
FIVE HOURS TO FREEDOM

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This book is a work of fiction based on real historical events. Although many of the events, places, and characters are inspired by true events—in particular, the Cincomarzada of 1838 in Zaragoza—this work incorporates dramatized elements, imagined dialogues, and fictional characters. Any resemblance to real people in different contexts, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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CHAPTER 1: THE LAST COMMISSION

The sound of Joaquín Espés' hammer was like the beating of an old and tired heart, echoing in the darkness of his smithy like an echo in a lonely valley. Each blow on the red-hot iron was a dull lament, a confession of his physical pain and isolation. The afternoon of March 3, 1838, crept over Zaragoza with an unusual, almost ominous stillness, but for Joaquín, stillness was his perpetual companion. His shoulders, once as sturdy as anvils, now groaned under the weight of the years and old war wounds, a map of forgotten battles etched into his flesh. His back, a tense arch from the effort, reminded him every day of the price of a life forged with a hammer.

His hands, gnarled and blackened by the soot embedded in the furrows of his skin, moved with the slow deliberation of one who knows every fiber of metal, every trick of fire. But the passion of yesteryear, the sparkle in his eyes as he tamed the iron, had faded, replaced by the resignation of an inescapable routine. The heat of the forge, which once revitalized him, now only accentuated the cold sweat on his forehead and the stabbing pain in his joints. He was an outcast in his own city, a blacksmith who had lost his spark, both at the anvil and in his soul. The smithy, once a hub of activity and chatter, was now a sanctuary of silence, broken only by the whisper of the bellows and the metallic clang of his hammer.

A lavish carriage, with gleaming hardware and horses with shiny manes, stopped with a screech of iron brakes in front of his smithy, breaking the imposed peace. Joaquín looked up, squinting at the afternoon sun filtering through the door. A dapper man with a sharp face and small eyes descended from it, followed by a woman in silk clothes who averted her gaze, her nose wrinkled by the smell of coal and sweat. They were the Counts of Monteflor, a family of wealthy liberal merchants who, despite their fortune, still depended on the skilled hands of a blacksmith for their mundane needs.

"Espés," snapped the Count, without deigning to step beyond the threshold, his voice unctuous but laden with barely concealed contempt. His eyes, rather than on Joaquín, rested with disgust on the disorder of the workshop, on the soot that covered every surface. "We need the gate to our country house repaired. The hinges are loose and the iron is corroded. It must be ready by dawn the day after tomorrow. And don't try to haggle, we know about your 'condition' and how little you've been working lately. The price will be fair, but not extravagant." Her voice carried the venom of superiority, the smugness of someone who knows they have the power. Joaquín, the blacksmith, the man who had once wielded a rifle with honor, was now a mere servant, an outcast begging for work, an uncomfortable reminder of the past.

The Countess, with a fan made of fine feathers, fanned her face, as if the air in the smithy dirtied her breath. "Make sure the work is impeccable, Espés. My garden does not deserve a botched job. And clean off the rust before you bring it. We don't want dirt." Her tone was that of someone speaking to a servant, to an object, not to a man who had given her his life, who had shed blood for her freedom. Joaquín nodded silently, feeling the burning humiliation rise in his throat, a bitter bile. His pride, if he had any left, swallowed the insult, the silent offense. He needed the money. He needed to feed Lucas.

Before climbing into his carriage, the Count threw a copper coin on the ground, a calculated gesture of contempt. "Oh, and make sure the job doesn't smell of the past, Espés. The city air needs to be pure. We don't want ghosts." The

words were a direct stab, an allusion to his Carlist past, to his "betrayal," to the shadows that had haunted him since he had returned to Zaragoza, limping and alone, with an orphaned child. The rich liberals, who benefited from his work, were the same ones who looked at him with suspicion, who had condemned him to ostracism, to oblivion.

As the carriage drove away with a clatter of hooves, leaving a trail of dust that mixed with the soot from his workshop, Joaquín bent down with difficulty, picking up the coin from the ground, his forehead beaded with sweat and shame burning his skin. The metal, cold in his palm, was the price of his silence, of his survival.

"The work of a blacksmith is dignified, son," a deep, kind voice echoed from the doorway. Joaquín looked up, surprised. There stood Father Anselmo, the parish priest of San Pablo, his gaunt figure and kind face framed by a worn cassock. He carried a basket of fresh bread, its sweet aroma contrasting with the stench of coal. "Don't let the rich tell you otherwise. God sees the work of your hands, not the gold in their coffers."

Joaquín straightened up, trying to hide the coin in his fist. "Father Anselmo. I didn't expect to see you." His voice sounded rougher than he wanted it to. The priest, unlike the others, had always treated him with discreet benevolence, an understanding that demanded no explanations, a faith that saw him as a soul to be saved, not a traitor.

Father Anselmo entered the smithy, his kind gaze sweeping over the silent anvils, the dormant forge. "I just came to see how you were doing, Joaquín. And to bring some bread for Lucas. They say fasting is good for the soul, but the body needs food." He handed him the basket, the bread still warm. Joaquín took it, the aroma of yeast and wheat a balm for the soul.

"We're fine, Father. Getting by. As always." The lie stuck in his throat, heavy and bitter.

The priest sighed, his gentle gaze resting on Joaquín's furrowed face. "Life is hard, son. But redemption is always possible. There is always a way back to the

light, even if the city walls seem to want to keep you in the dark." He approached the anvil, his old fingers caressing the cold surface of the metal. "Iron bends, but it does not break if tempered with faith. You, Joaquín, still have that strength. You can still forge something beyond anger and regret."

Joaquín looked down, the hammer still in his hand. "Redemption, Father? For a man like me? For a man who has stained his name with the blood of others, with betrayal?" His voice was a whisper lost in the silence of the smithy, a silent confession.

Father Anselmo placed a hand on his shoulder, feeling the tremor beneath the rough fabric of his shirt. "God is a blacksmith, son. He forges souls with fire and patience. And you, Joaquín, have not yet delivered your final work. You can still choose. The ways of the Lord are mysterious, but they always offer an opportunity for good, even in the most painful acts." His eyes met Joaquín's, a spark of hope dancing in them, an unshakeable faith. "Don't forget that, Joaquín. Men judge, but God forgives. And sometimes, even outcasts can be instruments of something greater. Even blacksmiths can break iron to forge a new freedom."

He took his leave with a nod, leaving Joaquín with the weight of his words, the scent of fresh bread, and a newly awakened restlessness in his heart. Redemption. Freedom. Words that had sounded hollow for years now resonated with a strange urgency, an echo of a past that refused to remain buried, a harbinger of an uncertain future. He closed his smithy earlier than usual, the premonition gnawing at him like rust on iron, now sharper, more insistent. There was something in the air that made his skin crawl, an imperceptible vibration that did not fit in with the routine of the city. The encounter with the Count and Father Anselmo, two extremes of his life, had been like two hammer blows, the first to humiliate, the second to awaken a doubt, a promise. Time was speeding up.

CHAPTER 2: FIVE CHIMES

The afternoon of March 4, 1838, slipped over Zaragoza with an unusual, almost ominous stillness. An icy wind swept through the streets, carrying away the dust and the last light of day, leaving a feeling of anxiety floating in the air, thick as winter fog. Joaquín Espés, with soot encrusted in the creases of his hands and the smell of hot metal permeating his clothes, closed his blacksmith's shop earlier than usual. It wasn't because of fatigue from the forge, which was a familiar and welcome tiredness, but because of a premonition that gnawed at him like rust on iron. There was something in the air that made his skin crawl, an imperceptible vibration that didn't fit with the routine of the city. It wasn't the silence, but the *quality* of the silence; it wasn't the darkness, but the way the gloom seemed to swallow up the usual sounds of life in Zaragoza. The children's laughter seemed more muted, the murmur of conversation in the nearby tavern more tense.

As he secured the heavy wooden and wrought iron bolts, his gaze, accustomed to the precision of the forge, paused on the elongated shadows dancing in the square. He had seen groups of men, strangers to the neighborhood, loitering in the alleys. They wore dark cloaks, their hats pulled down over their eyes, and their movements were too stealthy, too coordinated to be mere travelers or bandits. They were shadows that did not fit into the routine of Zaragoza, figures that

seemed to be waiting, lurking. The city seemed to hold its breath collectively, unaware of the predator approaching.

"Closing up already, master?" The voice, young and resolute, but tinged with barely concealed reproach, snapped him out of his thoughts. Iñigo de Larraga, still wearing his apprentice's apron and with a spark of indignation in his eyes, stood before him. The boy's blood was boiling, driven by the fervor of a cause that Joaquín had abandoned years ago. Iñigo, barely nineteen years old, had once been the most promising of his apprentices, his hands skilled with the hammer, his mind sharp for alloys. But the forge of war had called him away from the anvil, and with it, it had taken his innocence and part of his respect for the old blacksmith.

Joaquín nodded, his face furrowed with fatigue and the lines of a life forged in battle. "There's something in the air, Iñigo. Better to be prepared. I feel the wind changing."

Iñigo laughed without humor, a harsh sound that bounced off the cold stone. "Prepared, or hidden, master? As you have done all these years? The Carlists are not standing still, they are not waiting. Rumor has it that Cabañero is moving his pieces, that the attack is imminent, that they are stalking us like wolves in the night. Zaragoza needs us. All of us. Are you going to keep hiding your hammer while the city prepares for the storm, while young men like Pedro, like Juanjo, prepare to die for it?" His voice, once respectful, now dripped with sharp reproach, a sting that Joaquín felt in his bones, more than the cold of the afternoon. The memory of Juanjo, Martina's brother, the young idealist who had followed Joaquín to war and never returned, stood between them like a ghost, a silent and perpetual accusation. The wound was old, but it hurt just the same.

"My time for battles is over, Iñigo," Joaquín replied, his voice barely a whisper, laden with a sorrow the boy could not understand. The phrase, worn out by use and years of repetition, felt hollow, almost a betrayal of himself. He had promised Isabel, on her deathbed, that Lucas would grow up far from gunpowder and steel,

far from the smell of blood and despair. A promise that now weighed on him like lead, a burden heavier than any hammer.

"No one can abandon a battle that is not yet over, master. Iron is tempered in fire, not in oblivion. Loyalty is not forged once and left to cool," Iñigo insisted, his eyes fixed on Joaquín's, searching for the old sparkle of loyalty, of honor that the blacksmith once embodied. "People remember you, Joaquín. They need you. For your knowledge of their tactics, of the weaknesses of the Carlists, for your strength in the forge and on the battlefield." Then, with a gesture of disappointment that crushed any possible response from Joaquín, he turned on his heel. "But it seems you prefer to listen to the lullaby of the cradle rather than the bells of war, to care for your own blood rather than the blood of your land." He walked away, his youthful figure disappearing into the shadows, leaving Joaquín with the bitter taste of guilt and helplessness in his mouth.

Joaquín returned to his humble home, adjacent to the blacksmith's shop. The silence there was different, warm and familiar, a fragile refuge from the outside world. Lucas, his eight-year-old son, played with toy soldiers by the fire, his lips pressed together in a childish murmur, creating his own miniature battles. His laughter, when he heard it, was balm for Joaquín's wounded soul, the only melody that truly mattered. But that night, the laughter did not come. A dull uneasiness seemed to have crept into the house with the icy wind.

After dinner, as darkness descended upon them like a heavy blanket, Lucas curled up next to his father, his large, dark eyes like pools of calm water. The boy had been restless all day, his little shoulders tense, reflecting a strange anxiety that Joaquín had not known how to dispel. "Dad," he whispered, his voice barely audible, just a thread of fear. "I had a bad dream. A very bad one."

Joaquín stroked his tousled hair, feeling its fineness. "It was just a dream, son. Nothing to worry about. Nightmares fade away with the sun."

"No," Lucas replied, his little fingers clinging to Joaquín's shirt with surprising strength. "It wasn't like the others. I saw bells. Lots of bells, Dad. And fire. Lots of fire in the streets. And a voice... Uncle Ramón's voice. He said that you... that

you weren't from here. That we weren't from here." The boy's words hit him with the force of a hammer, each syllable an echo of his past, a harbinger of the future. Ramón. The mention of his old comrade, his son's premonition... Joaquín felt a chill that was not from the cold of the night, but from the premonition that pierced his soul. Iñigo's last words echoed in his mind: "the bells of war."

Joaquín hugged Lucas tightly, trying to dispel the shadow that had settled over the little boy's head, trying to protect him from a fate that seemed inevitable. But he knew it wasn't just a dream. The streets, the wind, the furtive shadows, Iñigo's sharp words, Lucas' innocent premonition... it was all an echo of what was to come. That night, sleep was slow in coming, and when it did, it was not restful. The smell of gunpowder tore at his nostrils, the echo of cannons pierced his skull, and in the darkness, he could see the cruel glint of Ramón's bayonet. The stillness of the eve was only the prelude to the storm. A storm of iron and blood that loomed over Zaragoza.

CHAPTER 2: THE ANVIL OF CHOICE

Frost covered the rooftops of Zaragoza in the cold dawn of March 5, 1838. A pale moonlight halo blurred among the last shreds of darkness, refusing to yield to dawn, like a ghost clinging to the night. In Joaquín Espés's blacksmith shop, the only fire burning was not in the hearth, but in the forge, which slumbered under a layer of coal, waiting for the morning bellows to wake it up and sing. Joaquín, a man with broad shoulders and weathered hands, stirred the embers with a poker, his face intermittently illuminated by the orange glow, each spark a small ephemeral universe. Beside him, Lucas, his eight-year-old son, curled up on a wooden bench, still wrapped in the drowsiness of sleep, but with his hand outstretched toward the bowl of porridge his father had prepared for him, a small ritual of love in the austerity of their life.

