Chapter 9

Italy and Africa

My name is Leonardo Bosco. I have black hair and brown eyes. I was 27 in 1940.

Hot, dusty, and sandy everywhere the eye could see in this godforsaken landscape of a desert. Who ever thought invading Africa in the summertime instead of during the much cooler winter should be shot. I would like nothing more than to return to my beloved hometown of Venice in Northern Italy. During the summer, Venice is beautiful along the water of the Mediterranean Sea, and the weather is the best for enjoying a stroll down to the little shops. With this war going on, however, I could not enjoy any of my former luxuries.

In the winter months of January and February, I enlisted into my Italian army, hoping that if we were to declare war on a country, it would be France. I had always wanted to visit France to see the beautiful art and landscapes found there. What I hadn't anticipated was for our leader to declare war on France and Great Britain, but then fight over in Africa. Early on in one of our campaigns, my commanding officer granted me the rank of corporal.

It was early July when I was shipped across the Sea onto one of our bases over in Africa. I was stationed in Italian Somaliland but more and more troops kept arriving from the time I first arrived there. It wasn’t until about a week before the plans were set that I received my orders to defend one of our occupied countries by invading a different one. On August 13, we invaded British Somaliland in East Africa as a defensive move, so the British couldn’t invade our occupied Ethiopia.

At the start of this, I knew it would be a fierce battle between our two countries, but I was confident we would come out as the true victor. After all, we are the descendants of the mighty Romans, so we should be able to build our empire just as they did centuries ago. The battle only lasted six days, but I lost many of my comrades on this horrible sand trap. The casualty reports came back as 2,000 of my brothers lost and only 250 of the British. We had won, however, and now controlled all of the land. For almost a month, I remained in Somaliland, waiting for my next orders or even dealing with having to stay here for the duration of the war.

My orders came in the first of September that I was to immediately move with my division to Libya and await further orders. We had occupied Libya since 1912 so at least this was friendly territory and not another bloody onslaught to take. I wish I had been wrong, and I wish I could have stayed back East more because there is less sand than this new desert I was going to even if it was the same desert. On September 13, we invaded Egypt from the Libyan border. The bloodshed here was massive because the Egyptians really did not want to give up any of their land they had claimed centuries ago, nor did they want us to ruin the land. Well it was getting ruined from the bombardments of shelling and tanks battling over the sand dunes and flat areas. Later on, rumors spread about how Germany had offered support to conquer these Arab peoples. They did not ask for help nor did they take our offer of help when they were off trying to conquer England up north. National pride made the government and the high command of my military refuse the offer. They should have taken because even more men had died for no reason.

With Egypt finally won, the makeshift base setup had quieted down for the time being until an important announcement was broadcasted over the radio. On September 27, Italy, Germany, and Japan all signed a pact known as the Tripartite Pact, or the Axis Pact. Maybe finally, the government was accepting help because there is no way we can continue with the casualty rates every time we invade an African country. Oh but I was wrong again it seemed, but instead of Africa, we invaded somewhere in Europe.

My friend, who also joined the army, wrote to me about the conditions he was facing over in southern Europe where they sent him. On October 28, Italian forces invaded Greece. From the start, he wrote of the problems with invading so late in the year and the way they tried to invade this very well defended country. The Greeks had not wanted to give an inch of their homeland to our invading forces. Greece is dominated by mountains, too, and it was the middle of the rainy season so roads were covered in mud and sludge. The whole campaign seemed to just be one disaster after another.

My division was faring well in Africa for now, but it seems that the rest of the Italian army was facing one disaster after another. On November 10 and 11, a torpedo bomber raid crippled almost our entire Italian fleet when they were docked at Taranto. Later that month, the Greeks defeat our 9th Army on November 22.

Minimal action was taking place for the moment in Africa, so I was granted a two week furlough to return home to my beloved Venice. Plans changed, however, when intelligence reported troop movements of the British. On December 9 and 10, the British began a western desert offensive in my part of North Africa. As we fought on the battlefield, they seemed to know exactly where we were going to be, even before we arrived there ourselves. We had 80,000 men with 120 tanks throughout this battle, but they had 30,000 with 270 tanks. In the end, many of us retreated and many more had to surrender with a total of 40,000 surrendering in those three days after. I was part of one of the division that had surrendered. Later on in the prisoner camp, I heard some of the enemy soldiers brag about the broken code of ours that lead to them learning of our troop movements, sizes, and points of vulnerability.

All I wanted to do was return home for Christmas with my family, but I was stuck in our prisoner of war camp for quite some time now. However, the soldier in the camp informed us the continuing war outside. On January 22, they informed us that Tobruk in North Africa had fallen back into the British forces. As angered as I was at this news, I could only feel relief that maybe I would go home the soon the African “adventure” was finished. This seemed possible because, on February 11, British forces advanced into Italian Somaliland in East Africa and control it now.

I started to hear hushed rumors among the guards about the same time they had announce the new controlling areas. It seems that a day later on the 12th, German General Erwin Rommel had arrived in Tripoli in North Africa. Perhaps my allies had come to rescue us from this sand prison. More rumors went around of the arrival of the first units of German “Afrika Korps” arriving. The rumors were true because on April 14, Rommel and his troops attacked Tobruk.

Months I have been living in this camp, waiting for the war to end or for the rescue of my army or allies. I spent my birthday on April 30 hoping for that rescue. On May 15, rescue was nowhere in sight with Great Britain’s new operations to control Africa again. This operation was called Operation Brevity which was their counter-attack in Egypt. From the minimal details given to us, the operation went horribly, especially when they captured Halfaya Pass.

I could feel change in the air when I heard of the onslaught of Germans to the sight of Britain’s newly gained territory. On May 26, Operation Skorpion began being the German counter-attack to the British counter-attack of Egypt. I only heard rumors and no one said anything about this because it completely reversed what the British had done. I was going to go home soon. I was 28 years old. I know we were faring better than the Russians out here.