

CHRISTMAS PAST

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Christmas Eve in the Monkey Bar. Hot. Humid. Oppressive.

Holly garlands, delivered via Clipper the day before, adorned the bar counter and wreathed the banister leading to the upper level. The green fronds and berries had already begun to wilt in the oppressive heat. Mistletoe spun on silver threads from the ceiling fans turning lazily overhead but no one took advantage of it. The bar was empty of all except the handful of people who called Boragora home and had no better place to spend the holidays.

The bar was unusually quiet, not only because of the lack of tourists but because the singer, Sarah White, had gone back to the States for the holidays to visit relatives.

Jake missed Sarah. He'd hoped she'd be able to spend some time with him during Christmas but her family obligations had ruled out any private celebration they might have come up with. So instead of a quiet, intimate Christmas with Sarah, Jake found himself sitting alone in a corner of the Monkey Bar with his feet propped up on a table and his chair tilted back against the wall. Nursing a beer, he watched the few regulars who, like him, sought the Monkey Bar and its alcoholic solace.

Alone at a table, Willie Tenboom contemplated the foam on his beer and sighed. He desperately longed for home. It was his considered opinion that nothing could match the beauty of his native Germany at Christmas time: the white, unblemished snow that topped the hills and gingerbread houses

like icing on a vast and wonderously beautiful cake; the crisp, brisk air that made the soul long to sing. A far cry from Boragora with its sweltering heat and humidity.

Willie lifted his glass, made a silent and half-hearted toast for the continued health of Der Fuehrer, and drained the contents in a single gulp.

Beside the bar, Gushie polished whiskey glasses with a frayed towel that had seen better days and avoided looking at the room's occupants. It was his second Christmas on Boragora and it promised to be as depressing as the first.

Bon Chance Louie paced the room, first pausing to inventory his dwindling wine stock, then hovering over Gushie's shoulder. Finally, he contented himself with checking the stock a second time. With a sigh, he wondered if perhaps it wouldn't be a good idea to lock himself into his office and drink himself into a stupor.

Snoring softly, Jack lay curled in a ball on the counter top, oblivious of anything and everything around him and content to remain that way.

What a sorry bunch we are, thought Jake sadly. What are we doing here, anyway? Christmas is a time for celebration, not moping around a bar half a world away from home.

It all boiled down to the same thing. The people gathered in Bon Chance Louie's had no place to go for the holidays. Jake himself had no family to speak of. His parents were dead and he had no

siblings, only distant aunts and uncles with whom he had little contact. Then again, he'd learned a long time ago that family didn't have to be blood related. Family was whoever you loved and were close to in spite of differences, large or small.

As far as Jake was concerned, family was Sarah and Jack and Corky.

Jake allowed his gaze to settle on Corky who sat at the upright piano, his back to Cutter. Unaware he was being observed, the mechanic idly picked out a few notes of *Greensleeves* on the ivory keys before he gave it up with a sigh and reached for his third beer.

They'd been together since Jake's first year with the Flying Tigers. It had been a stormy relationship at first, partially due to Corky's heavy drinking and absent-mindedness and Jake's preoccupation with keeping himself and his P-40 in one piece. It was a time of adjustment to their respective responsibilities as well as to each other.

Watching Corky with a wry smile, Jake allowed his thoughts to wander back three years...

It was Christmas Eve and Jake Cutter was miserable. There were easily a dozen places he'd rather be tonight: Hawaii, England, France, Duluth -- even Hackensack, New Jersey. Anywhere would be preferable to standing on a rain-soaked airstrip watching a mechanic work on his P-40 preparatory to midnight patrol.

Helluva way to spend Christmas, Jake thought sourly.

Corky Dixon wasn't particularly happy with the arrangements himself. Standing on the plane's port wing, he held aloft an arc lamp as he bent under the P-40's canopy and checked the throttle mounting. Rain streamed through his dark hair and plastered the cloth of his white, grease-stained coveralls to his back like a second skin.

Some Christmas, Corky thought irritably. He was cold and wet; worse than that, he was stone cold sober.

Huddled in his rain slicker, Jake watched the mechanic from the ground. According to what he'd heard, Corky Dixon was the best flight mechanic on base. The Tigers had picked up a real asset when Corky had signed on, as well as a major liability. For one thing, he drank too much. There were rumors that he'd been chief mechanic at Pan Pacific before his boozing caught up with him. He'd been fired because of it. Still other rumors hinted at another cause for his dismissal -- a tragedy of some sort -- but no one knew the mechanic well enough to confirm the stories.

