

wt. "To Days of the Past"

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There was a letter waiting for the old man named Sardina inside the bar in Termoli. The bar was near the port and the port looked out at the Adriatic Sea just as it had in the late 30's and early 40's when there was turmoil and destruction and hell on Earth and old man Sardina was young man Leone "Sardina" Vitali, a fighter pilot for the Kingdom of Italy. He was named "Sardina" because he stored cans of sardines in his biplane fighter - his Fiat CR.42, and everyone in the *Regia Aeronautica* knew him because he was a great pilot and had logged seven kills in his personal log by the time he was captured in Montacuto. But he was now just an old man who wanted to sit inside the bar and drink and remember before the remembering became too painful. The TV above the bartender's head was rattling the news about the death of Pablo Escobar, a drug kingpin in Colombia. He didn't think much of the news of today besides brief little thoughts that tied his pride back to those days on the Adriatic, when there was the good and the bad and Mussolini. Now there was P.M. Ciampi and a Republic and the Cosa Nostra that were wreaking havoc on the mainland.

"Things weren't simpler back then, but we were a stronger nation." Sardina began at the bartender.

"You have a letter, Sardina," said the bartender. "The mailman said he delivered it here because you'd likely read it sooner."

"This 'Escobar' - the Kingdom would have taken out ten Escobars with our boys in the skies."

“The mailman said it was important you read the letter; he received a note from Ancona that it was urgent.”

“I want nothing to do with Ancona.”

“I know, but read it, Sardina.”

Then a boy named Dante entered the bar and ran up to Sardina and begged to fly in his seaplane. Sardina owned a red and white striped two seater float plane that he used for his joy rides on the Adriatic Sea. Dante asked Sardina everyday whether or not he could ever join the old man up in the air, and the old man sent Dante away in a fit of sadness every time. This day was no exception. The bartender shaved off an orange peel as Sardina finished his Old Fashioned and looked at the white envelope with the letter inside, feeling the weight of something immense inside of it, and was suddenly struck by a shiver of fear. The shiver was in tandem with a December gust that flew into the bar from the sea, and Sardina suddenly felt very cold, so he took his drink and let the rye whiskey warm his throat, drafting his body and head into a hazy equilibrium. He closed his eyes and saw Ancona while the bartender shaved off another orange peel.

Ancona was a beautiful city in the Marche region, just about two-hundred-sixty kilometers away from Termoli. Sardina was born and raised there, met his one and only love there, and ended up fighting for the city alongside the Allies after the Germans captured it in the Summer of '44. Sardina was in his CR.42, leading a squadron of eight other fighters as they were backing up the Allies' march on the German-occupied Ancona from the West. Sardina and his group glided from the North along the coast of the sea, and the young Italian pilot felt the salt of the sea tickle his face and the drift of the sun as it heated the tides, and the tides were dancing underneath of their planes and everyone could hear them as if the waves were having

conversations. The march toward the coastal city was being taken by 50,000 men - Poles, Brits, Italian soldiers, and it felt easy; The Germans had set their defending positions with four barriers by Camerano, a town eleven kilometers away, but then the Allies broke through so the Germans dug in for a siege around the city. Sardina's group swooped in from the gleam of the sky to take out the Reich's artillery systems, but were suddenly met by a squadron of German fighters that came as reinforcements from the North and now everyone was in the worst dogfight of their lives. Planes and parts were picked out from the air and were crashing into the sea as the people Sardina slept near and ate with and prayed with and joked with and played cards with were being ripped apart by armor piercing rounds. They cascaded and fell like paintings, splashing into the sun-kissed tides and marking their burials with seeps of blood drawing the deeper layers of the water. Sardina caught the face of a clean-shaven goggled German in one of the planes and was close enough to him at one point to see the kid sucking his cheeks in crippling anxiety but it didn't matter because when Sardina circled around he caught him exposed and tore his engine apart and the German crashed like an asteroid into the side of an Anconan building - but then Sardina's wing was hit by someone else and he was falling so he ejected into the water and was fished out a little while later at Montacuto, a neighboring town also occupied by Germany. He was shackled and marched along with other POWs during their retreat of the Marche region, and this was the start of his year-long stay at a forced labor camp somewhere in German-occupied Europe. After he was liberated he returned to Ancona to search for someone who had already left Italy before the battle of the city began. He didn't find her.

Sardina opened his eyes and was back in the bar in his quiet and resting Termoli. The bartender was still peeling the orange.

"Are you ever gonna let Dante fly with you in your plane?"