"Come on, son. The sun doesn't wait for the lazy," said Joaquín, his voice deep but soft, a note of tenderness in the foreboding silence of the workshop. The voice was an echo of the countless mornings when he had uttered those same words. Lucas grumbled, but sat up, his dark eyes blinking, trying to overcome the pull of sleep. Life in Zaragoza was hard, and the blacksmith had taught his son to rise early, before the first rays of sunlight bathed the Virgin of Pilar, a symbol of resistance that stood majestically in the heart of the city, in gold.

A distant rumble broke the stillness, not the familiar thunder of a spring storm, but a deeper, more sinister sound. The ground shook, a tremor that slid through the veins of the earth to the foundations of the smithy, rattling the anvils and tools. Joaquín straightened up, his muscles tense as bowstrings, his hearing sharpened by years of alertness on battlefields he thought he had left behind forever. Another. And another closer, so close that the air vibrated with a pressure wave. Then the bells. Not the solemn tolling of six o'clock, but a frantic, disorderly clamor that spread like a lament, a cry of agony through the sleeping city. Screams. Distraught voices rising from the streets, tearing through the veil of night. Lucas's premonition had materialized with ruthless cruelty.

"Father, what is that?!" exclaimed Lucas, his eyes wide, his small body rigid with terror, the bowl of porridge forgotten on the bench. His voice was a thin thread stretched tight with panic.

Joaquín did not answer. He knew that sound. Cannons. Too close to be a military drill. It was war knocking on the doors of Zaragoza, again, like a tireless ghost returning to claim what it believed was its own. He picked up a hammer from the workbench, its familiar weight comforting in his hand, as if it were an extension of his own will. The butt of his old rifle, hanging on the wall, drew his gaze like a magnet, a constant reminder of a past he had tried to bury. "Stay behind me, Lucas," he ordered, his voice now a harsh whisper, tinged with steel and desperation.

The door of the smithy, made of sturdy wood and reinforced with iron, was kicked open with such violence that the bolt flew into splinters, embedding itself in the opposite wall with a sharp crack. Several men burst in, their silhouettes outlined against the darkness outside, armed with rifles and bayonets that glinted in the dim light. They wore uniforms that Joaquín recognized with an icy chill: the Carlist insignia, the Cross of Burgundy. At their head was a man with a thick beard and relentless eyes: Ramón, his former comrade in arms. The air in the smithy cooled by ten degrees, charged with volatile electricity, the tension palpable.

"What a surprise, Joaquín Espés. The deserter blacksmith, up early to forge the loyalty you don't have," Ramón snapped, his voice resonating with an ancient bitterness, thick as the smoke from a forgotten hearth, each word laden with resentment. His eyes, which had once shared a fiery gaze with Joaquín's on that freezing night in Vizcaya, now burned with fanatical zeal, hardened by scars that Joaquín could not see but could feel, burned into the soul of his former friend. "Your betrayal cost us dearly years ago, remember? The blood spilled in the Pyrenees, mine, which you swore to defend. Juanjo, Martina's brother... Have you forgotten, or buried it under your anvil and your cowardice?"

Joaquín clenched the hammer, his knuckles whitening from the pressure. The cold metal in his palm contrasted with the fire rising in his throat, a contained rage that threatened to explode. "There is no betrayal in defending your home, Ramón. In seeking peace for your family. What are you doing here? What do you want from me?" The question was rhetorical; the answer had already been burned into the city's guts with cannon fire.

Ramón let out a dry laugh, devoid of humor, a sound that scraped the silence and the walls of the smithy. "We have come to claim what is ours, Espés. What has always been ours by divine right. And you, old friend, are going to pay for your desertion, for your years of exile, and for that promise you made me and never kept." He took a step closer, the shadow of his rifle lengthening across the floor, a projected threat. "General Cabañero needs a favor from a man with your skills. And I need a blood oath that I have never forgotten. Or has the snow already erased your memory, Espés? Have the snow and betrayal frozen your heart?"

A chill ran through Joaquín, colder than the morning frost. The oath. The night in the Pyrenees. Ramón's frozen face, his limping leg, were memories that had haunted him for years.

Flashback: The Promise in Vizcaya

Snow fell relentlessly on the peaks of Vizcaya, a white blanket that hid the traps and muffled the cries of the dying. February 1836. Joaquín and Ramón, two young soldiers, crawled up the hillside, the cold seeping into their bones, fear a constant and heavy companion, more present than the breath on their lips. Their Carlist uniforms, ragged and stained with mud and other people's blood, offered little protection against the biting wind and the inclement weather of the mountains. They had been ambushed by a liberal patrol while attempting to secure a strategic mountain pass. Enemy fire rained down from above, a storm of lead whistling around them.

Ramón, always the most impetuous, with the blind impetus of someone who has little to lose and everything to gain in the cause he considered just, threw himself forward, taking cover behind a rock. His eyes burned with the fever of battle. "Cover me, Espés! They have a machine gun! If we don't silence it, we're lost!" His voice, youthful but firm, sounded authoritative above the roar of gunfire. Joaquín, however, hesitated. He had seen the metallic gleam in the liberal gunner's eyes, the way the weapon moved, calculating, aiming. It was a trap. He knew that advancing without a plan would be suicide, a pointless massacre. A second of hesitation, a moment of tactical analysis that seemed like an eternity of cowardice in Ramón's eyes.

"Wait, Ramón! It's a trap! Don't go!" Joaquín shouted, his voice torn, but the treacherous wind carried his words away, scattering them like snowflakes. Ramón had already risen, bayonet fixed, the cry of "Long live Carlos VI!" bursting from his frozen lips, a challenge to fate, a cry of faith. A reddish flash, an explosion. Ramón fell, a muffled cry in the snow, his leg bent at an impossible angle, blood staining the immaculate white with a dark, obscene crimson, spreading like a macabre flower. Joaquín, paralyzed by the sight, by the certainty of his mistake in hesitating, by the slowness of his reason in the face of Ramón's blind impetus, threw himself under the fire, dragging his comrade to safety behind a rock, feeling the inert weight of the wounded body, the trembling of another's flesh. The cold

of the snow burned his hands while Ramón's blood, hot and sticky, stuck to his fingers, an indelible mark.

*With his jaw clenched, Joaquín stopped the bleeding as best he could, tearing a piece of his shirt to improvise a bandage, his hands clumsy from the cold and the urgency. The pain in Ramón's eyes was unbearable, but the anger burning in them was even more hurtful, more corrosive. "You let me die, Espés! Because of your doubt! Because of your cowardice! Honor is an iron that is forged in sacrifice, not in indecision!" His words were daggers of ice, piercing Joaquín's heart. "You swore to protect your own. To the cause. You swore allegiance! You promised it for the love of the crown!"

Joaquín, his face white with guilt and the taste of shame in his mouth, had squeezed Ramón's hand, feeling the coldness of his skin, his weak pulse. "I swear by my father's blood, Ramón, by the God who watches over us, that I will never let my people down again. That my life and my strength will be used to protect those I care about. I will always, always protect them. I swear." The promise had been forged in the heat of battle, in the guilt of the moment, an oath to the Carlist cause that, over time, would become a personal oath, more intimate and profound, a promise to life itself. Ramón's limp, visible in every step since then, was a perpetual reminder of that promise broken at its source, of a loyalty that Joaquín had transferred from the cause to life, to family, to survival.*

End of Flashback

Ramón interrupted the memory with a sudden movement, shaking Joaquín out of his lethargy. "Your son has courage. Courage that you are going to pay for, Espés. Courage that the liberals will never be able to recover." He pointed to a small window overlooking the outside, where the first towers of Zaragoza could be glimpsed, shrouded in smoke and the chaos of dawn. Two soldiers pounced on

Lucas, who had let out a muffled cry, a sound that tore Joaquín's soul apart. The boy struggled futilely, his small fists punching the air, his tiny figure disappearing among the Carlist uniforms, as if the night were swallowing him whole.

"Lucas!" Joaquín roared, trying to move forward, blood boiling in his veins, but the butt of a rifle crashed into his side with such brutal force that it took his breath away. A searing pain burned his side, a brutal reminder of his helplessness, his old age, his loneliness. He doubled over with a groan, falling to his knees, the hammer slipping from his numb fingers, a dull echo on the dirt floor, the sound of defeat.

Ramón crouched down, his face close to Joaquín's, the icy breath of betrayal and threat enveloping the blacksmith. His eyes, once sharing a comradeship in arms, were now just two embers of cold fire, without a shred of mercy. "Zaragoza is going to fall, Espés. And you're going to help it fall faster. The smuggling tunnel under the wall of Santa María la Mayor. Clear the reinforcements and light a flare. Before the sun warms these streets and the city fully awakens, the breach must be open. If you fail... or if you try something stupid... your son will pay for your cowardice. Hour by hour. Every chime that doesn't bring us closer to victory will be torture for him. Lucas will be taken to the Aljafería. There he will await your decision, Espés. Don't delay. The clock won't stop."

Joaquín closed his eyes, his face contorted with physical pain and moral agony. He saw Isabel, his wife, feverish, murmuring Lucas's name in her final days, the image of his lost love, the fragility of life. He looked again at his hands, now trembling, stained with soot and blood: they were not the hands of a blacksmith, they were the hands of an executioner. Time, not just an hour, but time itself, became the cruelest enemy, a relentless executioner. He looked at the pale face of his son, who was being dragged out of the smithy, his little cry of "Father!" tearing through the air, a sound that pierced his soul and was burned into his memory. Lucas, the only ember left in his life, his only light after Isabel's death and his abandonment of the Carlist cause. Now they were taking him away, using him as a pawn in a macabre game, a sacrifice.

The tunnel under Santa María la Mayor: a vital point, a direct route of infiltration into the heart of the defense. Sabotaging it meant a fatal breach, an open path for the Carlists, a mortal wound for Zaragoza. Ramón knew it. So did he. It was an attack on everything Zaragoza stood for: resistance, pride, blood shed for freedom. But Lucas... The scales tipped heavily toward the flesh of his flesh, toward a father's unconditional love. What good was a liberated city if his son was not there to see it? What good was honor if he lost the only thing that kept him alive?

Joaquín stood up with difficulty, his back aching, the pain in his side a constant twinge reminding him of the brutality of war. The smell of gunpowder and stale sweat scratched his throat, bitter bile rising up his esophagus. His old rifle, a relic of times past, hung on the wall, a ghost of other battles, of other loyalties. He took it down. Heavy and familiar, the cold metal reminded him of battles he thought he had left behind forever. The cartridges were in the usual drawer, as if fate had been waiting for this moment. He put them in a rough cloth bag, along with his sharpest knife and an iron bar that felt like an extension of his own rage, of his despair. The street awaited him. An unknown and deadly chaos. But worse than the unknown was the certainty of what would happen to Lucas if he didn't act. He took a deep breath, the cold air stinging his lungs, air that smelled of blood and ash. He was an old man, tired, broken, but despair injected him with unnatural strength, a silent fury. He crossed the threshold of his smithy, toward the bloody dawn, with the echo of a name, "Lucas," hammering in his chest, an anvil in his soul, the only truth he had left. Time was not only moving forward; it was devouring him.

CHAPTER 4: IRON AND HONEY

The early morning air was an icy dagger, but the screams that rose from the alleys, sharp and heart-wrenching, were even colder, as cold as the steel of a bayonet. The city, just minutes ago asleep under a blanket of false peace, now groaned and writhed under the assault. Joaquín left the blacksmith's shop, his old rifle in hand, and chaos hit him full force, a tide of noise, smoke, and despair. From the Plaza del Pilar, a dry, deep boom echoed, followed by the mournful tolling of the large bell of La Seo, the one that only announced calamities. It was not a call to arms for dawn mass, but a roar of war, a visceral cry that spread through the living flesh of Zaragoza, piercing its entrails.

Joaquín moved like a shadow through the streets of his city, which was beginning to bleed, brick by brick, life by life. Each stride was a tick-tock on his own hourglass, each step a sacrifice. His mind, accustomed to the relentless logic of the forge, now worked at a feverish pace, weighing every risk, every consequence, every life. Ramón had spoken of the Santa María la Mayor tunnel as a "key point." Joaquín knew it, a smuggling passageway, an open secret among the old-timers in the neighborhood, a sensitive nerve that Cabañero sought to sever in order to paralyze the city's defenses. It was his target. But before reaching that point of no return, the image of Lucas, his frightened face, his heart-rending cry, stood between the smoke and the ruins, more real than the very air he breathed.

The smell of burnt gunpowder mingled with that of damp coal, an aroma that transported him to the battles of Vizcaya, to the brink of death, to broken promises, to the metallic taste of blood. But beyond those bitter memories, another rose up, sweeter and more painful at the same time: that of Isabel. The vision of her face, pale but full of love, haunted him, a beloved ghost.

Flashback: Iron and Honey

*The bells of El Pilar rang joyfully, not with the frenzy of war, but with the sweetness of life, with the song of hope. On September 10, 1829, under a gentle sun that streamed through the windows of Joaquín's humble home, little Lucas had come into the world. Isabel, his wife, her face exhausted but her eyes bright and full of infinite light, held the baby with a tenderness that broke Joaquín's heart, accustomed as he was to the hardness of iron and the forge, to the cruelty of the battlefield. He, the blacksmith forged in war, suddenly felt vulnerable, melting like red-hot metal under his wife's gaze, under the purity of the new life she held in her arms. A new life, pure and innocent, had blossomed in the midst of the harsh world he knew, a miracle.

"He's perfect, Joaquín," Isabel had whispered, her voice a thin thread, but charged with immense love and gratitude that filled the small room. "Our little miracle. The miracle you promised me when you tore off your war uniform and came back to me. Our freedom."

Joaquín knelt beside the bed, feeling the roughness of the wood beneath his knees, kissing Isabel's sweat-beaded forehead, then the tiny wrinkled face of his son, who squeezed his finger with surprising strength, a promise of life. He had promised to protect them. Both of them. Life was simple then, full of hardship, but filled with a fulfillment he had never known in the heat of war, in the loneliness of the camps. The forge, which once produced only metal tools or weapons,

now forged a family, a future, an anchor for his wandering soul, a purpose beyond blood and steel.*

*But the sweetness of those happy years was soon mixed with the bitter taste of illness. Shortly after Lucas's first birthday, Isabel began to languish. Fever consumed her, a slow fire that refused to be extinguished, devouring her body day after day. Her eyes, once full of life and joy, dimmed, losing their sparkle, and her body, once slender and strong, wasted away to a fragile shadow, barely a whisper. Every day, Joaquín felt life slipping through his fingers, like fine sand.