In fact, no one seemed to know Corky personally at all. Everything Jake knew about the mechanic he had from hearsay and that in itself wasn't much. Apparently Corky preferred to keep to himself and had as little contact as possible with the men who flew the P-40s and F2A3 Brewster Buffalos he ser-

vised. During the day he could usually be found ambling around the airfield, perpetually in need of a shave and dressed in the same pair of coveralls stenciled with a fading Pan Pacific logo. When Corky wasn't tinkering with the planes, he was drinking himself blind in The Hootch, the Tigers' local excuse for a bar and officers' club.

According to Randall McGraw, Dixon wasn't too bright, was rarely lucid, and had a frustrating tendency to misplace things. He was also notoriously absent-minded.

Sometimes Jake would covertly watch the mechanic and wonder what could drive a man to such self-imposed loneliness. Personally, Cutter didn't think Corky was as bad as some of the Tigers let on. He certainly looked like a nice enough guy. A little on the beefy side, perhaps, and clumsy, but he had an infectious grin when he bothered to use it.

Yet in spite of Dixon's excessive drinking and reclusive attitude, the Tigers all agreed to a certain amount of admiration for the man. The P-40s and Buffalos never flew so smoothly as when Corky serviced them. Whatever else he may be, the man was certainly a gifted mechanic. That was one thing in his favor.

Jack was another. For some reason that Jake couldn't quite comprehend, the dog adored the mechanic. The little mongrel never hesitated to eagerly greet Corky whenever possible and, in turn, Dixon seemed to genuinely enjoy the dog's company. It wasn't unusual to see the two of them sitting in a corner of The Hooch sharing a beer -- Jack's in a shallow bowl -- or wandering the airstrip as the mechanic made his rounds.

It seemed that Jack was the mechanic's only friend.

"You about through?" called Jake. It was getting colder and he wanted to be out of the rain.

"Almost," came the sullen response.

Jake shifted his weight from his left foot to the right. He'd been standing out here for the better part of an hour waiting for Corky to finish. Tilting his face skyward, he sighed. At least the rain had begun to slack off. Perhaps it would lift before it came time to take off.

It's Christmas Eve, thought Jake as he let the drizzle wash his face. *Why couldn't it be snowing? At least then it would feel like Christmas.*

Corky slid the canopy into place and switched off the arc lamp. The runway was cloaked in gray, the only illumination coming from a flood light near the barracks.

"Did you check the plugs?" asked Jake.

"I checked 'em," answered Corky as he wiped his hands on the legs of his coveralls. He sat down heavily on the wing and dropped to the ground.

"How about the fuel screen?" asked Jake as the mechanic caught his balance.

"Them too. Anything else?" he asked sarcastically.

"I don't mean it personally," said Jake. "Anyone can overlook something. I'm going to take this bird up tonight and I just want to make sure it's not going to shake apart when I need it most."

"Look, I don't tell you how to fly so don't tell me how to fix planes," said Corky defensively. "I may not do a whole lot of things right, but I know my job. When you want her to go, she'll go." With that he turned and stalked off toward The Hooch.

Merry Christmas to you, too, Jake thought irritably. What does Jack see in that guy, anyway?

As a rule, Jack was an excellent judge of character. Cutter had never known the little dog to be wrong with a first impression. Not once. It was almost as though Jack could literally smell a bad personality and he never hesitated to voice his opinion with a growl or an angry series of barks.

And Jack liked Corky. A lot. In fact, he spent almost as much time with Corky as he did with Jake. That alone spoke volumes in the mechanic's favor.

Maybe I'm missing something, thought Cutter as he watched Corky trudge across the runway, his head hung low and his hands jammed into the pockets of his dripping coveralls.

As if to confirm Jake's suspicions, Jack raced out of the mechanic's shed at the edge of the runway and ran toward Corky. As Cutter watched, the little mongrel leaped excitedly around Dixon's legs in a frantic bid for attention. His tail wagged like a metronome and he made every effort to wash Corky's already rain-soaked face when the mechanic stooped down to say hello.

I'm definitely missing something here, Jake thought with a twinge of jealousy. *I think it's about time I found out just what that something is.*

Thus decided, he began to walk across the airfield toward Corky and Jack. He never reached them.

