

SAINT  
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S A I N T

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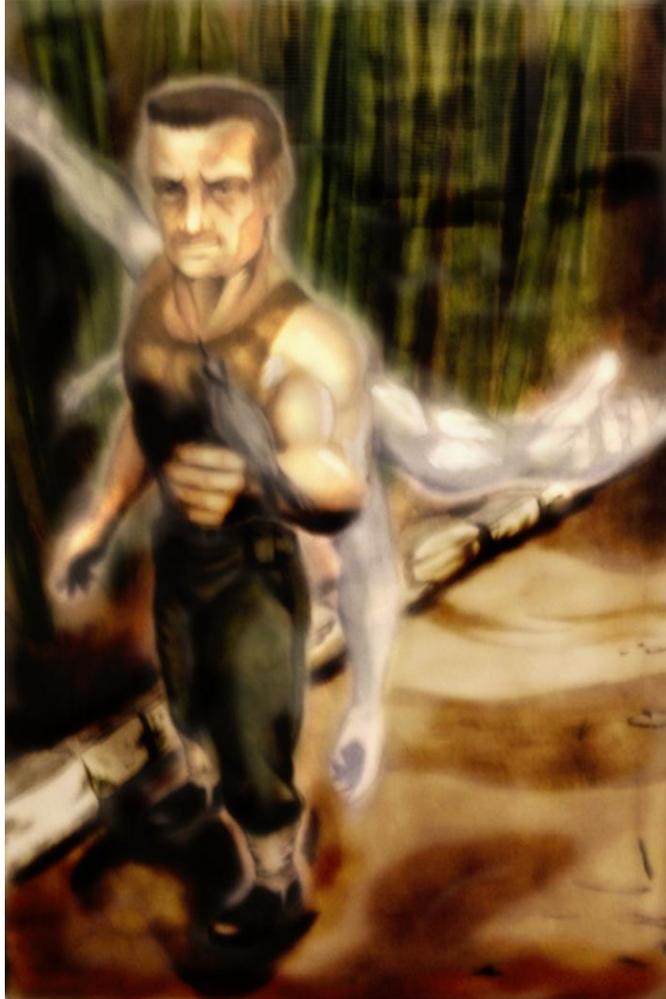
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Победа – Vincerò



*Raymond in China* by Ilya Kralinsky



*May 1964*

In the silver dome behind the exam light blaring in his face, Raymond observed his distorted reflection, a soft white square with blue eyes, something from dreams with white cloud tendrils rolling into darkness. Amused, he assumed his breath fogged and receded to make the ethereal halo.

“Raymond ...” Arthur Danton's low voice grizzled in his ear, breath brushing his ear and cheek, “aren't you worried?”

The wrist restraints at arm's length to his sides tightened.

“Aren't you the least bit concerned?”

Raymond smiled to his own reflection, which smiled back.

*April 1964*

Raymond's head leaned back slowly, tilting, eyes narrowing, as his lips parted in some strange terror.

“What is happening to me?”

Colonel Bennett scooted up in the red vinyl bar seat.

“Let go,” Bennett said.

*1955 – India*

Leather restraints chewed deep into his wrists like salty sweat and dirt scrubbed into raw, bloody flesh, when he turned his right hand under the direction where the restraint bolted to the table. He brought his clenched fingers under ... over ... under ... over ... and when the buckle busted with a hard *clank* and a ping from part of the buckle striking the cobblestone wall far to the right, he flinched. His hand throbbed and stung, and his acid-logged ribs, chest, back and shoulders shuddered with spasms as he brought his arm up, hand pointed to the dirty yellow light overhead. When he regained feeling, he unbuckled the left wrist and shot upright to unbuckle ankle restraints. The last restraint hit the table as the bolt in the wooden plank door ground in its braces before it slammed open.

Frozen, Raymond watched two oily barrels of German rifles ease into the light before their Nazi handlers, eyes concealed in shadows of helmets, entered with a figure between them who remained a bulky shadow.