Joaquín remembered the endless nights, watching over her bedside, begging a God who seemed deaf to his prayers, to his desperate pleas. The herbs that the healers gave him had no effect, they dissolved into nothingness. The savings, once intended to expand the blacksmith's shop, to build a future, vanished into useless medicines and treatments, into empty promises. The innocent joy of Lucas, who was beginning to take his first steps and babble his first words, was a painful contrast to the silent agony of his mother, a funeral song that tore his heart apart.

One afternoon, with the sun setting behind the silhouette of the Aljafería, tinging the sky with a purple melancholy, Isabel called him. Her voice was barely a whisper, each word a supreme effort that took her breath away. "Joaquín... the war... the cause... we can't let it... take everything from us again." Her eyes, though veiled by fever and the proximity of death, fixed on him with an intensity that pierced his soul, a last spark of will. "Don't go back to the front. Promise me. Lucas needs you. More than the cause, more than any king or any flag. He is your legacy. He is your life. He is the only freedom that matters, Joaquín. Our freedom."*

Joaquín, his throat tight with tears he refused to shed, squeezed her bony hand, feeling the coldness of her skin. The weight of that oath crushed him, but at the same time purified him, defined him. "I swear, Isabel. For the love I have for you, for the life of our son. I will not return to the front. I will protect Lucas from this war. I will keep him safe. From everything. From all the darkness in the world." It was a sacred oath, born of love and fear, which clashed with the promise he had

made to Ramón in the snowy mountains, but which felt more true, more urgent, more intrinsic to his very nature. The promise to his wife, to his family, stood on the ashes of his military past, an immovable rock.

Isabel smiled then, a pale, fleeting smile that still haunted him in his dreams, a light that was fading. "My blacksmith... my strength... my life." Those were her last words. She died at dawn, with Lucas's name on her lips, her last breath a caress. Joaquín, his heart broken, had clung to his son's small body, the only comfort in the devastation of his soul. The forge had cooled then, the anvil had fallen silent, and the iron had become a bitter memory, a symbol of all he had sacrificed for the peace of his family.

End of Flashback

The echo of the cannon shot brought him back to the present, shaking him violently, tearing him from the sweet agony of memory. The pain of loss, though old, was still fresh, renewed by the threat hanging over Lucas, a threat as tangible as the smell of gunpowder. The promise to Isabel, the oath to protect her son, was all that mattered. The ambitions of kings, broken loyalties, military honor, all paled before the image of Lucas, his small, fragile shipwreck in this sea of blood. No matter the price he had to pay. No matter the accusation of treason that would resound against him, already beginning to be whispered. He would do whatever was necessary. His oath to Isabel stood like an iron shield, unbreakable, against the fury of the world. He stepped out of the dim light of the doorway, determination etched into every line of his weathered face, the silhouette of the Aljafería looming menacingly on the distant horizon, a nest of snakes where his son awaited him.

CHAPTER 5: THE ECHO OF BETRAYAL

Joaquín continued his forced march through the bloodstained streets, each alleyway a gorge roaring with the din of battle. The air grew thicker with every step, an unbreathable mixture of gunpowder, blood, and the sweet stench of lime from the ruined houses. The urgency to reach the tunnel drove him on, a motor of desperation, but the pain in his side, where Ramón's rifle butt had struck him, and the weight of the rifle itself in his hands slowed him down, reminding him of his own fragility. The image of Lucas in the Aljafería, alone and frightened, hammered in his head, a cruel metronome marking the passing of the hours, of the minutes that were slipping away.

As he turned a corner, a scream stopped him in his tracks, a howl of rage and despair that echoed above the chaos, a scream he recognized. A woman with her hair loose, covered in soot and ash, was struggling with a Carlist soldier who was trying to force open the door of a house with an axe, her face disfigured by violence. It was Martina. Her eyes, once filled with a vibrant spark and unyielding passion, now burned with cold fury, an almost animalistic desperation, the glint of a sorrowful virgin forged by pain and war. They met for a moment, their gazes colliding amid the pandemonium. A flash of pain and surprise crossed her face, followed by an expression of icy contempt that froze Joaquín's blood more than

the early morning wind. The soldier, seeing Joaquín, let out a growl, his gaze wavering between the intruder and the woman.

"Joaquín Espés! Damn you! Are you back to betray us again, or to save your own skin as usual? Isn't what happened to Juanjo enough? Are you tired of hiding, of living in cowardice?" His voice was a hoarse lament, full of the bitterness of years of broken loyalties, of personal losses that Joaquín had not dared to face, that he had buried under layers of work and silence. Juanjo, Martina's brother, a young idealist who had followed Joaquín to the Carlist cause in his youth and never returned, his body lost on some forgotten battlefield. His shadow stood between them, dense and cold as steel, an insurmountable wall.

The soldier, bewildered by Martina's intervention and Joaquín's sudden appearance, turned around, axe raised, a brutal threat. Joaquín did not hesitate. The rifle, which moments before had felt like a dead weight in his hands, rose instinctively, not to shoot, but as a mallet, an extension of his will. The butt crashed into the first soldier's skull with a dull thud, a sharp sound that echoed in the narrow street. The man fell without a sound, his body limp, the axe slipping from his fingers. Martina looked at him, and for a moment, a flash of something like gratitude or surprise crossed her face, a crack in her hardness. But it was fleeting. It was replaced again by hardness, by the impenetrable wall she had built around her heart, a shield.

"I don't thank you," Martina said, her voice low and harsh, filled with a venom that would not dissipate, a resentment that time had solidified. "Not today. Not ever. This changes nothing. You left. You abandoned us." She raised her own rifle, a relic from her father, a weapon she knew well, and fired at another Carlist who was poking his head out onto the main street, the bullet whistling through the air. "Go, Joaquín. Your place is not here, among those who fight. We know that already."

He didn't stop, he couldn't. He just looked at her, a silent plea in his tired eyes, filled with immense sorrow, before continuing on his way, leaving behind the open wound between them, a wound that seemed to reopen with every cannon

shot, with every battle cry. The city was bleeding to death, and with it, his own soul. The rifle weighed heavy in his hands, a reminder of when war had a clear side for him, a noble purpose. Now, there was nothing but a whirlwind of grays and the urgency of his blood, of Lucas's life.

Joaquín climbed onto a rooftop, the cold tiles beneath his hands, the effort making him pant, each breath a pain. From there, the view was bleak: smoke, fire, and the menacing figure of the nearby hills, where the silhouette of the Carlist cannons could be made out, their dark mouths spewing death. The tolling of the bell quickened, a metronome of doom marking the pulse of the city. He had to choose. His son or Zaragoza. But in his mind, the choice was already made, seared with Isabel's blood and Lucas's desperation: save Lucas. The dilemma now was how to save Lucas without condemning the entire city, without being the executioner of his own people.

The Carlist general Cabañero, Joaquín thought, was cunning, cruel, a ruthless strategist. The assault on Zaragoza was a masterstroke, a surprise move, executed with calculated coldness, and he, Joaquín, was a piece on his board, a pawn moved by desperation. He needed to understand the Carlist strategy, read his movements, find a crack in his armor, a weakness he could exploit for his own ends, for his own survival and that of his son. A nearby building collapsed with a deafening roar, raising a cloud of dust and debris that darkened the already gloomy dawn. The air was filled with screams and more gunfire. The city was being devoured, its entrails exposed. Joaquín covered his face with his arm, feeling the sting of each defeat as his own, guilt gnawing at him. His time was running out. He had to get to Santa María la Mayor.

And then, he needed to find a weak spot in the Carlist network. One that Ramón would not expect, one that only an old Carlist like him, a blacksmith of a thousand battles, could foresee. Betrayal, after all, could also be a tool, a double-edged sword. Or a shield to protect his own. The question was at what price he would gamble. He couldn't completely betray Zaragoza, hand it over to

the massacre. He had to find a way to carry out Ramón's order without slitting the city's throat, without being a monster.

The plan, forged in the heat of desperation, began to take shape in his mind, clear and precise as the design of a piece of forgework. Ramón wanted a breach. He would give it to him. But it would be a controlled breach, an illusion of victory that would turn into a death trap. It would compromise the barricade, yes, weaken it, but it would not bring it down completely. He would cut one of the bolts from the oak beam, the one that bore the main weight, and loosen the other with the iron bar he was carrying, so that the structure would not collapse instantly with a clean blow. It would give way with a crash on impact, creating a visible, attractive fissure that the Carlists would interpret as an easy victory, but which would not allow the mass passage of troops without a fierce fight and a terrible risk of total collapse for the attackers. It would be a wound, not an amputation, a bloody decoy. The Carlists would see the flare and hear the crash, interpret the breach as their golden opportunity, and rush forward with a thirst for victory. And in that chaos, in that distraction, he would find his way to the Aljafería, to the heart of the enemy. A chance to escape with Lucas while the enemy drowned in its own false victory, in its own blood.

He took a deep breath, the cold air stinging his lungs, air that smelled of destiny. It was a crazy plan, a razor's edge over the abyss. But it was the only one. Zaragoza would survive, wounded but alive. And Lucas, with luck, too. Betrayal, after all, could also be a path to a deeper salvation, albeit one stained with blood.

CHAPTER 6: THE MAP UNDER THE CHURCH

The plan had taken shape in Joaquín's mind, forged in the crucible of despair, but now it needed to be as sharp as a razor blade. Ramón had mentioned the tunnel under Santa María la Mayor. Joaquín knew about it, not only from old rumors, but from his own experience. Years ago, when the city was expanding its bowels with new sewers and the War of Independence was still a fresh memory, Joaquín, then a young blacksmith, had helped reinforce some of the underground structures, including an old smugglers' passageway that ran under the city walls. His father, a respected master builder, had taken him along, teaching him the secrets of the underground, the resistance of the earth, and how to master it.

In the dustiest corner of his smithy, under a pile of rusty tools and scrap metal, Joaquín had kept an old rolled-up map, a forgotten treasure that now held incalculable value. It was a rudimentary drawing, traced by hand on yellowed parchment, with annotations in faded ink: the water pipes, the foundations of the church, and yes, the intricate network of underground passages. With trembling hands, he unrolled it on a makeshift work table, his gaze scrutinizing every line, every sketch. The smuggling tunnel, marked with a chalk cross, was shown in detail: its curves, its weak points, the old wooden structures that supported it.

"What's that, Dad?" A small, curious voice startled him. It was Lucas, who had woken up from a restless nap and was watching him from the doorway, his eyes wide and frightened, but also fascinated by the map, by the mystery it emanated.

Joaquín hurried to roll it up again, but it was too late. Lucas, despite his young age, had a keen intuition, a perceptiveness that sometimes frightened him. "It's an old map, son. From when I was young. Of secret tunnels, the kind used to hide important things." It was a white lie, but the boy had already caught the flash of concern in his father's eyes, the tension in his shoulders.

The clock on the nearby church, barely audible over the din of battle, struck four in the morning. Ramón's deadline was getting closer with every tick. Joaquín knew he had less than an hour to reach the tunnel, to execute his plan.

"And what do you have to do with him, Dad?" asked Lucas, his voice a whisper. His curiosity, despite his fear, was unshakeable. The boy had unconsciously become his assistant, forcing him to verbalize his thoughts, to clarify his strategy.

Joaquín sighed, the weight of the world on his shoulders. "I have to find a place in that tunnel, son. A place where the wall is weaker, where the reinforcements that hold it up... can give way. I need to open a path." His voice was a whisper, laden with a guilt the boy couldn't understand.

"Open a path for the bad guys, Dad?" Lucas's question hit him like a hammer. The innocent purity of the question was more hurtful than any accusation.

Joaquín closed his eyes, his face tense. "No, son. Not for the bad guys. For you. So we can be safe." The answer was the truth, but also a mutilated truth, a truth that involved sacrificing others. It was the price of his choice.

He crouched down next to Lucas, his trembling hand stroking the boy's tousled hair. "Look, son. Imagine this wall as a block of iron. Very strong. But all iron has a grain, a vein. A point where it is weaker. I must find that point. I must make it look like the iron breaks on its own, out of weakness, not by the blacksmith's hand. That way, the bad guys will think they've won easily, and they'll rush in without thinking."

"And what will you do then?"

"Then, in the chaos, I will get you out of the Aljafería. While they celebrate their false victory, we will leave. Far away from here. To a safe place." It was a crazy plan, a razor's edge over the abyss, but the logic of a blacksmith, the cunning of a war veteran, told him it was his only chance.

The map, though old, revealed a particularly vulnerable section of the tunnel. Near the foundations of the church of Santa María la Mayor, a massive oak beam, reinforced with two solid iron bolts, supported a crucial section of the passageway. He himself had supervised its installation; he knew its strength, its limits. If he cut one of the bolts with his sharp knife, weakening the joint, and then loosened the other with the iron bar he was carrying, the structure would not collapse completely at once. It would give way with a crash on impact, creating a visible, attractive fissure that the Carlists would interpret as an easy victory, but which would not allow the mass passage of troops without a fierce fight and a terrible risk of total collapse for the attackers. It would be a wound, not an amputation, a bloody decoy. The Carlists would see the flare and hear the crash, interpret the breach as their golden opportunity, and rush forward thirsty for victory, but they would be rushing into a trap.

Lucas nodded, though his eyes still reflected fear and confusion. "Don't let it smell like burning, Dad," he whispered, his voice barely audible. Joaquín felt a twinge in his chest. The child's innocence, his fear of fire, of the smell of burning, was a silent reproach. For Lucas, fire was no longer just the fire of the forge. It was the fire of destruction, the fire of war that had marked him.

