because—”

“Cheryl, would you be patient?” Betty demands. “My God!”

Cheryl huffs.

They step through the doors.

A banner hangs over the entrance.

“Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade—Ten Year Reunion. ¡No pasarán!”

A dozen heads turn to greet the new arrivals.

“Jones!”

Sweet Pea grips Jughead tight and lifts him off of his feet.

“God! The years have been good to you, eh?”

“Well…” Sweet Pea taps his shin. It rings hollow and tinny. Then he pulls up his pants to reveal a prosthetic leg. “In some ways, sure.”

“Did that happen in Spain?” Toni asks.

Sweet Pea hugs her, and then says: “nah. Murmansk Run. Merchant Marine. 1943.”

“Hey, Sweet Pea. There’s someone we want to introduce you too,” Jughead says.

He ushers Cheryl forwards.

“Au chante. Cheryl Blossom,” Cheryl says.

“Blossom—Jason’s…”

“I’m his sister,” she says.

Sweet Pea beams.
“Good to know you. Your brother was a good son of a bitch.”

She smiles, sadly. “I know.”

“Come on. All of you,” Sweet Pea says. “Come and say hello.”

There are about thirty guys at the reunion.

Jughead doesn’t know most of them. The majority joined up with the Lincolns after he returned home.

But he recognizes Chuck Clayton, who emerges from the crowd and pulls him into another crushing hug.

“Commissar Jones!”

“We’ve talked about this, Chuck.”

“Welcome, Jughead.”

Chuck slaps him on the shoulder and says hello to Toni, and introduces himself to Betty and Cheryl.

Jughead is introduced to Milton Wolff, a tall, lanky Brooklynite with big features and small, shiny white teeth.

“He was our last captain,” Chuck says.

Wolff shakes Jughead’s hand.

“Good to know you. You know, more than anything else, the guys always talked about how you brought them donuts before Jarama. One of our commissars, after you left, Steve Nelson, I think he felt a little upstaged. Poor Steve. He must have scoured half of Republican Spain looking for a donut shop. Don’t think he ever found one.”

Jughead laughs.

They spend the better part of the night mingling, talking, and drinking. They tell the good stories and try to forget the bad ones.

As the reunion draws to a close, someone brings out a record player and pops in Twelve Songs for Liberty.

“Hey, is that Archie’s record?” Betty asks.

“Yep,” Jughead smiles, a little tipsy.

The strains of ‘Jarama Valley’ scratch out of the record. Jughead sniffs.

The Lincolns and their comrades stand, lift their glasses, and sing along.

“Now we’re far from that valley of sorrow, but its memory we’ll ne’er forget! So before we conclude this reunion, let us drink to our glorious dead!”

Chapter End Notes
Okay, ONE more and then we'll be really, REALLY done. Pinky swear.
Finale: Blacklist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We’ll teach you how to spot ‘em in the cities or the sticks,
for even Jasper Junction is just full of Bolsheviks!
…You cannot trust your neighbor, or even next of kin!
If mommy is a commie, then you’ve gotta turn her in!”

~’John Birch Society Song’, the Chad Mitchell Trio

The war ends and the world changes.

The brittle alliance between the western democracies and the Soviet Union shatters before the ink has dried on the Nazi instrument of surrender.

The old order is passed away, even if Hiram Lodge’s dream of global fascist hegemony vanishes into the flickering shadows of history.

Washington and Moscow divide the earth between them. The nations swear allegiance. The times of warring tribes and glittering kingdoms is done. The day of a dozen allies and a hundred foes is finished.

There is only this side and that one.

In 1947, Jughead Jones receives a phone call.

“Listen…we’re putting a hold on production.”

“What? Why?”

The man on the other end sighs.

“It’s just…well…to be frank, Thomas and his guys have been breathing down our necks. It’s just…just not a good time for this sort of thing, right?”

“Right,” he says, sourly. And he hangs up.

Jughead slams the phone down.

He shoves his typewriter aside.

It’s been half a year since Warner Brothers hired him to write the screenplay for the film adaptation of Which Side Are You On?