“Now, gentlemen,” the man in the middle, bulked by heavy trench coat, said in German, “and I'm certain we'll all stay gentlemen ...” He walked to the simple wooden table and chairs to Raymond's left, bathed in white light from a lamp swaying overhead. When he removed his hat and placed it on the table, slicked back hair over dark eyes rang familiar in Raymond's head. The man sat across the table from Raymond and let the long coat over his shoulders drop back to the chair back. Dark, soft eyes watched Raymond, the face a still mask of something ... superiority, a dignity. “You will come here? Sit with me here at the table?”

Raymond spun to let rubbery legs dangle, and when he slipped to his feet, he reached behind him to grab the table before he regained strength and shuffled to the table to pull a chair and land on the seat, slumped.

They faced one another, the high ranking man, with no insignia but a swastika, who folded his hands in his lap. He regarded his hands, worked his neck around in his collar and juted his chin out to stare at Raymond.

“You take a cigarette, my friend? Yes?” He looked up and motioned to the guard to Raymond's right, who shoved a cigarette into Raymond's lips with a bitter sprinkling of tobacco on his tongue and brought a flame heavy with fuel fumes to the cigarette's tip.

Raymond drew flame into tobacco. The flame disappeared with a heavy clank as Raymond let out the smoke and rested his hand on his thigh. Smoke ribbons curled up into the light. The man smiled and nodded.

“Good.” He appraised Raymond. “I am Albert Speer.”

Raymond watched his dignified gaze and smiled through the body-lightening buzz from nicotine. “Why would they bring me to you?”

“I am an architect – a designer.”

“Yes, but why you?”

He shook his head and glanced up and away before he looked at Raymond. “Fate has its good reasons, I suppose.”

They remained in silence. Raymond drew from the potent, smelly cigarette again and relaxed.

“I understand you come to us from quite a fight.”

“Indeed.”

“Aren't you worried?”

Strange images flashed through Raymond's head as he looked at the floor.

“Aren't you the slightest bit concerned?”

Raymond smiled. “If you can give me good enough reason ... then I will consider it.”

“Death?”

“You fear death?”

“Who doesn't?”

“Death in this life, in this form ... and I am to be worried?”

“You are a brave man.” He looked at the guard to Raymond's right. “Look at this brave man – this brave Russian soldier ... in the American uniform ... who speaks German entirely too well.” He stared at Raymond as any amusement in his expression died. “So, what are you?”

“A person.”

“Don't be coy. You're Russian? American? German?”

“It doesn't matter, all these artificial titles you so believe in.”

“Then what are we?”

“Murdering eugenicists,” Raymond said in a flat, hard voice. “You see, this is what divides you and me.”

“What about this makes me so awful?” He looked skyward. “My leader – my leader is a genius.” He stared at Raymond. “I longed to see him come to power, and I long to see him win even still. What is so wrong with us? There *are* too many people in the world. There *are* only a few resources to go around to the strongest and best. There *are* races and people out there – look, we are looking to build a productive society, a strong society, a society where people can work and make their living, where people can provide for their families –”

“So long as they're –”

“So long as they're *like you*, my friend!” He laughed and the smile remained as he gestured towards Raymond. “*Look* at you, my friend! Aryan – through and through. Close to perfection.” He watched Raymond. “And we ... we have such a task for you. That's what this little exercise – and I apologize about our means – that's what this little exercise regards. Your willingness to assist in this matter. You were just another capture, you know, until my intervention in your matter. You are a Marine. An Intelligence Marine for the United States, all the way in our Eastern Campaign. We cannot let Czechoslovakia be the edge of our frontier, and we cannot ... we absolutely cannot allow enemy forces on the other side of this barren

frontier, because they will cross it and occupy it, no matter how radioactive it still is.”

“So you've brought me here to bring peace to the world and end the war, hm?” Raymond looked at the floor as his shoulders bounced with a laugh.