Joaquín stood up, the old rifle in his hand, his sharp knife and the iron bar hidden under his jacket. He looked one last time at the map, the topography of disaster, the road to his own doom. There was no turning back. The promise to Lucas, the oath to Isabel, the unconditional love, were now his only guide, his only compass in this labyrinth of iron and blood. And in his hands lay not only his son's life, but the fate of an entire city, a fate he dared to manipulate, to divert, to twist. The blacksmith, after all, had always known how to bend iron to his will. And now, he would bend destiny.

CHAPTER 7: THE SILENT TRENCH

The dawn was a picture of smoke and fury from Martina's window. Not the window of her house, now a likely target for Carlist cannons, but from a makeshift hideout in a half-ruined building overlooking the Plaza del Pilar, from where she watched the hell that loomed over Zaragoza. The constant roar of the cannons and the incessant rattling of rifle fire were the soundtrack to her day, a macabre concert. Her mother, prostrate on a makeshift bed of dirty blankets and rags, coughed with a dry, metallic sound, her breath hoarse and her face pale as wax, her eyes sunken. Consumption had consumed her for years, a silent war in her own home, which now mingled with the noisy and bloody war in the streets, a cruel irony.

Martina brought a damp cloth to her mother's feverish forehead, feeling the skin burning under her fingers. The old woman's skin was dry and hot, an oven slowly, inexorably devouring her life. The smell of medicinal herbs mixed with the acrid stench of gunpowder and the sweetness of blood tore at her nostrils, a nauseating mixture. "Hang on, Mother. Hang on a little longer. It will pass. The city is holding on, and so are we." But her voice sounded hollow, a prayer without faith, barely a whisper against the storm.

As she changed the water in the bowl, her gaze fell on an old, faded photo she kept in her pocket, a picture of Juanjo. Her brother. Always smiling, with those

eyes full of contagious idealism, a blind faith in justice. An idealism that Joaquín Espés had known how to ignite with his words and his own conviction, when they were both young and believed in a cause. Juanjo had admired Joaquín, had followed him to the Carlist War, believing in the promise of a better, fairer Spain. And he had never returned. Martina had felt the weight of that loss, the anger against Joaquín for having dragged him to his death, for having stolen his future, for having broken a promise. The emptiness of his absence haunted her day and night.

"The blacksmith..." murmured her mother, her eyes closed, a shadow of recognition in her feverish voice, a distant memory. "Joaquín... Always so strong... so good to Juanjo. Always looking after his own."

Martina pressed her lips together until they turned white. Kind? Strong? The image of Joaquín shooting the Carlist soldier in the street was etched in her memory. An instinctive act, unexpected protection, a glimpse of the old Joaquín. But that did not erase the years of silence, the abandonment of the cause that Juanjo had embraced with his life. It was a contradiction that tore her apart, a knot in her chest that she couldn't untie. She despised him for his desertion, for the pain he had caused, for the shadow of Juanjo. But a part of her, a small part buried under layers of resentment, remembered the Joaquín of yesteryear, the man of integrity, the leader, the protector. And she couldn't help but feel a bitter respect for the strength he still possessed, for the way he had protected the child Lucas, despite everything, despite his own guilt. She had seen the fear in his eyes, the desperation that drove him, the love of a father. She understood a father's choice. But she didn't forgive him. Not entirely. The wound was too deep to be healed by a single act.

Despair washed over her, a cold wave. Her mother was getting worse by the hour, the city was burning, and she couldn't just sit idly by, hidden in a corner. She had been transporting ammunition for the militiamen, assisting the wounded in makeshift aid stations, knitting bandages with trembling hands. But it was no longer enough. Zaragoza would not be saved by wet cloths and prayers alone, nor

by small acts of charity. She needed steady hands, alert eyes, loaded rifles. She needed to fight.

She took her father's rifle off the wall, a heavy, familiar weapon that had hung there for years, a silent guardian. Juanjo had used it before going off to war, and its cold touch brought back vivid memories of her brother. Martina's hands, accustomed to needlework and household chores, to the delicacy of fabrics, now clung to the cold metal with a new resolve, a determination that surprised even herself. If war had consumed her brother, if war threatened her mother and her city, then she would join it. Not out of loyalty to a king or a flag, not out of blind idealism, but out of the fury of survival, out of the memory of Juanjo burning in her chest, out of the love for her mother and her home burning in the streets. She would not seek revenge, not actively, but she would make sure that the blood of her people was not shed in vain, that every life had a purpose.

The silence he had kept for years, the silence of his grief, the silence of his resentment, was broken. His trench would not be made of earth and sandbags, but of silence, of cold, steely determination. She looked one last time at her mother, her face serene in her feverish sleep, her breathing growing weaker. "I'll be back, Mother," she whispered, her voice barely a thread, and she went out into the heat of battle, toward the fire and smoke. She would join the militiamen, not as a weak woman, but as a warrior forged by pain and loss, by love and rage. Joaquín had chosen his son. She chose her city. And in that choice, there was a bitter and undeniable similarity, an unbreakable force that united and separated them at the same time.

CHAPTER 8: THE STRATEGIST AND THE IRON

From the heights of Cruz del Coso, with the whitish glow of a frosty dawn staining the eastern horizon, General Cabañero contemplated Zaragoza as if it were a chessboard, a puzzle of narrow streets and improvised fortifications that he was about to unravel. His impassive blue eyes scanned the enemy positions with calculating coldness, anticipating every move of the defenders, every reaction. The frantic ringing of bells, which the artillery had silenced in other sectors with its relentless barrage, still vibrated in the frosty air, a metallic screech that added to the constant roar of cannons and rifles, the metronome of war.

"General, Ramón reports that the blacksmith has been 'encouraged'. The piece is in play. He has gone to the tunnel as ordered," said an aide, his voice barely audible above the din of battle, trembling with the tension that hung in the air at the command post.

Cabañero nodded, his eyes fixed on the smoke rising in spirals from the center of the city, drawing ghostly veils in the sky that heralded the devastation. "Good. Have Ramón make sure the orders are carried out to the letter. The tunnel must be a decisive surprise. Once it opens, liberal morale in that sector will break like a dry branch under a giant's foot. The resistance will crumble." His orders, precise and cold, brooked no reply; they were the law. The general knew that Ramón, forged in the same civil war, shared his fanatical zeal, although his, the

general's, was purely strategic, while Ramón's was fueled by personal loss and an unshakeable faith in the cause. He had planned every move for weeks, anticipating the rage and ferocity of the people of Zaragoza. He knew that Zaragoza would defend itself with the ferocity of a cornered beast, with the pride of centuries of resistance. That is why his strategy was one of suffocation, the systematic cutting of its veins, street by street, block by block, until it bled dry. The city was a living body, and he had begun by amputating its fingers, one by one, without mercy.

In a secluded alleyway, hidden behind a barricade of overturned carts, where the gunshots sounded like a distant echo, Ramón checked his men's rifles. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead, not only from physical exertion, but also from the tension that gnawed at him like a worm. Joaquín's face, the silent plea in his eyes, the image of Lucas, the boy, continued to burn his retina, an indelible stain on his conscience, a contradiction. The general's order had been clear: the tunnel. But the image of Lucas, Joaquín's son, in the hands of his own men in the Aljafería, was a thorn stuck in what remained of his humanity, a silent torture. The Carlist cause was his blood, his reason for being since he lost his own family in the siege of Morella, crushed by liberal fire. But to use a child... his fanatical loyalty clashed with a remnant of decency that refused to be completely extinguished, an ember of compassion.

He looked up when he saw one of his subordinates, the young Iñigo de Larraga, his face anxious, his rifle clenched in his hands, his eyes reflecting a mixture of enthusiasm and youthful terror. Iñigo's gaze, though steady, contained a mixture of idealism and fear that reminded Ramón of himself when he was young, of Juanjo, of all the young idealists who threw themselves into war with their hearts on their sleeves, blind to the cruelty that awaited them. "Lieutenant, prepare your men. The general is waiting for the signal. There is no room for error. Once the breach is opened, we will advance like a torrent, like the overflowing Ebro River, and take the city." Ramón looked at him, his eyes hardened by the conviction that had cost him everything. "Remember, Iñigo, victory for the cause is the only

redemption. For those who fell. For those who suffered in the sieges. For Morella, for all the cities that fell under the liberal yoke."

Meanwhile, Joaquín, swept up in the whirlwind of fire and gunpowder, advanced toward Santa María la Mayor, his wounded arm aching with every step. Ramón's orders were clear: *deactivate the reinforcements on the south wall of the tunnel and light a flare*. The tunnel, a narrow, dark passageway, had been used for years by smugglers and was known only to a few, including Joaquín, who had explored it in his youth. He knew that the barricade of rubble and beams blocking its entrance on the inside of the wall was fragile and improvised, but crucial to the defense of that sector. Deactivating the iron anchors that held those beams in place would open a fatal breach, a mortal wound. No one better than a blacksmith like him to know where to strike, which piece to pull out so that the scaffolding would collapse, to crumble the defense. The bitter irony burned his soul: his strength, his skill, always used to build, to repair, would now be the instrument of destruction. To save Lucas, he had to destroy Zaragoza.

The faint light of dawn filtered through the cracks in the buildings, revealing the silhouettes of young militiamen, like Iñigo de Larraga himself, fighting with desperate determination, their faces covered in soot. Joaquín saw them in the distance, boys who had occasionally worked in his smithy, carrying buckets of coal or helping him forge tools, now clutching muskets, their childish faces weathered by the urgency of battle, by the proximity of death. Iñigo represented pure loyalty to the city, a stark contrast to Joaquín's moral dilemma. Every shot he heard, every cry, was another weight on his conscience, an echo of his own betrayal.

The blacksmith entered the tunnel. The air was heavy, stale, the smell of wet earth mingling with that of gunpowder seeping through the cracks in the wall, a smell of confinement and death. Darkness enveloped him, an oppressive darkness that drowned out the sound of the battle outside, leaving him alone with his thoughts, with his demons. He could feel the dampness on the walls, the echo of his own slow, heavy footsteps, each one a burden. His mind was no longer weighing the moral dilemma; now it was focused on the execution, on

finding the crack, the fulcrum, the precise mechanics of destruction. He could not completely betray Zaragoza, surrender it without a fight. He had to find a way to carry out Ramón's order without slitting the city's throat, without being the executioner. But Lucas's life...

At the end of the tunnel, the barricade rose like a wall from a nightmare, a giant made of sandbags, wooden beams, loose stones, all improvised in the rush of desperation, the urgency of defense. In the dim light, Joaquín examined the joints, the points of tension, his blacksmith's eye analyzing every detail, every weak spot. His blacksmith's instinct told him where the weakest point was, the key piece that, when removed, would create a domino effect. A knot of despair tightened in his throat. The only way to simulate compliance with the order and, perhaps, create a distraction that would allow him to reach Lucas without a total massacre for the defenders, was to compromise the barricade, not destroy it completely. He would make it look like an accident, an unexpected weakness. He knew that the oak beam, anchored with two large wrought iron bolts, was the main nerve of the structure. If he cut one of the bolts with his sharp knife, weakening the joint, and then loosened the other with the iron bar he was carrying, the structure would not collapse completely at once. But it would give way spectacularly under the pressure of an assault, creating a false fissure that would attract the Carlists like flies to honey, a deadly deception.

With trembling but determined hands, Joaquín set to work. Not with noisy hammers, which would give away his methodical destruction, but with the edge of his knife and improvised levers, seeking to weaken the support points without completely knocking down the structure, but only enough. Time slipped through his fingers like fine sand. Every sound he made, every stone he moved, was a drumbeat in his chest, a warning of what was to come, of his son's life. The plan was uncertain, desperate, a knife's edge. But it was the only one. To create an opening that the Carlists could interpret as a breach, an opportunity, but one that would not guarantee their passage without a fierce fight. A distraction. A chance to escape with Lucas while chaos took over the tunnel.

Then, the flare. He took it out of his pocket, the cold, heavy powder cartridge. He had to light it at the mouth of the tunnel, a beacon of betrayal. It would be the signal, proof of his "compliance" with Ramón's order. He took a deep breath, the cold air stinging his lungs. There was no turning back. The choice was made, sealed with the sweat of his desperation and the echo of Isabel's blood and Lucas's scream. Hell awaited him.

CHAPTER 9: THE FIRE WAS NOT RED

The cold of the stone penetrated Lucas's bones, a chill he couldn't shake. Crouching on the floor of the Aljafería, in a dark corner of what looked like a guard room, his knees pressed against his chest, he felt the weight of darkness upon him. The footsteps of the Carlist soldiers, entering and leaving the adjoining room, echoed in his head like distant drums, each one a harbinger of terror. He had cried. He had screamed until his throat was dry and his voice broke into a thin thread. Now, only a silent tremor ran through his small body.

Hunger gnawed at his insides, an emptiness that added to his fear. A soldier had thrown him a piece of stale bread, but the image of his father, his face contorted as he was beaten, the heart-wrenching cry of "Lucas!" echoing in his ears, had taken away his appetite. The bread lay on the floor, a silent witness to his paralysis.

His eyes, large and dark as pools of calm water, rested on the small crack in the window. A reddish light filtered through it, a distant flame that stained the sky the color of blood. Fire. Lots of fire, like in his dream. He remembered his mother, her sweet voice singing lullabies by the fire, the protective warmth of her embrace. The fire in his house was orange, warm, familiar. But this fire, the one raging over Zaragoza, was not red. It was hell, a monster devouring houses and lives. He felt guilty. Guilty for not having been stronger, for not having been able to help his father, for not having escaped. In his childish imagination, the

battles he played with his toy soldiers always ended in victory, with brave heroes and defeated villains. But this battle, the real one, was different. It was ugly. It was unfair.