And now they’re ‘halting production’?

Well, he knows why, of course.

Things are getting tougher.
More than a few of his novelist and screenwriter friends have already drawn the attentions of the House Un-American Activities Committee. And of those unfortunates, most won’t be working again any time soon.

His profession is a dangerous one, now.

He’s disappointed.

He doesn’t need the money from the picture. Frankly, he’s made enough from Which Side Are You On? to keep him comfortable for the rest of his life. That’s not counting his compendiums of poetry, or his latest novel, The River’s Edge.

But Jughead had been excited. He’d wanted to see his book play out on the big screen. He’d wanted people to know the heroism and sacrifices of his friends. He’d wanted to show the world what had really happened, in Spain and here.

But it is no longer 1936. It is not 1944. The Depression is over. The war is finished.

It is 1947, there’s a new war on, and the books and the pictures must fall in line. The ‘reds’ are ravening monsters, and no depictions to the contrary will be tolerated. Least of all, his book.

“In all likelihood, Betty; it’s just going to get worse,” he mutters over dinner.

“If you say so,” she replies. She’s in little mood for argument.

But he’s right.

Three weeks after production is ‘halted’, the subpoenas start coming in.

The first one called to testify before the HUAC is Archie, much to his friends' outrage.

"This is ridiculous!" Veronica exclaims. "You're a folk singer for God's sake. You're Archie Andrews. You're the paragon of all-American cleanliness and moral fiber!"

"It's about me," Jughead says. "You guys are suffering for my friendship. If I were you guys, I'd distance myself, even if just for the moment."

"Jughead, shut up," Archie sighs.

"I concur," Veronica says. "Friends don't abandon friends when the government starts hunting for reds."

Archie's testimony before the HUAC goes rather seamlessly.

"Mr. Andrews, are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?"

The chamber laughs.

The committee, respectful of his image as the son of the American heartland, asks him few questions, and careful ones at that, almost all revolving around his friendship with Mr. Forsythe 'so called Jughead' Jones.

He answers firmly and clearly that Mr. Jones is a good, decent, brave man, certainly no raving Bolshevik. The committee thanks him and lets him go.
Cheryl is next, and she gives them a real verbal lashing.

"Miss Blossom, we are in possession of film footage which would seem to show you giving a speech—with a large banner sporting a hammer and sickle behind you—and loudly singing a song with the lyrics...uh..." the congressman pushes his glasses up his nose and squints at his notes. "Vengeance to the kings and plutocrats! Harvest the crops of the future!"

"Oh, is that what the song said? They didn't tell me!" she says sweetly. "It was in Polish, after all."

"Would you mind very much if we played that footage, miss?"

"Yes, I would, congressman!"

The committee members sigh.

"Miss Blossom, do you subscribe to a communistic philosophy?"

"Not if the 'common' in 'production planned in common' includes the likes of you."

A grimace.

The room snickers.

"Miss Blossom, are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?"

"Yes, I am."

She was not, of course, and had answered thus solely to frustrate the committee's efforts and making their job that much harder. When this was discovered, and she accused of perjury, Cheryl tried to claim that she had not, at the time of her statement, been aware that declaring oneself a member of the Communist Party did not in fact make one a member of the Communist Party.

Finally, Jughead himself receives the call he's long known was coming.

"This is an outrage," Betty says, shaking a fist. Now she’s angry.

"Absolutely!" Cheryl concurs.

"They can’t do this!"

"You’re a war hero!" Cheryl adds on. "And an award-winning author!"

"I’ll dedicate my next concert to you," Archie adds. "And I—"

Jughead raises a hand for silence.

"Guys…I appreciate the zeal. Really, I do. But you all need to calm down a bit. It’s …not as great an issue as you’re making it out.”

"Not that great an issue?" Betty demands. "My husband is being accused of treason by those… those—"


"I haven’t been accused of anything, yet, technically.”
“Well—“ Archie starts to say.

“Calm,” Jughead urges, again. “Let’s take this one step at a time.”