Speer looked up at the guards and motioned them away. When they hesitated, he nodded. “You may go. I will talk with him alone.”

They shuffled out and closed the door, but the bolt never sounded. Speer settled into his seat with a deep sigh.

“You will report something for us.”

Raymond watched him and dropped the cigarette on the floor in a spray of sparks to stomp it out.

“You are familiar with the Chinese. You will know how to find this out for us.”

“What?”

“There is a bridge in China ... it is resupplying forces against our Japanese counterparts. You will be transported there.”

“Why don't you and your friends bomb it, then?”

“We can't find it.”

“Then how do you know where to take me?”

“Because it is a legend. It is a place of legend. It is a bridge that allows resupply to front lines against the Japanese, but it cannot be seen with the naked eye.” He let that set in. “It cannot be found. It cannot be seen by our bombers, our reconnaissance – any of it. Any missions sent there never come back. The villagers there live in total peace amidst all this chaos. They have everything they need. They cannot be strangled off. They are somehow untouched.”

“So you are asking me to destroy one of the last, most peaceful places in the world.”

“You are so silly with your ignorant ideals. Don't be brash, sir. *No*. I am an architect. I want to know how that bridge is made. Tell us everything of it. It could mean supply routes which are untouchable for us.” He sat up, uncrossing his legs, and laced his fingers on the table. “Had we not obliterated Eastern Europe in 1944 with our doomsday weapon ... we would have been backed against a wall, we could have very well lost this war. Come now, Raymond ... we have been engaged in this ridiculousness for roughly twenty years. This is insanity. It is.” He shook his head and held out a hand. “You don't want to keep doing this. This must be *done*, and, by now, does it matter how it ends?”

“With everyone dead except the German people?”

“No-no-no ... you have to be tired –”

“And so ... why am I selected for this?”

“You know the Chinese ... you are Russian –”

“And you know this how?”

“Your personnel record.”

“How did you get this?”

“An American sold it to us – someone who understands our work.”

Raymond stared into Speer's soft, watery, dark eyes. A machine clicked away in his head.

“I'll do this for you.”

“Wonderful,” Speer said with a sudden grin, slapping his hands on the table.

1955

The truck's leaf-spring suspension bounced Raymond on the wooden bar seat of the German transport. In the blackness, leaves caught gray moonlight in a rustling mosaic of black and varying shades of gray, while the road split the lurking darkness with a swath of light gray dust stirred from the rutted, dark gray road.

Dirt narrowed his nostrils and gritted in his teeth. When he dug into the corner of his eye, a heavy crumb of something fell out. With a blink, eyesight glazed over in a haze and eyelids stiffened. Something rustled deep in the leaves. Raymond looked off over the trees as the transport took a curve, and he hunted out some sliver of the moon only to be disappointed by trees closing in over the road and more dust.

A gang of pops of varying intensity triggered the flash and loud crack that rocked the truck up on two wheels as instinct put Raymond on the steel deck. Brakes squealed as guards returned fire from the truck. When the truck's rocking subsided, Raymond slipped over the rear gate and dropped to the dirt road to fall on his side. He scurried to the tree line, where a hand grabbed his wrist.

“Friend,” Raymond said in Chinese in a huff. “*Péngyǒu.*”

Branches smacked him as gunfire trailed off in the distance, and they lowered over a ridge, where Raymond switched his footing sideways to keep upright.

“I am your friend, too,” an older man's rough voice said in Chinese.

Blurry-eyed, Raymond followed how the man pulled him, and they turned at a stream to follow its course right. The grip slipped away while Raymond blinked hard several times to clear his vision, sweat forming on his forehead.

“You follow me,” the voice said as his short shadow hesitated long enough to snag Raymond's wrist again and lead him into the shallow, babbling water, where they splashed.

“No –”

“I know,” he said. They changed course, out of the water, and trudged over the sharp rocks at the stream's bank.

The fire danced with shadows over Long Yi's face as he stoked the flames with the charred end of a branch. Long Yi's grandson, nearly a man himself, sat on the ground at Long Yi's feet and watched Raymond.