He tried to take refuge in those heroic fantasies that had so often saved him from boredom or sorrow. He imagined himself as a brave knight, with a shining sword, rescuing his father from the clutches of the Carlists. His father, the blacksmith, would be the king, and he, the prince, the savior. But the image of the soldier beating his father, Ramón's cruel gaze, dissolved the fantasy like fog in the sun. His own toy soldiers, which he had left forgotten in the smithy, now seemed insignificant, ridiculous. Real heroes were not made of lead, nor were they from stories. Real heroes fought with fear, with pain, with blood on their hands.

Suddenly, a distant shot rang out. Then another, and another, closer. The rattling of rifle fire, once a distant rumble, became clearer, more terrifying. The ground shook beneath his feet, a vibration that spread from the bowels of the earth to his small body. Bells. The bells from his dream. Not the sweet chime of mass, but a frantic, disorderly clamor, a cry of agony that spread throughout the city. Lucas curled up, his arms around his head, trying to cover his ears, trying to block out the sound of terror. He cried silently, hot tears streaming down his cheeks, mixing with the soot that covered his face. Fear was a poison that paralyzed his body, froze his blood.

He heard voices. Shouts. A growing chaos coming from the corridors, from the courtyards of the Aljafería. The soldiers guarding him, two men with thick beards and empty eyes, who had previously been absorbed in a game of cards, now jumped to their feet, their faces contorted with surprise. "What the hell is going on!" exclaimed one, his voice hoarse. The other peered over the threshold, his hand clenching his rifle, his gaze anxious.

Lucas did not look at them. His eyes remained fixed on the window, on the fire rising above Zaragoza. The fire was not red, it was not orange. It was an indefinable color, a spectrum of shadows and flames dancing in the sky, a monster devouring the city, life, innocence. The smell of burnt gunpowder seeped through the crack,

a stench of death that turned his stomach. He felt the coldness of abandonment, the certainty that his father would not come, that he was alone in this hell. What good were heroic fantasies if the hero did not arrive? What good was it to be brave if fear paralyzed him? He hid again, his head between his knees, his hands over his ears, wishing he could disappear, vanish into the darkness. The fire was not red. The fire was the color of his fear, the color of the war that had stolen his childhood, that had stolen his father, that had stolen everything from him.

CHAPTER 10: THE HEART OF THE LABYRINTH

The cold breath hit his face like an icy slap, but hell was already burning inside Joaquín with relentless fury. The three o'clock bell had fallen silent a long time ago, and now the silence felt heavy, broken only by the muffled echoes of the fighting in the streets of the city. Ramón hadn't lied. Dawn was approaching with its cruel light, and with it, the fatal deadline. Two hours, maybe less, to dismantle a vital part of Zaragoza's defense.

Joaquín lit the flare. Its reddish light, an eye of fire in the oppressive darkness of the tunnel, rose up the narrow passageway, visible from the outside, a beacon of false hope. It was the signal. The promise fulfilled, the first part of his diabolical plan. Then, with the contained fury of a cornered man, he lunged at the barricade, his hands moving with the precision of a craftsman but with the violence of a destroyer. He did not destroy it completely, but dismantled the key points he had identified, freeing the iron beams that supported it, creating a controlled fissure, a calculated weakness that could, in the heat of the assault, be interpreted as a gaping breach. It was a risky strategy, a silent prayer, a razor's edge over the abyss. He did not want Zaragoza to fall, but he needed Ramón to believe that his order had been obeyed without objection.

The sound of the partial collapse of the barricade, a dull roar of wood and debris, mingled with the thunder of the cannons outside, with the heat of the

battle intensifying. The Carlists, alerted by the flare and the din, did not hesitate. A lieutenant, with the Cross of Burgundy embroidered on his jacket, shouted an imperative order, his eyes shining with the promise of an easy victory. "This way! Advance! The breach is open! Glory to Charles V!" The Carlist tide, which a moment before had hesitated, now poured through the crack, unstoppable, blinded by bloodlust and the promise of a triumphant entry.

Joaquín made his way through the confusion in the tunnel, every nerve tense as a violin string, every breath an effort. The plan depended on surprise, on the chaos that the "breach" would generate, on the voracity of the enemy. His destination: the Aljafería, the Moorish fortress that the Carlists had turned into their headquarters, where Lucas was being held. It was madness, an assault on the heart of the beast, calculated suicide, but Lucas was there. There was no other option, none that his father's heart could contemplate.

He left the tunnel through a side alley, mingling with the people who were running, frightened, their faces white with terror, and the first groups of militiamen heading to the front with their smoking weapons. The air was saturated with screams and gunshots, a hellish symphony that served as camouflage, a protective veil. The Aljafería stood imposing and gloomy to the west of the city, its centuries-old walls silent witnesses to countless sieges, centuries of blood and battles.

Joaquín knew it well. He had been inside on other occasions, in times of peace, when it was a military prison or an arms depot. He remembered a service passageway that ran alongside the kitchens, barely guarded, connecting to the stables at the rear. It was a huge risk, a blind gamble, but the only one he could take. Time was slipping through his fingers like sand, every second an agony.

He ran through the side streets, the cobblestones slippery with moisture and blood, dodging overturned carts and lifeless bodies lying in the darkness. The sound of his own footsteps mingled with the distant echo of cannons and the crackling of fire. He slipped through an old archway, dark and covered in ivy, which led to the rear of the fortress, a passageway forgotten by many. The sentries

at the main gate would be focused on the assault on the breach, distracted by the chaos. Here, surveillance would be more lax. Or so his desperate heart hoped.

The passageway was narrow and smelled of dampness, stubble, and the rot of debris. He came to a small service door, closed with a simple iron bolt, worn by time. With the iron bar he carried, the same one he planned to use for the barricade, he pried open the lock with brutal effort. The metal gave way with a groan, the wood splintering. He slipped inside, his heart pounding, a drum in his temples.

The interior of the Aljafería was a labyrinth of gloomy corridors and silent courtyards, strangely oblivious to the chaos outside. He moved like a ghost, clinging to the shadows, every muscle tense, every sense sharpened, waiting for the slightest sign of danger. He heard voices. Laughter. It was the soldiers on guard, relaxed, confident in the security of the fortress, oblivious to the betrayal in the making. Ramón had said that Lucas would be held near the command room, in a visible place, so that Joaquín could see him if he returned, to torment him with his image.

A corridor opened onto a room, dimly lit by a brazier that cast dancing shadows. And there he was. Lucas. Sitting on the floor, his knees pressed against his chest, his large, glassy eyes lost in the void, his face contorted with fear. Two soldiers guarded him, absorbed in a game of cards, their rifles leaning against the wall, their guard relaxed. Lucas's face was pale, covered in soot, and a trickle of dried blood marked his lip, an innocent wound. He had cried. He had screamed. But now he was silent, in shock, petrified with terror.

A cold, controlled rage swept through Joaquín, more dangerous than any unbridled fury. There were two of them. He was tired, in pain, but his son's life was at stake. He slid down the corridor, creeping closer, each step measured, restrained. The crunch of a boot on a tiny pebble. One of the soldiers looked up, his eyes widening in surprise.

"Who goes there!"

Joaquín lunged. The rifle was raised, not to shoot, but as a club, a blunt and silent weapon. The butt crashed into the first soldier's skull with a dull, wet thud. The man fell without a sound, his lifeless body collapsing like a sack. The second soldier, stunned, tried to reach for his rifle, but Joaquín was faster, a wounded but deadly animal. He pounced on him, the sharp knife glinting in the dim light, reflecting the fire from the brazier. There was no time for mercy, no place for it. A quick, deep cut, a gush of warm blood. The man collapsed, his eyes wide open in silent terror, a scream caught in his throat. The smell of fresh blood filled the air, metallic and heavy.

Lucas, seeing the scene, let out a muffled groan. His eyes widened, fixed on his father's face, on the bloody knife in his hand, on the brutality of his love. A silent scream of pure horror escaped from his small throat, a sound that tore at Joaquín's heart. He didn't recognize him. Not the man he had killed to save him. Shock had taken control of the boy, paralyzing him.

Suddenly, a deep voice echoed in the hallway, metallic and full of rage. "Espés! I knew you would come! I knew your love for your blood would betray you!" Ramón.

Joaquín spun around, rifle raised, his arm bleeding. Ramón was there, limping, but with the gaze of a predator, his eyes burning with a mixture of anger and a strange sadness. He was not alone. A group of Carlist soldiers appeared in the corridor, their bayonets gleaming menacingly. His face, covered in soot and dried blood, was a mask of conviction and disappointment. "You never changed, Joaquín. Always choosing your own blood, your little world. Do you think you can run away from your oath? From your destiny? From the cause you abandoned?"

"My destiny is Lucas," Joaquín hissed, placing himself between his son and Ramón, his aching body a shield. "And my oath is to protect him. Not your cause. Not you. My oath is older than any king."

Ramón smiled bitterly, a cruel grimace. "Then it's time for you to pay. For the blood you've spilled. For mine, in Vizcaya. For Juanjo! Get him! Make him pay for his betrayal!"

The soldiers advanced, their footsteps echoing in the corridor. Joaquín fired his rifle, a deafening bang in the room. A soldier fell, with a cry. The shock of the shot freed a corner of Lucas's mind, a glimmer of hope. "Dad!" he shouted, his voice a thread.

"Run, Lucas! Through the kitchen passageway! Now! Run, son!" Joaquín ordered, his voice rough with desperation. The boy, still trembling but galvanized by the instinct for survival, threw himself toward the passageway, a small bundle of terror disappearing into the darkness. Joaquín took cover, firing again, buying time, his blood boiling. A sharp pain burned his arm, the flesh torn by an impact. A bullet. He fell to his knees, the rifle slipping from his fingers, his vision blurred. Ramón lunged forward, bayonet fixed, his face contorted with rage.

"To the Aljafería! Get them!" came a thunderous cry from outside, a war cry that echoed through the courtyards of the fortress, taking the Carlists by surprise. The Liberals, taking advantage of the confusion at the tunnel breach, had launched a counterattack towards the Aljafería, believing that the Carlist command was concentrated there. Chaos reigned, a godsend for Joaquín.

Ramón hesitated for a moment, his face contorted with rage and helplessness. The priority of the command was the defense of the fortress, not personal revenge. "Retreat! Defend the walls! The enemy is upon us!" he shouted, driven by urgency, his men running toward the battlements. He looked at Joaquín, lying on the ground, bleeding, with a promise of death in his eyes. "This isn't over, Espés. It's not over. When Zaragoza falls, or when peace returns, I'll come for you, for your son." He turned and disappeared with his men, swept away by the tide of battle, leaving Joaquín wounded but alive.

Joaquín struggled to his feet, his arm dripping blood, the pain stabbing him with every movement. The pain was intense, but rage gave him strength, an animal fury. Limping, he threw himself down the passageway, Lucas's scream

still echoing in his ears, his only compass. He found him crouched in a dark corner, trembling, his small shoulders shaking. He hugged him tightly, feeling the warmth of his little body, his heartbeat against his own. "It's okay, son. We're together. We're safe. I've got you." But as he looked at his son, he saw in his eyes not only terror, but a new darkness, the shadow of his father's actions, the brutality of his love. Freedom had a price, and Lucas had just paid a part of it, a part of his innocence.

CHAPTER 11: THE FAKE GAP AND THE RIVER OF FIRE

The clamor of the Aljafería faded behind them, but the hell of Zaragoza burned more intensely, a fire that spread from street to street. Joaquín, with Lucas pressed against his chest, his small body trembled to the rhythm of the cannon fire now closer, which seemed to explode in his own guts. His wounded arm ached with a constant throbbing, a pain that kept him anchored to reality, but adrenaline and desperation kept him on his feet, an automaton driven by a father's love. They had escaped from the lion's den, from the Aljafería, but now they were in the heart of the slaughterhouse, in the raw flesh of the city. The air had become thick with the smell of gunpowder and the screams of the dying, a stench of death that permeated every fiber of his being.

The inner barricade of the tunnel, his ingenious trap, had completely disintegrated under the pressure of the Carlist advance. The enemy torrent, once a tide contained by Joaquín's strategy, was now an overflowing river, engulfing everything in its path through the Santa María la Mayor sector. But Joaquín's trap was not a clean breach; it was a bloody funnel. The narrow passageways and rubble forced the Carlists to enter one by one, making them easy targets for the desperate liberal defense that had converged there, the militiamen firing from every window, from every rooftop.

"This way! To the rifles! Staggered retreat! Don't let them flank us!" Ramón's voice, desperate but firm, tried to impose order on the chaos that had broken out, a barely concealed tension on his face covered in sweat and soot, his eyes full of rage and frustration. Joaquín saw him, with difficulty, in the distance, directing a handful of militiamen who were firing desperately before retreating, taking cover behind every wall, every gap, every shadow. Their eyes met for a fleeting moment. There was no surprise in Ramón's gaze, but rather a bitter confirmation of what he had always feared about Espés: a betrayal that did not need to be intentional to be lethal, a sacrifice that he, Ramón, would never have tolerated. A cold, contained rage covered his face, a silent promise of revenge.

A Carlist, his face covered in soot and his eyes wide with terror and adrenaline, lunged at the gap with a bayonet drawn. He stumbled over a fallen body, groaning in pain, and fired his musket into the air, the deafening roar so close that Lucas cowered even further into his father's arms. Joaquín squeezed Lucas close and dove headfirst down a side alley, slipping on the cobblestones wet with blood and mud, the smell of iron and earth. He heard the cries of "Long live Carlos V!" echoing with a premature but undeniable victory in their sector, unaware that they were sinking into a deadly trap. Each shout was another nail in the coffin of his conscience, but he couldn't afford to stop, not with Lucas in his arms, his small body an anchor. The child was his compass, the only anchor in the shipwreck of his soul.

Calle Mayor, once a safe and bustling corridor, had become an open battlefield, a river of fire and steel. The liberals, outnumbered and taken by surprise, were forced to retreat, fighting house by house, barricade by barricade. Women and children poured out of their homes, some fleeing in panic, others seeking refuge in the nearest doorways, their faces reflecting pure terror and despair. It was the face of Zaragoza, and Joaquín felt the weight of every tear, every scream, every life lost.