But it becomes more difficult to remain placid and nonplussed after the radio broadcast he hears the next day while he makes himself a sandwich in the kitchen and Betty fiddles with the plants on the windowsill.

“And you swear that this is true, son?”

“Absolutely, sir. On the Bible.”

Jughead turns. The voice on the radio is familiar.

“So you, sir, Mr. Nicholas St. Clair, in testifying before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, maintain that Mr. Forsythe Jones, while serving as a volunteer for the Spanish Loyalist forces ten years ago, participated in the murder of noncombatants?”

“Yes, sir. The so-called International Brigades were used as shock troops by the red government. This involved not only fighting against General Franco’s patriot army, but also the liquidation of ‘unreliable elements’. I personally heard Mr. Jones bragging, over drinks, that in his capacity as a commissar, he had carried out the executions of several nuns and priests from a Carmelite convent in Madrid.”

“What?” Jughead hisses.

“Oh my God,” Betty gasps.

“That utter, unbelievable, slimy, pathetic, son of a bitch!”

But the damage is done.

The next day Jughead sees a headline calling him ‘Commissar Jones’. The article beneath it spends two paragraphs sensationalizing Nick’s ‘testimony’, and wondering aloud if it could really be so that ‘well-loved author, Mr. Forsythe Jones’, might really have taken part in the murders of Spanish clergymen. The article not so subtly suggests that yes, it could really be so.

“‘Blood drenched Stalinist?’ Give me a damned break! And what’s this ‘commie’ nonsense?” Jughead slaps the paper. “What ever happened to ‘red’ and ‘Bolshie’? Those had a much nicer ring to them.” He shakes his head. “I must be getting old.”

“Jughead, you’re twenty-eight,” Betty says.

“It’s been a tough twenty-eight years, Betty.”

Nick’s testimony gets his hearing moved up two weeks.

True to his word, Archie holds a concert in his honor, in which he plays almost exclusively songs of the Spanish Civil War and old union hymns. Jughead is grateful for the support, but fears it does little to dispel the emerging image of him as a raving communist.

Betty, with the help of her otherwise-retired mother, writes a column in the Times denouncing the ‘cruel persecution of a good, brave, honest man and artist who has always fought for justice and twice marched against tyranny, by a gang of cowardly, rabid politicians.’
When his day finally comes, he finds the chamber packed full. Supporters and detractors alike. The hisses of ‘commie!’ and ‘go back to Russia!’ are tempered by ‘give ‘em hell, man!’ and ‘go, Lincolns!’

Betty squeezes his hand and then he takes his place at the head of the room.

Jughead sweeps the crowd with his eyes.

Veronica’s come, sitting near the front. Archie’s here too, of course, and he gives a timid wave. Cheryl and Toni sit together a few seats back, the former glowering in righteous indignation.

Even Kevin Keller, who he has not seen for some time, has come, taking a seat next to Betty.

And there, near the back, is Nick St. Clair.

Jughead suppresses a snarl.

A reporter snaps a photo.

“Mr. Jones,” the committee chairman begins. “Will you state your full name for the record?”

“My name is Forsythe Pendleton Jones III. Named for my father and his father before him.”

“When and where were you born?”

“I was born in Riverdale Township, New York State, USA, in 1919.”

Congressman John E. Rankin, from Mississippi, leans in.

“Mr. Jones, are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?”

“No, sir.”

Rankin slams a hand down onto his desk.

“In fact, Mr. Jones, this committee is in possession of documents which would seem to show that, from 1936 to 1938, you were a member of the Young Communist League. Do you deny that?”

Jughead leans in. He takes a sip of water and smiles a bit.

“No, sir.”

“Shall I take it that you lied to me, then, a moment ago?”

“I was added to the rolls by an…overzealous friend of mine in the late summer of 1936. So I suppose in the most technical sense—though I never participated in any functions or attended a single meeting—yes, I was a member. But regardless, the YCL is not to the Communist Party. So, no, I don’t lie when I say I am not and have never been a member of the CPUSA.”

"Who was that friend?"

"His name was Jason Blossom."