“Do you speak much Chinese?” he asked, narrow eyes widening as he looked aside to Raymond, who sat on a felled log, feet crossed and knees sticking up and out as he shoveled rice from the bowl with his chopsticks.

Raymond lowered his forearms to his thighs, bowl in one hand, and chopsticks in the other. “I do not speak Chinese well,” he said. “I know a little Chinese.”

“What do you speak well?” Long Yi said to the fire.

“English,” Raymond said in English.

“Hm.”

“Russian,” Raymond said in Russian.

“I know someone who speaks Russian,” Long Yi said, and then he smiled. “She may be a problem for you.” He laughed, and then he nudged his grandson's shoulder.

His grandson rolled up on one knee, but he hesitated and stared at Long Yi. Long Yi gestured away with one hand, which started his grandson on his race into the darkness, feet smacking hard-packed earth.

Raymond finished the bowl of rice and Long Yi managed the fire before his grandson returned, breathless, eyes widened to his grandfather before he took his seat again. A small woman in a brown uniform with red

squares on the lapels and glaring eyes stepped into the fire's light and turned her stern gaze from Long Yi to Raymond. Raymond placed the chopsticks in the bowl on the ground.

They stared at one another, the woman's brow stern.

“And who are you?” she asked in Russian.

“Mikhail Pastukhin,” Raymond said, “but my name was changed to Raymond Smith when I came to America.”

“This is why you have the American uniform?”

“Yes.”

“You were what the Germans were transporting?” It was more of a statement.

Raymond blinked and nodded. “Yes.”

She looked at Long Yi and switched to Chinese: “What else did they have?”

Long Yi laughed and looked away, and then he looked up at her again. “This is the treasure.”

Raymond cocked his head at Long Yi, and then he looked at the woman. “Did he say treasure?”

“You were a prisoner?” she said.

“Yes.”

“What else was there? Did you hear anything about something very valuable coming through?”

Raymond smiled. “Just me.”

“Puh,” she said. “Why were they transporting you alone?”

“I was supposed to tell you I was being transported to the Japanese, but Albert Speer showed up and told me of a bridge that cannot be seen with the naked eye, and they want to know how to build such a bridge.”

“Who are you to report to?”

“They never told me anyone to report to. I suppose they thought I would return on my own for some reason, but I will keep going.”

“Where?”

“To ... to fight the Japanese. To get back with my unit.”

“You are Intelligence?”

“Yes.”

“What do you do?”

“We go forward of basic operations to obtain information at critical junctures. I work closely with Soviet forces on the Korean and Mongolian fronts.”

She scanned him up and down. “Hm. You're here to see the bridge.”

“Believe me ... I don't know that I care about this bridge. I want to do my job.”

“Can you stay with us?”

“I can. I'm officially captured.”

She looked at Long Yi. “He will stay with me.”

“I am no one to question you,” Long Yi said in Chinese, “and I know your modern Communist ideas are new and unusual for my old brain, but he could just as easily and perhaps more comfortably, stay with me.”

She scanned Raymond again and put her hands on her hips to lean forward, throwing a hand out in dismissal. “Good, then, he'll stay with you. You can acquaint him with things.” She pivoted and stomped off.

Long Yi laughed. “You will thank me later.”

When Long Yi introduced Raymond, the villagers gathered, some giggling behind hands, others reaching forward and poking him in the shoulder or the arm. They called him giant and examined him, even when Raymond and Long Yi walked away to the dirt road that led to the enormous rice paddy, where dirty water rippled, waving green weeds growing from its bed. Long Yi sat on a ridge overlooking the rice paddy.

Hsiao Feng stomped up in her Communist uniform and planted her hands on her hips as Raymond sat down next to Long Yi.

“I am to translate. You cannot walk around freely without a translator. You make me look lazy.”

She plopped down next to Raymond.

Long Yi spoke in Chinese.