As they ran, they came across a group of Carlist soldiers, exhausted, their uniforms torn, their faces blackened by smoke and gunpowder, their eyes empty.

They did not have the fanatical gleam of those advancing at the heart of the breach. Their eyes were sunken, filled with a weariness that bordered on despair, on desperation. One of them, a young man barely seventeen years old, his skin pale beneath the soot, dropped his rifle to the ground with a thud, his hands trembling. His gaze met Joaquín's, a moment of silent recognition. "No more," he murmured, his voice broken, a thread of lament. "This is not a war, it is a massacre. I can't... I can't keep killing these people." He turned and disappeared down an alley, his figure blurring in the fog, a deserter. Others followed him, deserting silently, their footsteps like echoes of a fractured conscience, of a broken faith. Morale was beginning to falter even among the Carlist ranks, the fire of the initial assault diluted in the nightmare of street fighting, in the futility of bloodshed. Joaquín's false breach was taking its toll on both sides, in lives and souls.

Joaquín and Lucas crossed the Plaza de San Felipe, which had become a hell of smoking barricades and fallen bodies, a brutal testimony to the fighting. The church, its facade once pristine, was now riddled with bullet holes, its bells silent in the face of so much death. They had to climb over a pile of rubble, dodging an overturned cart that was slowly burning, its wood creaking mournfully. Lucas, in his father's arms, coughed violently, his little lungs irritated by the smoke and dust, his body shaking with each explosion. Joaquín's arm was bleeding more profusely, soaking his sleeve, but he couldn't stop, not with Lucas's life in his hands.

He saw Martina. She was behind a makeshift barricade of overturned carts, her rifle smoking, firing with cold, deadly precision. Her dark hair had come loose, framing a tense face marked by fear and rage, by the despair of loss. For a moment, their eyes met again, and this time, instead of bitterness, Joaquín read raw despair, a silent reproach that pierced through the din of battle, more hurtful than any bullet. She had seen the breach, had felt the enemy's surge. She knew. She knew that he had caused it, that he had opened it. There was no time for explanations. There would be no forgiveness. Joaquín looked away, his chest tight with old and renewed pain, a lump in his throat, and dove into a dark doorway, looking for a passageway that would allow him to leave the main line of combat, out of

Martina's sight. Lucas clung to him, his breath heavy on his father's neck, his small body a weight that anchored him. "Dad, what's going on? Where are we going?" his voice, a trembling thread, barely audible above the pandemonium. "Nothing, son. Nothing. It'll pass. We'll be safe," Joaquín lied, knowing that the truth was that he had just surrendered his city for him, that his freedom was Lucas's, and Lucas's alone. And in the darkness of the doorway, Zaragoza bled, brick by brick, life by life, for his only choice, for his unconditional love. The cost of survival became incalculable, burned into his soul.

CHAPTER 12: THE VOICE OF THE YOUNG

The smoke burned his eyes, but Íñigo de Larraga did not blink. His eyes, red and bright, scanned the street, his mind feverish, his body in constant tension. His voice, hoarse from the effort, echoed above the incessant rattling of rifles, a youthful but determined battle cry. "Hold the line! Don't let them past San Felipe! For Zaragoza! For those who fell!" His fists gripped the butt of his musket with desperate force, his knuckles white. The smell of gunpowder was so thick you could almost chew it, mingling with the sweet stench of blood and fear that permeated every cobblestone, every building.

A moment of terror paralyzed him, taking his breath away. The young militiaman beside him, a boy named Pedro, not much older than himself, with whom he had shared jokes and dreams of a better future, fell to the ground with a muffled groan. Blood spurted from his chest, staining his shirt a dark, spreading red, a macabre stain that grew rapidly. His eyes, filled with an idealism that Íñigo knew well, remained fixed on the smoky sky, lifeless. Pedro had been the first of his squad to fall, the first to fall under his command, the first friend he had lost in the heat of battle. Guilt pierced him like a bayonet, sharp and cold.

"Pedro! No!" Íñigo rushed forward, desperately trying to stop the bleeding, his hands clumsy with panic, but it was useless. The body was already cold, life extinguished like a candle. War was not like the history books, it was not like

the grandiloquent speeches of politicians, nor like patriotic songs. It was this. Senseless death, the cold body of a friend who had been laughing moments before. The idealism that had driven him, that had led him to challenge Joaquín, cracked like broken glass, his innocence crumbling. His vision of glory, of the cause, faded into a haze of pain and rage.

The Carlists, driven by the "breach" they believed to be a victory, advanced like an uncontrollable tide through the street, their cries echoing with wild euphoria. One group took cover behind an overturned cart, their silhouettes advancing through the side streets like specters. The most senior officer at his side, his face bloodied by a scratch, staggered and fell, shouting an incomprehensible order before passing out. Iñigo did not hesitate. The pain for Pedro turned into a cold, controlled fury, a whirlwind of determination. "Concentrate fire on the cart! Don't let them advance! Those with shotguns, take cover, to the flanks! Don't give them an inch!" His decision, a flash of instinctive strategy, galvanized the men, who responded with a burst of gunfire. It wasn't Joaquín the blacksmith who was there to guide him with his veteran experience, it was Zaragoza herself whispering strength, the rage of survival, the need to protect what was hers.

The memory of Joaquín, his former teacher, assailed him amid the chaos, like a ghost in his mind. He had seen him before, in the street, with Martina, and then he had heard the crash in the tunnel. The blacksmith's look of despair, the way he had shot the Carlist soldier, and then, the breach. The wave of Carlists pouring through Santa María la Mayor. For Iñigo, the connection was obvious, painful, undeniable. The blacksmith had opened the gates. He had chosen his son, and in doing so, he had put Zaragoza, all of them, at risk.

Iñigo's admiration for Joaquín, the debt he felt for his teachings in the forge, for the knowledge he had passed on to him, had been transformed into something more complex, more contradictory. He respected Joaquín's brute strength, his protective instinct, his skill with iron and weapons. But his youthful idealism, freshly stained by Pedro's blood, could not comprehend the sacrifice of an entire city for a single life, however precious it might be. For Iñigo, Pedro's life, the life

of every man and woman fighting in the streets, was as valuable as Lucas's. And Joaquín had betrayed that loyalty. He had made a choice, and his choice had caused suffering.

Iñigo's voice rose again, this time with unshakeable authority, forged in blood and loss, in the pain of battle. "Advance! Retreat, but do not give an inch! Let them feel the iron of Zaragoza!" The city was bleeding, yes, but it resisted with relentless fury. And he, Iñigo, was part of that resistance, the voice of the young people who knew nothing of the old war, the old loyalties, who knew only the here and now, the fury of defending their home, their land. The Carlists retreated under concentrated fire, under the determination of the people of Zaragoza. The tide was beginning to turn. The Cincomarzada would not be the date of defeat, but of rebirth. And Iñigo, the boy who had defied his master, was there to witness it, his heart bleeding, but his spirit tempered in the fire of battle, a new blacksmith forging his own identity.

CHAPTER 13: THE CITY THAT BLEEDS AND RESISTS

The tolling of the bells of La Seo, which a moment before had been a funeral lament, now rose in an angry and insistent clamor, a cry of defiance that echoed through every alleyway. It was not a call to prayer, but a battle cry, a desperate signal that ran through the streets like a fever, a fever of resistance and pride. Joaquín, huddled next to Lucas in the dark hollow of a shattered doorway, felt the vibration in the ground, in his bones, and in the constant trembling of his son, who was still breathing heavily and sobbing silently. The nearby explosions had subsided, replaced by a more sustained chorus of gunfire, closer now, and with a rhythm that was not that of a retreat. It was the rhythm of a resistance that refused to die.

The dawn, which should have brought the frozen silence of defeat, instead brought the furious breath of a city that refused to be defeated, rising from its ashes. From his hiding place, Joaquín saw shadows moving with renewed urgency. They were not only the dark silhouettes of the Carlists who a moment before had roamed freely, seeking booty and easy victory; now they were mixed with other figures, armed with whatever they could find: old hunting rifles, rusty sabers, even blacksmith's or carpenter's tools. Women with their skirts lifted, barefoot men, all seemed to converge on the points where the Carlist advance had been

deepest, where the wound was bleeding most profusely. The fury of Zaragoza, dormant due to the surprise of the attack, had awakened with a primal roar.

An explosion, more powerful than the previous ones, shook the air, and the guttural cries of falling men flooded the momentary silence that followed, a silence broken only by the moans of the wounded. Pieces of masonry fell from nearby facades, and dust invaded everything, blinding the eyes. Joaquín pressed Lucas against him, covering his head with his hand, feeling every tremor of the child. The boy was no longer crying, only emitting small gasps, like a wounded animal, his face marked by the horror of the Aljafería, an indelible scar on Joaquín's soul. "Hang on, son. Hang on a little longer. This is ending," Joaquín whispered, his voice hoarse, barely audible above the growing pandemonium.

A few streets away, Iñigo de Larraga, with the taste of blood and dust in his mouth, felt his musket burning in his hands, hot from constant use, his body exhausted but his spirit unbreakable. "Hold the line! Don't let them past San Felipe! For Zaragoza!" His voice, torn by the effort, cut through the noise of the gunfire, a war cry. A group of Carlists advanced, taking cover behind an overturned cart, but now they moved with desperate slowness, their movements hesitant. Iñigo had seen the fear in their eyes, the doubt, the exhaustion. He had seen some of them, scattered, throw down their weapons and run, fleeing from a battle that was turning against them, that was devouring them. The concentrated fire of the militiamen, the fierce resistance from every street, every window, every rooftop, was beginning to break the Carlists' morale, to crumble their will. The most senior officer at his side, his face covered in blood, had fallen. Iñigo did not hesitate, and his decision, a flash of instinctive strategy, galvanized the men. It was not the blacksmith Joaquín who was there to guide him, it was Zaragoza itself whispering strength and the rage of survival into his ear.

Meanwhile, Martina, slender and determined, ran through an alley near Joaquín's doorway, leading a group of women carrying baskets of ammunition and assisting the wounded, her steps firm despite the danger. Her face, marked by gunpowder, sweat, and the loss of Juanjo, was that of a sorrowful virgin, but

with an indomitable ferocity in her eyes, a steely determination. Her fleeting gaze met his. There was no hatred, as he had expected, nor reproach, but a cold, bitter understanding that weighed heavier on him than any insult or accusation. A look that said: *I understand your choice, the desperation that drove you, but there is no place for it here, among us. There is no forgiveness, only the harshness of survival.* The bond between them, what little remained, had been severed forever, pulverized by war.

The fighting intensified. The bells did not cease, their tolling a constant reminder of the hours that were slipping away and the decisions that were being sealed with blood. Cincomarzada, the date the Carlists had chosen for their coup de grâce, became the date of Zaragoza's furious rebirth, a symbol of its invincibility. And Joaquín, the blacksmith with hands stained by ambiguous loyalty, watched it all from the exile of his own decision. His son was safe, yes. But victory, if it came, would not be his.

General Cabañero, on the other side of the makeshift barricade, must have realized that his surprise attack had failed miserably. Reports piled up on his command table, each one gloomier than the last, each word a stab at his pride. The false breach in the tunnel, instead of being a fast track to victory, had become a quagmire of blood and steel, a death trap. The lightning attack that was supposed to crush the resistance before dawn had turned into a nightmare of street fighting, a quagmire. His orders, once concise and decisive, were now punctuated with palpable frustration, a bitter acknowledgment of the approaching defeat. The Carlists, demoralized by the tenacity of the Zaragoza forces, by the losses suffered in the trap tunnel, and by the exhaustion that crept into their bones, began to falter, to hesitate. The retreat, slow at first, became faster, more chaotic, a disorganized flight. It was not a complete flight, but neither was it an orderly retreat. It was the surrender of a victory they had believed certain, a triumph that was slipping through their fingers.

Joaquín watched as the Carlist forces dissolved into the distance, their Bourbon banners blurring in the smoke and shadows of a day that was now fully upon

them, revealing the devastation. The battle was not over, but the decisive moment had passed, victory had swung in Zaragoza's favor. The city had resisted. It had done so without him, or worse, despite him, despite his "betrayal." Silence began to creep into the dawn, a terrifying silence that replaced the roar of gunpowder. But it was not peace. It was the echo of the massacre, the gasp of an exhausted and bloodied city that, with great difficulty, remained standing, covered in scars, but undefeated. Lucas, still clinging on, broke the silence with a muffled sob. Joaquín hugged him tighter, feeling the small body tremble. Lucas was safe. That was all that mattered. But in Joaquín's soul, victory had the bitter taste of remorse, the ashes of a city that had saved his son, but which he had left unprotected, or worse, wounded by his own hands. There was no joy in him, only the weight of his choices. And the knowledge that, although Zaragoza had won, he had lost every thing.

CHAPTER 14: THE ASHES OF HOME

The sun was already high, promising no warmth but revealing the harshness of the devastation. Its harsh light spilled over a canvas of smoke and debris, each ray a dagger piercing the veil of night to expose the magnitude of the open wound in the city. The air, once thick with the roar of cannons and the echo of rifles, now carried the sour stench of ash, lime, and gunpowder, mixed with a metallic hint that tasted of dried blood, of recent death. Joaquín, with Lucas clinging to his neck like a small castaway to a broken mast, barely noticed the morning chill in his bones. Fatigue was a heavy shroud that enveloped him, but the shivering warmth of his son's tiny body, his agitated breathing on the back of his neck, was his only anchor in that newly cooled hell, his only reason to go on.