"And where is he now?"

"Spain. Forever."
There's a moment of awkward silence, then the committee presses on.

“So is the committee to understand,” begins Congressman Wood from Georgia. “That you do not subscribe to the Communist philosophy or any Marxist political, economic, or social theories?”

“That’s a bit of a…broad question, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think so,” Chairman Thomas interjects. “Do you, or don’t you?”

“Well, it might be that I think Marx had a point here or there without me being a full-blown Bolshevik. Would that mean I ‘subscribed to Marxist theories’?”

Rankin clears his throat. “Mr. Jones, you wrote a book—“

“I tend to do that,”

Rankin slams a gavel down.

“We’ll have order, here.”

“Will we?”

“Mr. Jones, the name of your book,” Wood begins. “Is ‘Which Side Are You On?’ Is that accurate?”

“As far as I recall.”

Rankin leans in again. “In this book, you detail your exploits, among other things, serving in the army of the red government in Spain?”

“No, Mr. Rankin,” Jughead says, firmly. “I don’t believe that’s accurate.”

“No? You didn’t fight against General Franco’s National forces?

“I fought against Franco and his traitor generals, yes. I don’t recall any ‘red government’, though. I remember a legally elected republican government under attack by a fascist military insurrection.”

Rankin’s lip twists into a sneer.

“As you may be aware, this committee very recently received the testimony of Mr. Nicholas St. Clair—“

“The only time I’d ever believe anything Nick St. Clair said was if he swore to me he was lying.”

The room chuckles.

“Mr. St. Clair contends that in the course of your time in Spain, you participated in the extrajudicial killings of unarmed civilians. Do you deny that allegation?”

“In Spain, just like in North Africa, just like in Sicily, and just like in France, I never pointed a weapon at anyone who wasn’t pointing one back.”

“So you—“

Jughead cuts him off again.

“Does the committee find it in the least bit funny that when I went off to fight fascists in 1943 I
was called a hero and draped in medals, but because I did it seven years earlier, I’m a blood-drenched Bolshevik traitor?”

“No one is impugning your record of service to the country,” Woods assures him.

“Really? Because it—“

“Mr. Jones,” Rankin presses. “Do you or do you not deny the allegation that you participated in the murder of several priests and nuns in Madrid in the winter of 1936-37?”

Jughead turns around and flashes Nick a look of scouring hatred.

“Please face the committee,” one of the interrogators requests.

He turns around again.

“It’s a scabrous, bald-faced lie and nothing more.”

“Let the record show Mr. Jones denies the allegation,” Chairman Thomas mutters, aside.

“Here’s what really happened in Spain,” Jughead continues.

“We did not ask what ‘really happened in Spain’,” Rankin growls.

“What happened was that Mr. St. Clair abused his position as a war correspondent and his contacts in the Republican People’s Army to betray the positions of my battalion to the enemy and also to strip us of vital air and armor cover. As a result—“

Rankin bangs his gavel.

“Mr. Jones!”

“As a result, we were slaughtered and I had to watch my friends die in the dust. Because of St. Clair. The only murders he had any involvement with in Spain were the ones that cowardly, vile little worm helped commit.”

Nick leaps to his feet.

“You shut your mouth, you communist—“

“I’ll beat you to death this time!” Jughead shouts back.

“Enough!” a gavel bangs. “Both of you sit, now!”

Shaking, both men sink into their seats again.

“Regardless of what exactly you did or did not do in Spain, the fact remains that you did go there to fight with communists,” Woods says. “And then you came home and wrote a book extolling those same communists, here and abroad. Is the committee wrong to find this suspect?”

“There were communists in the Republican Army. There were also socialists, anarchists, democrats, liberals, and people who’d never joined a party in their lives. I didn’t ‘fight for communism’.”

“Wasn’t your rank in the Loyalist Army ‘commissar’?” Woods demands. “Is that not a politic—“
“It was mostly an administrative position. I coordinated shipments of coffee and beans, for God’s sake,” Jughead answers.

“What you did in—“

“What my friends and I did was to help foil a fascist insurrection in this country, and try to fight one abroad.”