“He says to translate this,” Hsiao Feng said, switching her glance between Raymond and Long Yi, but as he spoke, her lips clamped as her brow grew sterner. “He said that I am not supposed to interrogate you, we will never turn Communist, and I am about to tell him what a mean, nasty, old man he is!”

They went back and forth in Chinese.

“Wait-wait-wait,” Raymond interrupted. “Wait.”

They stopped.

“You have a wonderful village full of wonderful people here,” Raymond said, switching between them, “and I am grateful for all the hospitality you have extended ... but I need to get towards Mongolia. I need to report who they have on the Indian Front, troop numbers I've observed, actions ... that Speer is there ...”

Long Yi started in Chinese, which Hsiao Feng translated:

“Take yourself down the road about three miles. In fact, why don't we all go there, close to the woods where you were taken from in the attack?”

We will –” her eyes widened with worry as she followed Long Yi's suit and stood, watching him – “We will all go. I will show you myself.”

She went after him with agitated rattling in Chinese, as he trudged along with his staff bobbing, shuffling along the dirt road, his whole body silent and resigned, but Hsiao Feng unleashed a panicked speech as she raced ahead of him to watch his face.

Raymond stood and followed light and relaxed, reinvigorated from last night's dinner, sleep, and a good breakfast. As he followed the frail steps, Hsiao Feng glanced back in breaths between phrases. Long Yi walked and said nothing.

Trees rustled in cool breezes, and Raymond heard the return of the stream. Long Yi stopped at the edge of a road, where he turned and said something.

“We have to cross the stream and go to the other side of the ridge,” Hsiao Feng said. “The other side is the side where I found you.”

Raymond followed them down the hill, dirt breaking loose under his sideways steps. They splashed across the rolling, clear water; pebbles made things slick in some places, and new rocks felt like they could stab through the worn-thin soles of his boots. They trudged up the other bank, more dirt making all three of them lurch forward and use hands to climb. They crossed through more trees at the top of the bank, and then the clearing opened up. Raymond scanned black pits in the ground as a familiar smell filled his nose, tightened his throat and made his eyes water. He had started off good with smells – odors – but as he aged, they made his body lock harder each time he encountered them. When he scanned harder, Raymond spotted mounds among the higher grasses, dried black blood with bodies turned blue, white, swollen, some rupturing open a dark pink striated with glistening red, from the sunlight. Long Yi ventured forward, but Hsiao Feng hissed something at him. He waved behind him, poking the ground with his

staff, head scanning back and forth. He stepped up to one of the mounds and motioned for Raymond, squinting under his rice bowl hat.

When Raymond stepped out, Hsiao Feng cautioned: "Follow his footsteps exactly."

Raymond paused to look at her, and then he searched the ground for every footstep. When he joined Long Yi, Long Yi squinted at Raymond with tears in his eyes, and his voice was thick.

"This was my cousin. This was my cousin."

Raymond looked down to stare at eyes bulging in terror from a head set up carefully on the ground, set only on his jaw and the place where the Japanese had removed his body. His mouth sat wide to accommodate flesh stuffed inside, and when he looked closer, Raymond spotted the head of a penis and the swollen, overflowing sack of a scrotum underneath, black blood having dried in rivulets down the outside of his silent, screaming mouth.

When Raymond scanned, he found decapitated bodies of French fighters grouped with Chinese. Not a body had a head ... but not a head had a body. As the old man looked down, then looked up at Raymond with such horror and grief, something broke in Raymond, and he reached out to place an arm around the old man's neck and hug him as he looked at the creamy blue sky.

"Is this only as far as they get?" Raymond said to Hsiao Feng.

"Only for now," she said. "We used to have fortifications here, but they've filled them up."

"Why did they stop advancing?"

"Nationalist forces came from the South. The Japanese high command was taken by surprise, and so they redirected them to move south."

"What do they want here?"

“They want the bridge.”

Raymond tilted his head at her.

“We are the keepers of the bridge.”