They had reached what was left of their street. The blacksmith's shop was an open mouth of broken bricks and splintered wood, its roof caved in, its walls perforated by gunfire. His forge, the heart of his life, was a tomb of twisted iron and soot, silent and dead. The home they had left hours ago, the place where the anvil had sung its constant melody of work and life, where the family had been forged, was now a smoldering pile of memories and broken promises. The blow was silent, deeper than any explosion, more painful than any physical wound. His breath caught in his throat. His gaze was lost in the wreckage of what had been his life, and for a moment, the horror of the last five hours paled before the emptiness

he felt, before the irretrievable loss. The hammer he had held in his hand when he confronted Ramón was buried under a mound of broken tiles and charred wood, a symbol of his powerlessness. Lucas, his face still buried in his father's shoulder, murmured something unintelligible, a dry sob that was not quite a cry, but a trace of terror running through him. Joaquín held him closer, feeling every tiny rib, every erratic breath, every tremor of the child. The boy hadn't spoken since he had rescued him from the Aljafería. When he opened his eyes, they had the glassy stare of someone who had seen too much, who had witnessed the beast within man and the brutality of the world. War, like an invisible tattoo, had marked Lucas forever. And he, his father, had been the one who had dragged him there, who had exposed him.

People began to emerge from their makeshift shelters, ghosts rising from the catacombs of their basements and doorways. Their faces were masks of relief and horror, a mixture of joy at survival and desolation at loss. But when their eyes fell on Joaquín, the relief contracted into a grimace of suspicion, of mistrust. Heads turned, whispers rose like smoke from the ruins, each word a dart in his conscience, each syllable a judgment. "The blacksmith from Espés," "the one who was with them, with the Carlists," "they saw him... coming out of the tunnel, clearing the way," "our people saved his son, not him, not because of him." The city had resisted, it had won, but Joaquín Espés was not part of that triumph, of that glory. He was an outcast, a specter, an indelible stain. There were no formal accusations, no one pointed a finger at him directly, but the truth hung in the air like the soot from the burned houses, thick and inescapable, suffocating. Every silence, every sidelong glance, was a sentence heavier than any shackle, colder than any cell.

A group of men, with smoking rifles in their hands and soot-stained faces, passed close to him, their eyes tired. One of them, a young man who couldn't hold his gaze, spat on the ground before quickening his pace, a gesture of pure contempt. Joaquín clenched his fists, rage mixed with a pang of self-loathing and a deep shame that burned his cheeks. He had chosen his own flesh and blood above

all else. And now, the price was revealed in the desolation of his home and the rejection of the city he had bled so much to defend, a city that now spewed him out. His personal victory was a collective defeat, his salvation a condemnation.

Among the rubble, he saw Martina. She wasn't far away, coordinating a group of women and a few men who were removing bodies and assisting the wounded, her figure upright and strong. Her face, covered in soot and sweat, was that of a sorrowful virgin, but with an indomitable ferocity in her eyes, a steely determination forged in loss. Their eyes met. In hers there was no longer anger, but a well of exhaustion and a blood-curdling understanding, a bitter acceptance. She had understood his choice, yes. And she had forgiven him, in a way, for her son's sake. But that understanding was a wall higher than any barricade, more impassable than any rampart. The bond between them, broken years ago, was now pulverized, turned to dust and ashes. Not even an echo of what they once were remained. Only two strangers united by the tragedy of the same home, the same city, which burned between them, consuming them.

A little further away, Iñigo de Larraga, his uniform torn and his face pale with fatigue, helped organize the improvised defenses, his movements slow and heavy. His young eyes, once filled with the admiration of a debtor, rested on Joaquín. There was not the same agonizing compassion as Martina's. There was relief, yes, at seeing Lucas safe, a debt paid. But there was also a deep, inescapable disappointment, a sadness mixed with exhaustion and the pain of loss. In her pupils, Joaquín read the unspoken question, the silent judgment: *Was one life, however precious, worth more than the suffering of so many, than the open wound of an entire city, than Pedro's blood?* For Iñigo, the young soldier who had sworn allegiance to Zaragoza with the blood of his friends, the answer was obvious. And for Joaquín, so was the condemnation.

In the Plaza del Portillo, Ramón, sweaty and covered in soot, was organizing a group of men, his orders dry and sharp. When he looked up and saw him, his eyes were filled with cold conviction and barely contained rage, an icy fire. The strong embrace they had shared hours earlier in the mountains of Vizcaya, the

recognition of his past bravery, had vanished in the smoke of battle. There was no trace of it in the steely gaze he now directed at him. Ramón said nothing. It wasn't necessary. His silence was more eloquent than any words, a tacit sentence, the end of a brotherhood, the end of a friendship that had lasted decades. It was the condemnation of the man who had delivered his son to his death. Joaquín looked down, ashamed, humiliated. He felt like an impostor, an intruder in this victorious and wounded Zaragoza, which he had abandoned in its darkest hour.

Zaragoza, the warrior, the undefeated, was awakening from her nightmare, wounded and bruised, but still breathing, a giant rising. And he, Joaquín Espés, was breathing with her, but not *in* her. He got up with difficulty, his back aching, his muscles stiff from the effort and the pain in his arm. Lucas was still asleep, oblivious to the cataclysm around him, his head resting on his father's shoulder, a small bundle of life in the midst of death. Joaquín felt the weight of the child, the warmth of his small body, as the only real weight still worth carrying, the only treasure he had left. Everything else was gone. He looked around. Some neighbors were beginning to appear, ghosts with soot-smeared faces, removing debris, searching for their loved ones, mourning their losses. The soldiers, liberals and Carlists, were retreating or being picked up. The cannons fell silent. The Cincomarzada was over. And for Joaquín, another battle had begun, a silent one, without gunpowder or steel, but just as devastating, an internal war.

He walked through the streets, a sea of rubble and broken silence. The smell of burnt gunpowder mingled with the acrid stench of blood and smoke from the charred houses. The city, breathing again, did so without him. The bells, which had tolled his despair and defiance, were now silent, leaving a deafening void that cried out for a new identity, one that Joaquín would not share, one that did not belong to him.

"Dad... home..." whispered Lucas, his voice barely a whisper, his face still pale and sleepy. Joaquín felt a pang of pain grip his heart. "There is no home, son. Not for now. But we'll be together. Always together." The promise sounded hollow even to him, like an echo in an empty well, a white lie. How could he protect

Lucas from the stigma that would hang over them like a perpetual shadow? How could he erase from the boy's eyes the horror he had witnessed, or from his own soul the decision that had saved him but at the same time condemned him?

He turned down a side street, looking for a corner where they could be safe from prying eyes, at least for a moment, a respite. The destruction was total in some areas, the buildings torn open like rag dolls, revealing their shattered insides, their lives exposed. A woman wept over a pile of rubble, her cries lost in the air, echoes of thousands of similar losses. Joaquín quickened his pace, feeling the oppression of so much foreign misery, which was also his own, but which he had no right to lament aloud, he could not show his pain.

He looked at Lucas's sleeping face, his little hand still clutching his shirt, a fragile anchor. That was his anchor. That was the reason for everything. The price was the city, his identity, his past. The price was his soul. Zaragoza had vomited him out, and he had let himself be expelled, like a foreign body that the living organism could not assimilate. He was not a hero, not even a complete villain; he was just a man who had chosen the blood of his blood, unconditional love, and now he wandered through the ashes of his own life, a ghost in a city that was reborn without him. And he knew that this condemnation was harder than any bullet, colder than any grave. He would be an outcast, an uncomfortable memory, erased from the history that would be told. The memory of Zaragoza would be glorious, but his, Joaquín Espés, would be silence, oblivion. His blacksmith's shop was not the only thing the fire had consumed. He had consumed himself in the process, his spirit, his identity.

CHAPTER 15: WALLS DON'T FORGET

The sun rose fully, an indifferent disc of fire over the wounded city. Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, dragging on with agonizing slowness. The stench of gunpowder gave way to that of lime and human effort, to the promise of reconstruction. Zaragoza, like a stubborn beast, began to lick its wounds, to rebuild its broken bones with iron determination, raising new walls on the ashes of the old ones. Facades rose again, rubble became foundations, and the noise of hammers and saws replaced that of cannons, a new concert, a new life. But in the darkest alleys, in the elusive glances, in the silence that enveloped him like an icy shroud, Joaquín knew that his condemnation was as real as the rubble of his old smithy.

His hammer, which he had carefully unearthed from the charred remains of his former life, no longer struck the anvil with the same cheerful cadence, with the same force. His smithy was destroyed, a charred skeleton, and no one, absolutely no one, came to ask him for work. He tried to offer his services at other forges, carpentry workshops, anywhere where his hard, skilled hands could be useful, where he could earn his bread. But the response was always the same, silent and cutting like the edge of a freshly sharpened knife. A nod of the head, a sidelong glance, a "sorry, Espés, but we don't have room right now" that sounded like a cheap excuse, a veiled rejection. His reputation, his ambiguous loyalty, his

"betrayal," had spread through the city like a plague, tainting his name. He was the blacksmith who had betrayed, the one who had opened the breach, the one who had chosen his own people over Zaragoza. He was an outcast, and the city walls, as they were rebuilt, rose up against him too, higher and stronger than ever.

Lucas, always by his side, a little shadow, had regained his voice, but not the full joy of childhood. The nights were still torment, a battlefield in his own mind. He still woke with a start of terror, his small eyes, wide and vacant, searching for his father's face in the darkness, the only familiar figure in his nightmare. The images of the Aljafería, the fallen soldier, his father's knife, were burned into his memory, an invisible but indelible tattoo. When Joaquín held the bread over the fire to warm it one autumn morning, Lucas instinctively recoiled, whispering, "No, Dad. It's burning. It smells like burning. It smells like that." He didn't look at him. He just lifted the blanket and hid under it, seeking refuge in the darkness. Joaquín, for his part, never slept again without the echo of cannons in his dreams, without Martina's silent reproach and Iñigo's bitter disappointment. The scars of war were not only on the outside of the city, but also in the souls of its inhabitants.

The school, which Lucas had tried to attend again, became another silent but equally cruel battlefield. The other children looked at him with curiosity at first, then with innocent but hurtful hostility. "Your father is a Carlist," a boy snapped at him one day, pushing him in the schoolyard. "He wanted our people to die. He opened the door." Lucas returned home with torn clothes, scraped knees, and eyes full of unshed tears, his little soul wounded. "I don't want to go, Dad," he had murmured, his voice trembling, barely a thread of lament. "They don't want me there. They say I'm a traitor, like you."

Joaquín hugged him tightly, feeling the weight of his own guilt, the echo of Isabel's words. He had saved his son, yes. But he had condemned him to a life of marginalization, to be the shadow of his father's betrayal, to carry the weight of a choice that was not his. His promise to Isabel, to protect Lucas from the war, now felt like a cruel irony. He had saved him from bullets, but not from words, not from looks, not from the story that was being woven around him.

They wandered through the outskirts of the city, through the small nearby villages, looking for odd jobs, always in the shadows, always avoiding inquisitive glances, silent accusations. One day, he heard a rumor in a remote tavern: General Cabañero, repelled from Zaragoza, had sworn to return with more force, with more men, seeking revenge. But for Joaquín, that external war no longer mattered. His most important battle, that of the survival of his soul and that of his son, was fought in the silences, in the whispers, in the daily routine of rejection, in daily survival.

One afternoon, as he watched Lucas playing alone in an abandoned lot, chasing butterflies, the afternoon wind stirred up the dust and misery of their lives, carrying away the last vestiges of hope. The city, with its rebuilt walls and restored pride, stood imposingly before him, a monument to resistance. But for them, there was no place. The idea, once just a whisper, became a silent cry in his mind, an urgent need. What if they left? Leave Zaragoza, the city that had seen him born and now rejected him, that had expelled him? Seek a new beginning in some remote village in the mountains, where no one knew his story, where Lucas could grow up without the weight of his name, without the shadow of his father?

The question was an anvil in his chest, a painful but necessary decision. To give up his land, the memory of Isabel whom he had loved so much, the little that remained of his past. But Lucas's face, pale and lonely, was worth any sacrifice, any exile. "We have to go, son," he whispered, his voice barely audible, barely a breath. "Far away from here. Where no one knows anything. Where we can be free." Lucas looked up, his eyes wide and surprised, a spark of hope dancing in them. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance in this new exile, a chance to forge a future, far from the walls that did not forget, far from the words that condemned. Leaving was his last and only freedom.

CHAPTER 16: THE NAMELESS HEROES

Weeks had turned into months, and Zaragoza's pulse, though scarred, was beating strongly once again. The smell of lime and plaster, of new wood, slowly replaced that of gunpowder. But for Joaquín, the external reconstruction was a cruel mockery of the inner desolation. He returned to what was left of his blacksmith's shop, a charred skeleton, and set about clearing away the rubble, trying to straighten the twisted iron with his own hands, a futile act of love. No customers came, no voices called out to him. The looks he received, when not openly contemptuous, were of an indifference that hurt even more, a forgetfulness that condemned him to isolation. He was the ghost of a war that the city wanted to bury, the reminder of an uncomfortable choice.

Lucas, thin and silent, still carried the weight of war in his eyes. In the square, where other children played hopscotch or ball, Lucas sat alone, tracing figures in the dust with a stick, a little outcast in a world he did not yet understand. One day, a group of older children approached, their voices sharp and cruel as needles. "Look at the traitor's son!" one shouted. "His father wanted us all killed!" They threw small, harmless stones, but each one was a dart to Lucas's heart. The boy cowered, his arms over his head, tears streaming silently down his face.

Suddenly, a familiar figure stepped in. Iñigo de Larraga, still wearing his worn militia uniform, a glint of exhaustion in his young eyes, stood in front of the

children. "Leave him alone! He's not to blame for anything!" His voice was firm, authoritative, that of a man who had seen war up close. The children scattered, surprised by the intervention.