“Ah, yes,” Rankin drawls. ”The ‘Business Plot’. Tell me, was any evidence ever produced that proved beyond a reasonable doubt such a plot ever existed?”

“What? Do you think we fabricated it?”

“I’m saying I require a preponderance of evidence before I buy into pinko stories about narrowly-averted Hitlerite coups. You are, Mr. Jones, a writer of fiction, after all.”

Jughead sneers.

Chairman Thomas redirects the line of inquiry.

“Mr. Jones, you’re a member of the so-called ‘Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, correct?”

“Considering I am a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, yes.”

“Would you admit that the VALB and the Communist Party are very closely tied together?”

“In what sense?”

Rankin leans in.

“Are there communists in the organization? In its leadership?”

Jughead swallows and clasps his hands.

“Some of the veterans would probably describe themselves as such.”

“So you are on record saying that, yes, there are communists in the VALB, including in its leadership, and that you are friends with these men?”

“Perhaps.”

“Answer the question, Mr. Jones.”

“How about I ask a question,” he said sharply. “What exactly have I done wrong? Have I committed a crime? Have I been spying for the Russians? Because it seems to me like my only crime is to have fought fascism a few years before it was in vogue and then to have had the gall to write about it.”

“You are here, Mr. Jones, because we, and the American people, want to know if you or any of your associates might be in league with any organization or power that threatens our free institutions, here,” Woods asserts.

“Ah yes, the free institutions that protect men from being dragged before public tribunals to answer for their private thoughts and beliefs,” Jughead smiles.

The committee scowls.
“Will you please name some of the VALB men you believe to have communist sympathies or beliefs, commissar?” Rankin growls.

“No, sir. I will not repay some of the best and most heroic people I’ve ever known by sacrificing them to you jackals.”

“I’d hardly call a bunch of red dupes sailing halfway around the world to be shot to pieces on a Spanish plain ‘heroic’,” says Rankin.

At that, Jughead leaps to his feet.

“You pricks can call me a liar, or a red, or a commie, or whatever you like, and I’ll sit back and let you because I don’t think it’s worth it. But I will not let you slander my dead friends who did more for ‘free institutions’ in five minutes in Spain than you will in twenty years of sitting on your ass in congress!” he shouts.

The room shifts, uncomfortably. Rankin leans back, shocked.

“Mr. Jones,” Chairman Thomas says calmly, leaning closer. “Would you like to be held in contempt of congress?”

Jughead crosses his arms.

“Sir, I have nothing but contempt for this congress.”

Jughead receives four months in a federal prison for contempt of congress.

As he walks out of the chamber, surrounded by press, he spots St. Clair hurrying quickly in the opposite direction. Archie steps towards him.

“Archie—“ Betty tries.

“Hey, St. Clair!”

Nick whirls around to see Archie barreling towards him. The blood drains from his face.

“Blossom?” he squeaks.

Archie clocks him in the face.

Jughead meets up with his friends outside.

He looks from Betty, who pulls him into a gentle hug, to Archie, who’s still nursing bruised knuckles, to Cheryl, who’s fuming, to Veronica, who’s sighing in sympathy, to Toni, who’s offering Jughead a reassuring look and at the same time trying to calm Cheryl.

“You won’t see a day of that sentence,” Cheryl says. “We’ll see to it th—“

“Don’t worry about it,” Jughead says, smiling. “If nothing else a cell give me a little peace and quiet and some time to write.”

“Jughead, we’re not going to let you go to prison,” Betty insists. "Not for this!"

“Well let’s cross that bridge when we get to it, shall we? For now, why don’t we all go get
something to eat? Huh? Please?”

He smiles and his friends smile.

“My treat,” he adds on.

And so they did.

Chapter End Notes

Jughead's testimony is heavily inspired by some real HUAC testimonies I've read.

And now we're really, really done. Sappy ending but, hey, they deserved it.

I've already done my maudlin shout-out author's note, so I won't bore you again.

I'll just say again: thanks for reading, and see you next time!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!