Suddenly the night was filled with a distant droning that sent a cold chill of dread down Jake's spine. It was a familiar sound and one he'd come to immediately recognize as approaching airplane engines. More specifically, Mitsubishi A6Ms.

Zekes.

Jake spun on his heels. Looking skyward in the direction of the sound, he cursed the rain and the cloud cover it provided the incoming attackers.

Of course, it works both ways, he thought. *If we can't see them, they can't see us.*

Apparently he wasn't the only one to come to the same conclusion. Suddenly the flood light over the compound went dark and the air raid siren began to shriek a warning. Men, dark gray shapes on an even darker background, appeared out of the bar-

racks and The Hooch and ran for the cover of the brush at the edge of the airfield. No one bothered to man the two anti-aircraft guns. It took too much time to crank them into position and, besides, someone had stuffed the muzzles full of tinsel and wrapping paper during the Christmas party two nights ago.

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The Hooch and The Hooch ran for the cover of the brush at the edge of the airfield. No one bothered to man the two anti-aircraft guns. It took too much time to crank them into position and, besides, someone had stuffed the muzzles full of tinsel and wrapping paper during the Christmas party two nights ago. Jake turned and ran for cover just as they appeared -- three Japanese Zeros in a truncated 'V' formation; a leader and two wingmen. As they dropped to 200 feet, Jake dove for the safety of the brush. Parallel columns of .20mm shells chewed up the runway and everything in their path. Several of the P-40s took incidental damage under the barrage. Roaring passed, the Zekes gained altitude at the end of the runway and banked for another run.

"Now ain't that nice?" commented a voice to Jake's right. Cutter turned and found Randall McGraw near at hand, clothed in his scivies and knee deep in mud. He was drunk. Clutching a bottle of scotch, he waved it at the passing planes. "Just think. Those boys came all this way just to wish us a Merry Christmas. Kinda makes you feel wanted, don't it?" he laughed. Taking a pull at the scotch, he nodded toward the airfield. "By the way, Cutter, if I was you I'd start looking for a new pooch."

Poking his head up over the line of brush, Jake turned pale. Standing in the center of the runway, framed by a neat row of .20mm shell holes, Jack defiantly barked at the approaching Zekes. At the same time, Jake caught sight of a bulky white blur.

Corky had left his place of cover and was running toward Jack.

As Jake scrambled forward, McGraw grasped him by the ankle and tried to pull him back into the gully.

"You crazy, Cutter?" demanded McGraw. "It ain't worth getting yourself killed over a dog." He nodded toward Corky. "It's bad enough we're gonna be looking for a new mechanic."

The Zeros had reached the top of their climb and began to drop toward the airfield. Desperately, Jake kicked free of McGraw and darted into the open.

To Corky, it seemed to take an eternity before he finally reached Jack. As he scooped the little dog up into his arms, he became aware of the thrum of the incoming planes and whirled. The three A6Ms had reached the edge of the airfield, their ammunition tearing up walls of dirt.

Worse, they'd seen him. The lead plane banked to compensate and his wingmen followed.

"Sorry, Jack," shouted Corky. He gave a mighty heave and threw the little dog toward the bushes on the eastern edge of the runway. As soon as he released Jack, the mechanic turned and ran in the opposite direction. The gamble worked. The Zekes pursued Corky across the airstrip, more in-

terested in a running man than the stationary aircraft and an eight-inch high dog.

With frightening speed, the Zeros' shells churned the ground at the mechanic's heels. Corky could feel mud splattering his back and desperately urged his feet to move faster. It didn't seem to help much. He could hear his death approaching and it was a frightening sound.

Just as the shells caught up with Corky, Jake appeared from behind a P-40 and threw his entire body at the mechanic. The tackle knocked them both 90 degrees to the right and the Zeros were unable to compensate. Instead, they screamed past, their ammunition tearing up the ground a hair's breadth away from the two men laying face down in the mud.

Neither dared to move until the drones of the A6Ms became distant growls. Their message delivered, the Japanese headed toward home. Apparently McGraw had been right. Short and to the point, the Japanese had wished the Tigers their version of a Merry Christmas.

Jake spat out mud and earth and raised his head. A yard away, Jack sat expectantly, his tail wagging.

"Just what the hell were you trying to prove?" he angrily demanded of the dog. "You could have gotten killed!"