Iñigo crouched down next to Lucas, his face serious. He held out a hand to help him up. "You're okay, kid. Don't listen to them." Lucas nodded, his voice still a trembling thread, his eyes fixed on the ground. Iñigo patted him on the shoulder, a mixture of compassion and resignation. When he stood up, his gaze met that of Joaquín, who was watching the scene from the shadow of a doorway. Iñigo's eyes were a well of ambiguity. He had defended the son of his former teacher, yes. He had protected innocence. But in his gaze, Joaquín also read the shadow of Pedro, the fallen friend, the sacrifice of the city, and the inevitable question: *Was this enough? Was an act of decency enough to erase the stain, to forgive the choice that had put Zaragoza on a knife's edge?* Iñigo did not speak. He only nodded his head, a sign of bitter respect, and walked away, leaving them alone with the weight of his silence.

Joaquín felt a twinge in his chest. Iñigo, the young idealist who had admired his teacher, now looked at him with a mixture of respect and disappointment, a half-hearted forgiveness that was almost more painful than condemnation.

The afternoon stretched on, and Joaquín's desolation was palpable. He sat down on a pile of rubble, his head in his hands, feeling the cold of the stone. His hammer, which had been his voice, his identity, now lay silent on the ground, useless. Lucas approached, his small hand in hers, a silent anchor.

"Joaquín Espés." The voice, deep and soft, brought him out of his lethargy. Martina. Her slender, strong figure stood out against the evening light. She was dressed in simple clothes, stained with lime and dirt, but her face, though furrowed with fatigue, radiated a new strength, a silent determination. In her hands, she held a bouquet of medicinal herbs she had gathered for her mother.

Joaquín looked up, his eyes tired. He expected reproach, another condemnation, but Martina did not look at him with hatred. Her eyes, once filled with rage and contempt, were now a well of icy understanding, an acceptance that disarmed

him. "Your smithy is destroyed," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "And your name, they say, is too. The heroes of Zaragoza have been others. They don't name you in the songs. There are no plaques for you in the square."

Joaquín did not respond. Martina's words were daggers, but not daggers of rage, rather of a raw, inescapable truth. He was not a hero. He was a broken man, an outcast.

Martina took a step closer, her eyes fixed on Joaquín's, a gaze that pierced his soul. "I saw you, Joaquín," she said, her voice even lower. "I saw you in the street, rifle in hand. I saw you fight that Carlist. And I saw you when the breach opened." Her gaze fell on Lucas, who was clinging to his father's hand. "I understand. I understand your choice. The desperation that drove you. The promise that bound you." She paused, and Joaquín felt his heart shrink. "I don't forgive you, Joaquín. Juanjo's blood, my mother's pain, the suffering of this city... it's too deep to be forgiven with a word. But..." His voice became a thread, almost a whisper. "Thank you. Thank you for choosing the city. Even if no one tells you so."

She turned and walked away, her figure disappearing into the shadows, leaving Joaquín with the weight of her words. "Thank you for choosing the city. Even if no one tells you so." It was not forgiveness, it was not absolution. It was acceptance, a silent understanding of the complexity of his actions, of the brutality of the choice. Martina, the sorrowful virgin, the warrior forged by loss, had seen beyond the betrayal, had recognized the sacrifice, the brutal truth of his love. Joaquín, the blacksmith with hands stained by ambiguous loyalty, had saved his son, and he had saved the city, in his own tortuous and painful way.

But the city would not celebrate him. His name would not appear on plaques or in speeches. He would be the anonymous hero, the forgotten villain, the outcast who had chosen freedom in his own way, a freedom paid for with blood and silence, a freedom that only he and Lucas would know. And on that fading afternoon, with the silence of the destroyed smithy and the whisper of Martina's words, Joaquín felt the weight of his condemnation, but also a glimmer of peace. He had chosen. And even if the world despised him, his son was safe. The

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nameless heroes, after all, were the ones who held up the world, the ones who forged true freedom in the darkness.

CHAPTER 17: THE LAST FORGE

The years had stretched like metal under the hammer, hard and repetitive, shaping their lives into a path of sacrifice and silence. The sun, now an old acquaintance in the remote village in the Pyrenees where they had settled, streamed through the window of the small stone cottage, illuminating the dust dancing in the air, particles of time suspended. Joaquín, hunched over, his white beard sparse as frost, his skin weathered like old leather by the sun and wind, was no longer the blacksmith with broad shoulders and muscles of steel. His body, worn out by time and effort, was a map of silent pains, every joint a lament, every movement a twinge. His arm, wounded in the Aljafería, was a scar that hurt with the changes in weather, a constant reminder of that hellish night.

Sitting by a small fire, not the roaring hearth of his old forge, but a humble brazier that barely warmed the air, he forged something tiny. Not a sword or an anchor, but a little lead figurine, a little soldier, like the ones Lucas had had in his childhood, when war was an innocent game. His hands, though trembling with age and illness, retained their former skill, the instinct of the craftsman, the memory of iron. Each blow of the hammer on the lead was a whisper, an echo of a life left behind, a melody of remorse and love. Lucas, his son, was no longer a frightened child. He had become a strong man, his face marked by seriousness, his dark eyes identical to those of his mother Isabel, but with

a shadow of melancholy that had never left him, an invisible wound. He had worked the land, he had learned to keep quiet and live on the margins, the son of the wandering blacksmith, the outcast.

Life in the mountains was hard, lonely, with harsh winters and short summers, but it had offered them a precarious peace, far from judgmental eyes and accusatory glances, far from the murmurings of Zaragoza. Joaquín had kept his promise to Isabel. He had kept Lucas safe from war, from bullets and bayonets, but not from its more subtle and profound consequences. The stigma, though invisible, had followed them like a silent shadow, marking their existence.

One day, a stranger on horseback, a city man with fine clothes and polite manners, arrived in the village, breaking the quiet they treasured so much. He handed Lucas a sealed letter, a missive that smelled of old paper and history, of a world they had left behind. Joaquín watched from his corner, his sharp eyes taking in every detail. He saw Lucas's hand tremble as he opened it. The young man read, his eyes scanning the lines with feverish speed, each word a revelation. His previously impassive face contorted into a mixture of surprise and something akin to contained anger, to deep turmoil.

The letter came from the government in Zaragoza. These were times of a new amnesty, of seeking reconciliation after years of civil conflict that had bled Spain dry. The document offered an opportunity. An opportunity to "redeem" the name of Joaquín Espés, to recognize his "unintentional contribution" to the defense of Zaragoza during the Cincomarzada, to erase the stigma of "treason" for him and his son. The official history would be rewritten, including his role as a double agent, as a key player in weakening the enemy from within, a convenient lie for the victors. He would be offered land, a position in the local militia, and for Lucas, the possibility of joining the new administration, of being someone in society. A new, clean life, erasing the past with a stroke of the pen. A life that would allow him to return to the Zaragoza that had spit him out, now under a cloak of false glory.

Lucas, with the letter still in his hand, approached the small brazier, the paper crackling slightly. He looked at the tin soldier his father was finishing, an insignificant figure but one laden with symbolism, the reflection of a life. Then his eyes fell on Joaquín, on his tired and sick face, on his hands deformed by work and time, on the deep sadness that dwelled in his pupils. In them he read a life of sacrifice, the impossible choice he had made for him, to save him. In them, he saw the weight of guilt and the strength of an unconditional love that had marked his existence.

The anvil, small and worn, marked by a thousand blows, rested in a corner of the cabin, a silent witness to the life that had been forged and lost. Lucas looked up, gazing at the distant mountains, the snow-capped peaks that had been his refuge, his prison. The letter was a temptation, the promise of a life without shadows, a name without guilt. But his father's silence, the weight of his history, was a different anvil, one that weighed more heavily, one that could not be erased with a simple decree.

The sun set, staining the sky orange and purple, the last lights of a dying day. The heat from the brazier diminished, giving way to the cold of the night. Lucas stood, the crumpled letter in his hand, staring at the anvil, its silhouette outlined against the growing darkness. A decision was forging itself in his heart, as hard and resistant as iron itself. Should he redeem his father's name in the history books, accepting the convenience of an official lie, of a manipulated truth? Or should he follow the path of silence and truth that his father had taught him with every scar, every glance, every blow of the hammer, accepting the weight of his legacy?

The novel closes with Lucas staring at the anvil, his decision suspended in the air, the weight of the cold metal contrasting with the heat of the dying embers. The future, like unforged iron, still awaited its final shape, its definitive blow.

EPILOGUE: YEARS LATER

Time, relentless as a hammer on an anvil, had carved new scars on the face of Zaragoza. The walls stood tall, proud and restored, but in every brick, every cobblestone, one could feel the echo of battles, the beating of memory. Lucas, now a middle-aged man with graying hair and the furrows of life etched on his face, walked through the streets of his hometown. His eyes, deep and melancholic like his mother's, searched among the crowd, among the rebuilt buildings, for the ghost of a past that refused to disappear. The years had given him a quiet wisdom, a bitter understanding of the complexity of the world. He never accepted the amnesty, nor the false glory offered to him by the government. His father's truth was heavier than any official lie.

He came to a small square, adorned with oleander gardens and singing fountains. In the center, a white marble commemorative plaque gleamed in the sun. It listed the names of the heroes of the Cincomarzada, those who had defended Zaragoza with their lives and their honor. He read each name, feeling the weight of history, the solemnity of sacrifice. His name was not there. The name of Joaquín Espés, the blacksmith, the outcast, the traitor, did not appear on the polished stone. There were no plaques for him, no speeches, no poems. Only silence, oblivion. And Lucas felt a twinge in his chest, a mixture of pain and a

strange peace. His father did not need the recognition of men. His father had forged his own truth.

He turned down a familiar alleyway, the uneven cobblestones beneath his boots. The smithy. What was left of it, at least. A skeleton of broken bricks and wood rotten with age. The roof had collapsed completely, the interior covered with rubble and wild weeds growing through the cracks. The forge, the heart of that home, was now a mound of rusted iron, silent, mute. The anvil, that old witness to a thousand blows, was buried under a layer of dust and leaves, a ghost of what it once was. Lucas knelt down, pushing aside the stones and dirt with his hands, feeling the cold metal, the roughness of its surface. It was his father's anvil. The anvil where he had learned to forge, to bend iron, to understand its strength and fragility.

With some effort, he lifted it. Heavy, cold, but familiar in his hands. He placed it on a piece of wall that was still standing, a makeshift altar in the ruins. He stood there, contemplating the anvil, his eyes fixed on the distant horizon of Zaragoza. The city had survived, had prospered, had forgotten its anonymous heroes. And he, Lucas, the blacksmith's son, had learned to live with that memory, with that legacy.

The sun set, painting the sky orange and purple, the last light of a day that was dying. A cold wind blew, carrying with it the dust of the ruins, the echo of memories. Lucas closed his eyes, feeling the weight of the anvil in his hands, the hardness of the iron. Freedom. It was not an easy word. It was not a gift. It was a constant forging, a daily sacrifice.

"Perhaps freedom didn't need heroes," Lucas murmured to the wind, his voice mature and serene, a whisper lost among the ruins, an echo of a truth forged in pain and love. "It just needed blacksmiths. Blacksmiths who weren't afraid to break the iron." He turned away, leaving the anvil as a monument to memory, to the unwavering loyalty of a father. He walked silently, his figure disappearing into the darkness, leaving behind the ashes of a past he had learned to honor, and

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carrying with him the promise of a freedom that was forged day by day, in silence,
in love, in truth.

HISTORICAL NOTE

The novel "Five Hours to Freedom" is loosely based on a real episode from the First Carlist War, known as the "Cincomarzada," which took place in Zaragoza on March 5, 1838. This event is an important milestone in the history of the city and symbolizes the resistance of the people of Zaragoza in the face of aggression.

The historical context is that of the Carlist Wars (1833-1840), dynastic conflicts that pitted the supporters of Prince Carlos María Isidro de Borbón (Carlists) against the defenders of the regency of María Cristina de Borbón and Queen Isabel II (liberals). Zaragoza, a city with deep-rooted liberal traditions, was a key target for the Carlists.

The actual attack was led by the Carlist general Juan Cabañero y Esponera. In the early hours of March 5, 1838, Cabañero, taking advantage of the darkness and surprise, attempted to take the city with his troops. The Carlists managed to penetrate at several points, especially through the Puerta del Portillo and Puerta del Carmen gates, sowing chaos and street fighting. However, the unexpected and fierce resistance of the civilian population of Zaragoza, which joined the liberal garrisons, was decisive. Men, women, and children joined the defense, erecting improvised barricades and fighting with makeshift weapons. The Cincomarzada thus became a symbol of the will of a people to defend their freedom. After several hours of fierce fighting and faced with the impossibility of consolidating

his position, Cabañero ordered a retreat. The Carlist defeat in Zaragoza was a significant moral blow to their cause.

Historical elements in the novel:

- The date: March 5, 1838, as the day of the Carlist attack.
- General Cabañero: His role as leader of the Carlist offensive.
- The popular resistance of Zaragoza: The active participation of citizens in the defense of the city.
- The slogan "Zaragoza, the ever-heroic": Although not explicit, the spirit of resistance and pride of the city are reflected in the narrative.

Fictional elements in the novel:

- Joaquín Espés and his family (Lucas, Isabel): Completely fictional characters, created to explore the moral dilemma of personal versus collective loyalty in times of war.
- Ramón, Martina, Iñigo de Larraga: Also fictional characters who embody different facets of loyalty, idealism, and suffering.
- The story of the smuggling tunnel and the "fake breach": Although infiltration tactics were used, the specific sequence of events in the tunnel and Joaquín's manipulation to create a distraction are dramatic inventions for the development of the plot.
- Lucas' kidnapping and rescue at the Aljafería: A fictional plot point that drives the plot and Joaquín's main motivation. The Aljafería was a military fortress and royal prison, but this sequence is dramatic.

- Joaquín's personal and social consequences: Stigma, rejection, and eventual posthumous "redemption" are narrative elements that dramatize the repercussions of individual choices in times of conflict.

The novel uses the backdrop of a crucial historical event to weave an intimate story about fatherhood, loyalty, betrayal, and the price of survival, exploring the moral complexities that arise when the personal sphere collides with the grand narrative of history.