Jack barked once confidently.

Corky groaned and sat up. Jake's entire weight had come crashing down on his right shoulder and it hurt like hell. Gingerly, he flexed his right arm and was relieved to discover that nothing was broken.

Of course, it could have been worse. Those Zekes could have killed him. In fact, they almost had.

"You okay?" asked Jake, offering the mechanic a hand.

"I guess so," Corky admitted, accepting the hand and staggering to his feet. "Thanks," he said awkwardly.

"I should be thanking you," said Jake sincerely. "Jack'd be dead if it hadn't been for you."

Corky averted his eyes and blushed slightly. "That's okay," he mumbled, embarrassed. "He'd've done the same for me, wouldn't you, Jack?"

Jack barked twice assertively and wagged his tail for emphasis.

"You know, I'd say we were a couple of lucky guys," observed Jake conversationally.

Corky considered that for a moment. "Yeah. I guess so," he admitted with a sheepish grin. "Pretty neat Christmas present, huh?"

"It is in my book," agreed Cutter as he paused to consider the mechanic in a new light. There was definitely something he liked about this lonesome

man. It had taken a rare and special kind of friendship to try and save Jack. That proved a lot to Jake. More than words ever could have. Consequently, Jake found that he wanted very much to make this man his friend.

On an impulse, Cutter extended his hand and accompanied it with a warm smile. "Jake Cutter," he said by way of reintroduction.

Corky looked at the proffered hand with mild surprise. In his four months with the Tigers, no one had ever taken the time to speak to him on a one-to-one basis. He was a mechanic. As far as the pilots were concerned, the relationship ended as soon as they'd told him what was wrong with their planes.

For three months it was always the same. Until now.

Corky looked at Cutter's hand as though it were a snake that might bite him. Looking up, he met the pilot's blue eyes and marveled at the friendship they offered. They smiled, those eyes.

Could this man be different? wondered Corky. Then again, how would he ever know if he didn't take the chance?

Hesitantly, Dixon accepted Cutter's hand and shook it. "Corky," he said shyly.

"Pleased to meet you," said Jake with a smile. He could feel the ice melting between them. "What d'ya say we go over to The Hooch?"

The mechanic looked doubtful.

"Beer's on me," Jake added.

Corky blinked, both delighted and surprised. "Gee, I can't let you do that," he protested half-heartedly.

"Sure you can," insisted Jake as he began to guide the mechanic away from the airfield. "Think of it as a Christmas present. From a friend."

"Hey, Jake. You awake?"

"Huh? What?" Cutter grunted and looked up to find Corky standing over him. The Monkey Bar was empty of everyone except themselves and Gushie who was busy stacking glasses. "Where is everyone?"

"Gone." Corky pulled up a chair and straddled it. "The Reverend said he had to conduct some blessings, it being Christmas and all. Louie said he was gonna help." The mechanic shrugged, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "I guess Christmas makes folks extra religious."

"I guess," said Jake with a smile. "Looks like it's just you and me."

Jack barked once from the bar without deigning to open his eyes.

"Sorry, Jack. I meant us."

"Just like old times, huh, Jake?" grinned Corky.

Just like old times, thought Cutter.

Since the Christmas of '37, Corky insisted on becoming Jake's personal mechanic and rarely left his side. When Jake's plane was shot down and the resultant injury forced him to leave the Tigers, Corky packed his gear and followed. In the three years they'd been together, Jake and Corky had experienced their differences; at times it seemed as though they would part company forever but somehow they always managed to overcome the problem. Jake helped Corky on the road to kicking the booze before it killed him and, in return, Corky remained an invaluable friend as well as an asset as a mechanic.

They were a team; a family.

Gushie maneuvered his wheelchair past their

table. With a knowing smile, he deposited a pitcher of beer and two fresh glasses between them prior to his leaving the room.

Jake did the honors, reaching for the pitcher and pouring the beer until both glasses were brimming.

"To the best friend a guy could want," Jake said sincerely as he raised his glass to the mechanic. "Merry Christmas, buddy."

Genuinely touched, Corky repeated the sentiment with heartfelt emotion and rapidly blinked back the threat of tears before Jake could see them. Solemnly, he raised his own mug to Jake and wished the pilot a soft "Felice Navidad."

In the silence of the Monkey Bar, the clink of their glasses was as sweet as the purest Christmas chimes.

